

The Ocean Road

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Chapter One

Port Noarlunga, Tuesday, November 9th, 1999

This is not her. I'll tell you what I told the cops - this is not her. I don't care what my Aunties told them, what Nana said; she'll just agree with the last person who spoke. I'm not being mean, she'd say this herself. I can imagine them talking about Mum. Unreliable. What's she done now? Calling the cops though? Whose idea was that? I can't imagine where she is, I mean, that's true, but it is only one day and I am practically an adult now. I'm not in high school. I can look after myself. Maybe she.....I don't know, all right, but the cops?

I'd already decided that I wasn't going into TAFE this morning - so I was in bed. I was in Mum's bed actually, I slept there last night. I wasn't quite awake. I was rolling over to where the sheets were cool. I was listening for Dizzy's taps down the hallway. I've been tired, not sleeping, even before Mum up and offed. It's been, I don't know, a week since Dizzy died. Dizzy Dog. Then the nightmares that night and then for the next few nights. We'd buried her but too shallow and I could see her leg, her paw, sticking out of the dirt and pine needles and then the dirt was moving and I realized she wasn't dead after all. I had buried her alive. I was calling to Mum but she kept saying it would be fine, be fine. The memory of the nightmare keeps coming back, every time I stop, even though the dream itself hasn't. It comes into my head when I think of her: when I'm reminded that she's gone; that she's really dead. I listen but I can't hear her tapping on the floorboards in the hallway. If I looked for her in her usual space, I'd only see a shiny stain on the wooden floor.

I leave the telly on for background noise.

When someone lifted the doorknocker and fairly fucking banged it right through the front door, I jumped out of my skin. It was the cops.

I opened the door and one of them asked me, Elizabeth Smart? They came in before I could answer, they just looked over my head up the hall and then followed their eyes and then they were in the room. That must have been how they did it. I suppose Dizzy would have stopped them, before. Then, once they were in, they asked if they could come in and then they sat at the dining room table, their backs to the wall, and asked if they could sit down. I sat down and thought of the open kitchen and the shelves behind me and wondered if there were any implements left out. A sawn-off two-litre coke-bottle; surely the cops would've known what that was. It was probably a stupid thing to be thinking but I was shitting myself. Cops! It's too late now; they're in.

They speak like Americans; they think they're pretty important even though one looks about the same age as me, or only a bit older.

We just have a few questions about your mother. When was the last time you saw her? A party for what? Did you stay? What time? So it was Saturday night then? And when did you return home? And where were you? At a friend's, I told them. They told me not to worry, I'd be ok.

They told me not to be scared. I wasn't really listening at the end. Some number, a percent returning within a day or was it a week?

Do you have any questions yourself ma'am? Ma'am? Did he really say that? Can we take a look around? Hang on a minute, I think, but they've got me. I didn't get home until Monday night, late, I hadn't called home, Mum would've worried about me and then when I did get home, I rang Nana, hysterical and now this. I deserve it all. They are both standing up and making to move into the hallway, one already has his eyes in Mum's room; he is following them down there. The telly's still on. I can hear the rhythm of somebody on a morning show selling something.

I don't have a question except where is my mum and why am I me and why right now and what is my life and what is life and why do I have to think about it now in front of you? Cops! Faceless to me since my Mum would normally be the one describing them; that one, with freckles, she'd call him the twelve year old and the other would be the one who ate all the pies and she would say that it was human nature, the job, jobs; the world was made up of others. In the cop's case, goodies and baddies and we'd always be the baddies since we're not cops. I listened to my Mum.

Are you ok?

I just forgot what I was gonna say, I told 'em. I'd heard Mum say it as an excuse often enough. Fucking stoners. I felt a bit like one now though. P'noid. To the max.

They moved down the hallway. Their eyes and then their heavy feet. Even the twelve year old stomped.

What were they looking for? A question mark! A question at last.

Not sure. Signs. Signs of a struggle, for instance. This window for example, could be a sign, is that recent? Nup, that happened a while ago. I didn't give them the details. It was about two years ago. Ben Crow had put a cut-to-size pizza box lid in it two months ago. How about that torn curtain? Yeah, nah that one happened ages ago too. I didn't say, probably when I was still a baby. This hole, it's been patched up? Yep, ages ago.

Look fellas, I actually said that, I think I was channeling Aunty Ange, I've been here I said, there isn't anything new to see. I would've seen it. I'm sure you aren't gonna find anything.....like that.

Who called you? I asked him.

We are not at liberty to discuss that Ma'am. He did say it!

They passed my bedroom; the twelve year old paused and looked in but hefty bent his head down and kept walking, into Mum's room. He stepped into the middle of the shiny space in front of the heater; Dizzy's spot. He looked around the room, he fairly surveyed it before heading straight to Mum's desks; she has two, at the back of the room. First he went to the one facing the wall, he looked around her computer, her notes and journals and lists, her teapots and cups

and Graham Greene novels with sand in them from reading them under the jetty. I could see his eyes on everything. Then he moved to the desk in the bay window – the one covered in stacks of paper. He lent forward to open the blinds. His belly rested on the table and it moved one of the stacks into a fan shape under the stripes of sunlight through the blinds. He straightened up, tapped the edges of the papers to straighten them up and then lent back; satisfied it seemed but then,

What have we here? He asked.

Well, it's not her is it? I said it.

They both looked at me then. The fact that they were being nicer to me than I was being to them stopped me. Fuck them, sticky fat fingers all over my Mum's white paper; dust floating everywhere; bed unmade; old milk in the bottom of the teacups.

My mother is a writer. This is the novel she's been working on.

Why is it in a circle like this?

I don't know.

The fat fingers were picking up the pages now, tapping them straight against the desk; I knew it was him that had knocked on the front door. Him making to read. His tongue trying to come out of his mouth. Eventually it would make it. It would be fat and pointy at the same time. I can't watch.

Please don't touch them, my Mum wouldn't like it if she came back and found her stuff moved around (by you).

Mondays were the worst and this was the worst yet. He's reading it!

I can relate to that, how about you, Stewie? Talking to Stewie but smiling at me.

Not the other one though. Not Stewie; the twelve year old. He's not smiling. He's pissed off now, for some reason.

Sounds like someone who's depressed to me. I don't want to alarm you, um Mzzz Smart, but everything needs to be taken into account. Do you think your mother would have kilt herself?

No, she wouldn't have kilt herself. Again, it was Aunty Ange's voice. Never. She told me she wouldn't because of me. We'd talked about it. She'd written a novel about it.

What about the Republic. She wouldn't have been happy about that.

I nearly laughed. I said to him, this is Australia you know.

Well, what about that note?

Note? The novel? It's a story, come on. You've got to be kidding now guys (using their own language) she has been gone two days. I am not a school child, I'm ok. If I had known this was going to happen, I wouldn't have even called my Nana. She's the one that rang you, right? I was upset about other stuff, this is all ... ridiculous.

The word hung in the air. They stared at me. The fat one stood still with his hands curled in front of his belly, not moving. I said I'm sorry. We are trying to help, if anything has happened to your Mum, we'll have some record, and we'll be able to keep an eye out for her. If you do find anything suspicious or notice anything or find a note, you be sure and let us know.

He had to say note.

They said they'd take off, they went out the front door, then I saw them poking their heads over the gate into the back yard. Then one was in the paddock behind the house, looking through the trees. I heard the other one around the other side of the house, walking in the ivy near my bedroom. For all I know they might still be here.

Since then, I can't stop looking for signs. Signs I'd be more likely to see than those flat footed gumbos. Signs of what though? The thought is terrifying. I hardly want to look. Anywhere. Through the blinds, I can see out to the back yard, the back fence wire sags between those two pepper trees. I wonder if someone has jumped over it with Mum unconscious and slung over one shoulder. Are those fresh foot prints in the long grass? Are they ours? Mine and Mum's wetsuits are still hanging on the line. I can see the little cross leaning under the pine tree with Dizzy; the flowers all dry and closed now. Beyond that, the Esplanade and the ocean and then, seriously, nothing.

Except for Kangaroo Island. Mum reckons that the Aboriginal people around here, the Kurna,

never went to Kangaroo Island. She said not even they knew why anymore. Or at least that is what they'd told her.

Eyes drop to the inevitable, the novel, the story on the table. Mum had been doing research on the local area, this novel was set here, she said. I don't know if Kangaroo Island is in it.

I've heard some, the bits of it, only words, pieces I hear when I bring in a pot of tea and she's reading it to herself. I've read her other two books. Yes, even that one, I'm not a baby. You were though, I remember the reviews. I'm not surprised the cops hadn't heard of her, it's you guys who are the gatekeepers, right? And you didn't like it: the ending or the main character. Not believable, you said. You never got to see what she ate! Well it was really only one reviewer who said that. It was mostly the ending though, the ambiguity. What next? As if she *had* to tell you.

Well, here it is. On her desk. That's what's next. Where does it start or finish; it's just piles of paper. It looks like she's not saying.

Johnny walked into the ward, shaking hands with the other new fathers as if he knew them.

Another pile starts with:

That week was a lifetime, and she was already in her thirties and thought she'd had plenty of life.

This one:

She looked hard at him when he walked in at the end of the day to see if he suspected she was leaving him, catching the Overland tonight at 7.45pm from Adelaide Station.

That's my story, I think. My life.

It sounds like my family. It would to you, I bet. I know I'm in that last story. I'm a baby leaving with my Mum; in dozens of stories, in dozens of ways. I know better. It is not them, not the Smarts, it's not Nana and Papa and whoever else. And it is not me and it is not her. It's not my Mum.

I try to imagine what my Mum is doing. All I can see is her walking along these cliffs, following the smooth tracks, made by foxes or other walkers, down the gravelling sides to the harder rocks below. Then onto the sand. She has Dizzy beside her. Along the water's edge. She is talking into her hand. She's recording her voice. A story as she walks. A story for you.

I'm trying to imagine you.

I can't stay home, I've got nothing. I could listen to her Dictaphone. I could read her journals, there's heaps of them on her desk right now. That's what you'd do, I imagine, read. That's what the cops wanted to do. Read the first line anyway. They'd already worked out the ending.

I'd given up on bed and then even the house. I was walking along the top of the cliffs, following

my Mum. I was worried I'd see the cops, still looking for Mum, as I crossed the Espy. Run into them. Have to talk to them again. What to say then? Any leads fellas?

Any leads fellas? Even in my mind, I'm sounding like Aunty Ange.

I go out anyway. They are not sitting in the car park across from my house. They're probably already in the car park of HJ's. I climb over the sagging fence into the paddock behind our place and walk across, gathering three corner jacks in my thongs and slapping the high weeds from the back of my calves. I pull them all out and then I cross the Espy and I'm on top of the cliffs. I don't walk on the road and I avoid going past the Townies' place. Our neighbours. Lynda Townsend will probably be around this afternoon for a cuppa on the way to pick up her latest kid from school - I'll tell her then.

Tell her what?

I go past the Costa Vista on the corner, there are two cars parked in front of the motel, left over from the weekend. The chairs are still stacked against the wall, the bolted tables bare. There are no cars going either way when I cross the Espy. No joggers or Lynda Townsends at this hour, mid-morning, on the wide cement pathway that runs along the top of the cliffs, along the coast. The public BBQ is covered in black dirt, the bin is full but the square of lawn is mowed. The chain across the path we always take is thick and clumsy. I step right over it. The sign says *Cliff Unstable*. The track is red dirt between pockets of weeds and grasses. I follow it right to the

edge.

Is my Mum down there? I don't want to look. I see a patch of grass, thicker, and think it's her. It's her! But then I see it's grass, it's not her and my eyes are stinging. I sit right there, on the edge, small stones rolling from under me, my arse hanging over, my heels scratching against all the layers of rock beneath me. My heart feels like it is beating against the limestone.

Seriously, where is she? Where the fuck?

I stand up, I'm going straight home but when I get back to the BBQ area, those two cops are driving past. Slowly. I can see the fat one is eating. I actually laugh. After everything else, I laugh. I'm bent at the waist, like Mum does. I turn back to the cliff, around the fence, down the gravel, that clump of dark grass. I stop there for a while before I realise it is habit, waiting for Dizzy and now I'm crying. All like that. That quick. Now I want to sit in that thick grass, just sit. But I remember my first vision of it as a dead body and now I'm scared without Dizzy and I keep going, jump over the last clump of rock at the bottom of the cliff, skidding a little in the gravel and then onto the sand, shelves of it against these rocks. The water has left behind thick foam and broken weeds. I stand at the edge of the ocean wiping my eyes.

I can see two surfers further down the beach at Seaford, a figure watching them sitting on the beach. The girlfriend? I turn towards the river even though the tide is pretty high and I might not be able to get around without going in. As soon as I get over the first shelf of sand I can see that

I'm going to have to go in but I don't care. Don't even slow down, I just slip down the usual rock path and where I would have jumped onto the sand, I jump into the ocean.

The water's cold and I go in further than I thought I would, I fall forward on my hands and knees. The whole front of me is wet. There's one tiny strip of beach, near the caves. The tide's going out. I sit on the wet sand, my arms across my knees, sniffing piss from inside the cave and watch it.

Aunty Ange gets there just as Bridie leaves. I say leaves, but she actually stormed out like a fucking maniac when she found out there was no food in the house. I didn't know, I swear. There's usually stuff in there, I mean there was last time I looked. Saturday night. There was party stuff as well. Bridie dropped in on the way home from school. Tatachilla Lutheran College. We went to make some food. She's been on some kind of diet, no carbs, it's the one Clair Danes is on, ah god whatever, she was hungry. I didn't get a chance to tell her anything.

I used to go there too, Tatachilla Lutheran College, before I dropped out like a loser and started at TAFE. Taf. As in, that is so Taf. Me and Bridie used to catch the bus together. We'd drop in here, my place; her Dad'd pick her up after. She'd cook us something, we'd go for a swim, she'd talk about Henry Robertson, a guy on the bus. She'd call him R-O-B which was pretty funny because that's what my Mum used to call my Dad when she talked about him in front of me before I could spell and then, well, after I could spell. I don't remember when I told Bridie, or if Mum told her, or if Mum did it in front of her. It's kind of a private joke: Bridie's good at them.

She still drops in here. She's obsessed with Baz Lurhmann's Romeo and Juliet, which is why she's obsessed with Clair Danes. I like it too. I like the music. I like Shakespeare. I have a poster of Leo on my wall but I don't like it as much as Bridie. I don't like anything as much as Bridie. She's starving. She's starving and heading straight to the kitchen. It's not until then that I realise there's no food in the house and that I haven't eaten today.

Bridie acted as if this had been done to her. On purpose. I yelled at her, MY MUM IS MISSING.

She just kept looking at me with her hand frozen on the door of the food cupboard.

Where is she then?

I don't fucking know.

How long has she been gone? I only saw her the other day.

Just a couple of days, we can't be sure, I was with you all weekend remember. Did you get in trouble?

I told them I was here, remember. Anyway, don't blame me.

You said we'd get a lift home, but that's not the point here.

You didn't say you wanted to get home early to see your Mummy.

Are you fucking kidding me?

But I hadn't and I was blaming Bridie, it was her friend's party, the idiots from Tatachilla

Lutheran College, Henry's drunken Mum smoking all Ben Crow's weed and then crying. All of them talking about school and me not talking about Taf. Mary-Anna and Brea and all of them were acting like it was cool, yeah I want to go to Taf but after I finish high school. I want to *matriculate* first. I want to go to *University*. It was torture. And then following Henry Robertson around all night. All around McLaren Vale and even into Willunga, the streets so dark. Bridie even wanted to go up Old Willunga Hill, she was sure she could find the Oliver's house and she was sure Henry would have gone there to score.

I should have just stayed home.

Well there's flour here, she said, if you have salt, I can make damper. But we didn't have salt and she would not consider cooking damper without it. Then the flour had weevils in it and she started crying. Crying! I'm hungry she said. Maybe you should head home then, I said, but I thought, FUCK OFF THEN. I'll call you later, maybe drop by later in the week, it's gonna be 38 on Friday. And then she did fuck off, back to her air conditioning and her full food cupboard that's called a pantry and not a food cupboard because it was more like a room than a cupboard. Goes home to her Mum and Dad. She turned to look back at me just as she was going through the front door, as if she had some regrets, you can come to mine if you want, she seemed about to say but just then Aunty Angela arrived, pushed past her on the front step.

Nice uniform. What's that look you're going for - Nazi Youth?

Then Aunty Ange was at Mum's desk going through her tubs and pen holders and fanning her notebooks looking for dope. I pull the cover up and push the pillows against the brass headboard and sit on Mum's bed. Ange found the green, half a bag, in an empty tea cup that had Mum's pipe resting in it as well. The cops had missed it but not her.

The cops were here? She can't believe it. Who called them?

She smokes while I describe the visit from the cops. The blue smoke floats in an eddy around the bay window and then out into the open air through the window. Ange leans back on Mum's chair, feet up on the desk, work boots one on top of the other between two piles of sandy books. She rests the baggy casually on one long leg between packing and smoking one, two, three quick pipes. Ange's dressed in her work clothes, stretch pants and long t-shirt and work boots. Her overalls stay at the lens factory but there is the sheen of dirt and the smell of acetone and her long hair is tied up.

I tell her that the cops had asked about suicide.

Between puffs, with her breath held and then rushing out with words and the blue smoke, Aunty Ange talked:

She was fairly devo (breathe out) about the Republic. We were watching on the telly, well you know Libby; you were here at the start of it. Saturday night. (Puff, long breath in, hold) She

passed out though (high voice then breathes out) before we left. From what I remember anyway – hey hey. She was watching it on telly, the count, her and Fiona. Fiona cried! Can you fucken believe that? (Puff) Not your Mum though (breathe out) she was more angry. The rest of us were in the kitchen. I couldn't give a shit. I told her, it ain't broke and before I could finish she went off her tits at me. I was joking. (Puff, held breath, high tight voice) mostly, I, you know, I (breathe out) (coughing) I went along with her, you know, how (cough) you (cough) do.

I told her that the cops had touched Mum's papers, had read from her novel.

The one about us? Ange stopped smoking. Put the pipe and the now quarter filled money bag back into the tea-cup.

Mum said it's made up.

Yeah well she said that about the last one and it was obviously me.

Who was?

Roberta.

You've got to be kidding.

She worked in a factory.

She worked in an abattoir.

She was gay.

I thought you were straight now.

I'm bi.

So, how is that the same? Do you know how it ends?

I ... didn't ... actually... get to the end. No-one did.

No-one?

No-one in the family, at least. Gen was cool with it. We call it Blue Fin; you would have heard us talking about that.

That Colin Thiele book?

Yeah. We call it that because when we were kids she wanted me to read it so bad so I pretended I did, you know, it was about a fish, there was a boat, we still do it now, when we talk about her stuff. I'm not a reader.

We go there together, to Nanna's house. Nanna lives in a Granny flat behind Auntie Jean's house. I can't really remember the place at Greenbank Grove where my Mum and her family finally settled after all that moving. I always remember Nanna here, with Papa until he died. *Old age isn't for chickens Lib*. Things have changed since then. Auntie Jean and Uncle Ernie broke up. Malcolm moved in. Auntie Vicki and Uncle Jim never come around anymore. Both my Uncle Peter and Uncle John mostly hang out with their wives' families. It's all different.

No-one would've called the cops once upon a time. Not ever. We would have worked it out ourselves. Uncle John and Uncle Pete would be there. It's all changing. And him now, Malcolm fucking what's his name right there in the middle of it.

Auntie Ange seemed to be in my head with me. With me and you.

He's a fuckhead. I hate him. Prolly him that called the cops. *Malcolm*. Fucking big man him, hey.

Malcolm had been Aunty Ange's boss for a while at McCappin Optical, the factory where she works, so she hates him. He'd been Aunty Jean's boss too, and Uncle Ernie's, I suppose, or maybe they were equals at work. He might have been my Mum's boss too, but she'd been sacked after only a few months. She told me once that she never knew what she was doing the entire time she worked there.

She was lucky, I think.

Mum and I would always take the Espy to Nanna's only turning into Seaford proper on Aldam Road. We'd go past all the old shacks and the new mansions springing up like the limestone, they're all the same colour. Past the house where Dizzy's enemy lives, an invisible barking nemesis, we walk onto the road then, wide around, pulling Dizzy's leash; well at least we used to. Then turn left onto Aldam and then onto Nanna's street.

Not Aunty Ange. We're in her car, the Holden: faded paintwork, broken lock, empties rolling around on the floor of the back seat. She turns left from our house and drives the shortest route through the middle of Seaford.

The lawns are so dry, covered by dead gum leaves all curled and crunching as they gather around the houses. There are grey patches on the roads this way and cars parked all along the street, even on the corners. There are two give way signs Ange hardly slows down for.

This way takes you down Cliff Ave, truly and especially now I'm looking at it with you in my mind, the most depressing street in the world. Small rented houses and a huddle of closed shops: John's deli, Wogdog's, the Bottle-O, the bike shop and the twenty-four hour garden shop. The garden shop's sign is pock marked and I can see, even from here, that it is covered by dead gum leaves.

Fuck knows how they make their money.

Aunty Ange was swearing a lot, even for her.

I heard it was a cover for a drug dealer I said to her. My friend went there and tried to score. The guy went crazy, screaming, chased them out, who told you that, who told you that?

I didn't tell Aunty Ange that the owner was Andrew Summer's Dad, she didn't know Andrew or about his dead Mum and his lousy Dad. I felt a bit bad about that.

Why are you trying to score dope? She asked straight away. At your age. Does your Mum know?

She'd be the one going crazy.

It wasn't me. It was my friends I said, but she could see right through me. I stayed quiet.

Then past the dry soccer field. Four boys are standing in the goals, practicing kicking and falling over, past the school, my old Primary, a patch of green the sprinklers are on all the time, even now, and then right onto Aldam Road.

We park in front of the paddock next door to Nanna's. Me and my cousins would play in that broken olive tree; have wars with the Blake's across the road, who would bunker behind the high grass in their own empty paddock. It seems so long ago.

We go around the side of the house now. There is a sign, new, on the gate that says *Martha Smart at rear*. We head that way, then across Aunty Jean's pavers, her back door and the screen are closed. I can see, out of the corner of my eye, shadows moving within. I can't look though, it seems rude now. There are no kids around anymore, no bikes. We go straight to Nanna's.

Oh Libby, I was just thinking of you. I've been so worried since your phone call. How are you dear?

Nanna was in her lilac dressing gown, too hot for November and the satin bib covered with cigarette burns. Nanna put a hand-rolled ciggy to rest in the ashtray. Her fingernails were long and filed and a grey/yellow colour that matched the contents of the ashtray, and strangely, somehow, the lilac dressing gown.

I seem to be noticing everything. Things that you would want to know, I imagine. Like Nanna's lilac dressing gown at 4.30 in the afternoon. Aunty Ange's car. Descriptions of the streets that I've seen so many times, I could walk them blindfolded. They are not different colours usually, they are just colour. To me. You want more though. A story goes a certain way. There are

expectations.

Well you can imagine the smell in Nanna's flat too. Mum said when she grew up in Hackham, the kitchen always smelled of Oxo cubes. But in the smaller space of the granny flat, the cigarette haze, the very air is like a stock cube.

It's my job to make the cuppas. Only for Nanna and me; Aunty Ange has a beer in a stubby holder I didn't see her start. The stubby holder has a picture of a beer in a stubby holder with a beer in a stubby holder – the image creating a tunnel Aunty Ange doesn't look into. She is drinking, not sipping.

Remember how I like it. I know Nanna. Then both Aunty Ange and I say, together, "the colour of Kamahl".

Now this joke must have started with my Mum and her brothers and sisters because Kamahl is some brown skinned singer from the 70's that I've never even seen. I just know that the tea has to be strong with just enough milk to turn the liquid the colour of a Malaysian or whatever he is.

You haven't got any teabags Nanna. I hold up the empty jar for her to see.

Oh there's some in the cupboard there somewhere. I notice the gravel in her voice. This is most notable on the phone. You'll call her and she'll say hello and then start coughing. I haven't spoken to a soul all day, she'll say and then you'll hear the puff.

Her cigarette simmers now there in the ashtray while she slams her rolling machine shut on another. This she passes to Aunty Ange who puts her beer down on the crowded side table to light it. I could describe that side table to you – wool stacked and cup-holders with photos of Tasmania's notable sights, pen holders with knitting needles and lighters and Band-Aids and everything, it seems, except pens, scraps of paper with names and phone-numbers and other numbers and words with letters crossed out.

I reach as far as I can into the cupboard under the sink searching for the teabags. Tupperware containers with that stock stuff my Mum's described turned hard in the corners of the lids, flour in puffs underneath, sauce bottles with lava threatening to blow their lids and their own circles of sticky under them.

There's some Peppermint Tea in here Nanna.

No, not that shit, keep looking.

I move containers with bags of old spices, one corner sliced off; some rolled and held with pegs. Nanna never cooks. I've never seen her cook and I'm nearly eighteen. How old would these spices be? I hold them up to her.

I brought them from the old place.

That was ten, no it must be twelve, thirteen years ago – you might want to chuck 'em hey Mum.

Don't you start Angela; I get enough of that from your sister. My whole life – why do people always want to tell me what to do?

Oh, don't you start, said Aunty Ange but it had already started. I kept trying to find the tea.

I shove the spices to the left with the top of my hand and three of my fingers are sticking together now like they're magnetised. There is a Vegemite jar, actual Vegemite in here with all the rest of this brown and the lid of the jar is tilted and you can see it is all turning hard inside. Maybe it is escaping. International Roast. I know that'd be rock solid, only Papa drank it and he's been dead ages. Jatz – not so old but hard and soggy in turns anyway. Maybe Nanna would eat them with her curried eggs – now there, she does cook and she does use spice, I take it back – and there would be some left behind, on her face, on the sleeve of the lilac gown – the worst coloured stain. There would even be some on the corner of her glasses sometimes.

Nanna!

Keep looking. I know there's some in there. Or you can go in and ask your Aunty Jean.

But I didn't want to go into Aunty Jean's house. At last, right at the back, a huge box of teabags. As I pulled them to the front I got something nasty under my nail. The kettle boiled. It has a whistle.

Looo-ooove that sound, said Nanna but it was all ritual, her heart wasn't in it. We sipped.

So, I wanted to wait 'til Jean got here to talk to you, but it doesn't look like she's coming out, she doesn't always, these days. Have you heard from your mother?

No Nanna, but really, she lives her life, I live mine. I'm not at school anymore. It's different now. She's doing her own thing. I'm doing mine. I dunno.

But you sounded so upset, love. You sounded worried and scared.

Aunty Ange speaks up for me.

Libby thinks she might have been pre-mature, she says taking a slug of beer.

Nanna just stared at me.

She does do her own thing a lot more these days Nanna, I say.

She sipped her tea and smoked her ciggy through dry, dry lips, staring through the telly and the cabinet and the wall behind.

She's selfish, that's all. Just like your Father.

Whose father? Whose father, Mum? Mine? Or Jean's? Genevieve's? Whose?

Oh, God, do we have to go through this again? Your father...I mean John, he's your father, he was a selfish bastard. A bastard his whole life and I do one thing...

So you are going to do this? Ange was asking.

It just seems so unfair. Just because he's dead, he gets to be a saint now...or something like one.

She drifts off at the end. I suddenly think I should be worried about my Nanna. Even her hatred seems half-hearted but maybe she's just getting starting.

My Mum wasn't selfish. I said it quietly. I'd started all this.

No, no, no of course Libby. I just don't want you to worry. She was always a good Mum to you. A good parent. She just always did what she wanted. That's all. Selfish in that way. But not selfish like John. Bastard.

Ange laughed then, kind of resigned, just shook her head in a way. She didn't say anything funny.

Instead she said,

Well, I'd stop it right now if I were you, here comes Jean.

Leeeeby! Aunty Jean shrieked. How. Are.You? She sat beside me on the couch and squeezed me with each syllable. Then Jean seemed to notice that Nanna and Aunty Ange had stopped talking.

What? She asked.

What? Asked Aunty Ange straight back.

Nothing, nothing dear. We were just talking about Gen. I don't think she would have taken off without telling us. That's not like her.

Nanna smiled over at me. Like I said, the last thing she heard.

She might have told me, I say, maybe I've forgotten or maybe I wasn't listening.

Did the police come around Libby? Aunty Jean asks me, Malcolm is friends with one of the detectives at Christies Beach Police Station.

Aunty Ange and I looked at each other then. Ange mouthed the word CUNT.

What? Aunty Jean asked again.

Well, you know what Gen would have said about the cops, Ange says.

That's why Malcolm rang Beardsy, his friend from Basketball. He told him that Gen smoked dope but Beardsy said that that doesn't matter only if she has heaps of dope. Does she have heaps of dope?

Aunty Jean asked me, shyly, but Ange answered her.

Not anymore, she said.

Just then Malcolm appeared in the doorway of Nanna's granny flat.

Now, there's one thing I should tell you here; I want to tell you here. Something that my Mum told me which means it might be worth telling you. It might explain something to you. Malcolm refuses to be called Mal. Corrects you if you try.

Hi Libby, he said. Heard anything?

No, but...I...

Did the police come around today?

Yes, this morn...

What did they say? Detective Beard assured me that most people turn up, 65 percent within the week.

Um, yes. Was that what they'd been saying?

Thank you Malcolm, thank you dear. Nanna, on to the next thing to agree with.

You fucking arsehole.

I beg your pardon?

Angeeeeeeeela! Jean's voice had turned into a screech, a scratch that could be seen against the brown air. The beefy fog that had actually been pretty nice, I now realise, as it is rushing out the door, swirling between Malcolm's long legs.

Oh Angela, stop that right now. She doesn't mean it dear. Nanna was patting her chest. A small fire had broken out.

Malcolm was trying to help, Angela. Jean stabbed each word through the thinning air where it still made holes.

It's just that Mum does hate the cops and it's not just the dope. She's scared of them. It's about their power. She wouldn't want them to be looking for her, or keeping an eye out for her. She wouldn't want them to know her name. It's not just the dope. I was repeating myself and talking quickly because this was getting out of control and I am, basically, a kid. This was adult shit.

And if she's on an adventure, I'm thinking of that story she wrote about Flinders Ranges, the cops chasing that writer – do you remember that one? I looked around but no one answered. I mean what if she's on an adventure somewhere?

They're all staring as I talk like I've never said anything before.

An adventure? Aunty Jean repeats after me.

An adventure. Malcolm's voice is supercilious. It's the only word for it.

She's just like your father. Oh Nanna. Jesus, did the shit hit the fan then. Just like that, I was sitting at the adults table.

Aunty Jean stood up so quickly, the end of my dress got caught on something she was wearing but she didn't stop. She pulled her arm back as if I was on fire. Her eyes never left Nanna. Nanna was staring at a spot a few feet ahead of her, her head tilted and her bottom lip poking out towards Aunty Ange.

He's a bastard. And he's a liar. I'm not going to pretend he wasn't.

He *was* a bastard, said Aunty Ange. He *was* a liar.

Heeee's deeeead. Heeeee's deeeeaad. Aunty Jean screeched. Why are you still trying to make me hate my Dad?

Hey, he's not even *my* Dad.

Oh Angie. Aunty Jean softened then towards her sister but not towards her mother. Not towards Nanna.

And after what you did, Jean said, how can you say anything? I would've thought you'd be too ashamed, talking like this. Even now.

I wonder what my Mum would've done with this scene. You probably think she'd be sitting back watching like me, she'd be taking it all in to tell you; but that's not how it works. Mum would be the match, usually, in this tinderbox; she was the one to throw a scene into disarray. Aunty Ange cracks the joke that stops Mum and then Aunty Jean comes in cleans up and feeds everyone. Aunty Vicki, well her role's not clear, she brings Uncle Jim, I suppose, his funny stories. Aunty Jean would keep everyone together, though, even more than Nanna.

Things seem to have transformed. I wonder when that happened. I hadn't noticed. Now I'm noticing everything.

My stomach is empty. The cup of tea, the colour of Kamahl because I make everyone's tea the same way as Nanna's, even my own, is swishing around in my stomach. The walls feel like they are touching. I want to bend forward, grab my guts, push into it, create less space inside me. I burp a little burp. It tastes like tea.

Malcolm is standing tall in the doorway breathing through his nose. I think he might do something but he's as helpless as me. He has the longest nostrils I've ever seen. Long and dark. They kind of go to a point. Kind of aristocratic. Is that it? Is that the word for it? Uncle Jim, Aunty Vicki's husband, he's got two different shaped nostrils, from a fight he had, he told me, back when he was a kid in Windsor Gardens – a mint leaf on the left and a jelly bean on the right. The thought makes my stomach growl.

How did you manage to bring Dad into this? How is this anything to do with Genevieve? Heeeee's Deeeead. Aunty Jean is crying now, I've never seen her cry. She sniffs pretty quickly though. I've got to check dinner she says, but I'm not sure who she's talking to. My stomach growls and I can feel it turning. Aunty Jean looks at me and looks at my stomach but doesn't say anything. I'm not sure if she heard it. I keep my mouth closed tight; raise my eyebrows to say goodbye and she leaves.

She pushes past Malcolm, who looks like he wants to say something. Did he hear my stomach? Does he know I'm hungry? Ange is still glaring at him and Nanna is still pouting but she has started rolling another ciggy.

Um, you know, your mother, I mean Genevieve, Gen...she was very passionate about the Referendum.

What? You won. Are you trying to rub it in? Aunty Ange is suddenly political.

Well, Angela, I didn't win. I'm not the only Pom living in Australia and there are obviously a lot of Australians who like the Queen and the monarchy.

Well, congratu-fucking-lations.

Angela! Nanna cursed her with the unlit ciggy between her pointed fingers.

Well, your Mum (he was talking to me!) Gen, well, she wouldn't be happy about it. We'd had some erm, discussions, conversations really, a number of them. I told Sergeant Beards that as well. I could only tell him what I know, not much, you'll have to fill in the rest for him. For the police.

For the cops? Asked Angela.

He stopped talking. He breathed through his nose.

Thank you so much for everything Malcolm; I don't know what we would have done without you. Nanna was trying to reach behind for Malcolm's hand, or something.

Thank you sooo much for everything Malcunt, Aunty Ange said after Nanna but Malcolm had gone so Nanna didn't tell her off again, only stopped reaching behind her. She gave Aunty Ange the ciggy in her lap and started rolling another for herself.

He's just trying to help, Angela; to be part of the family.

Yeah, well things change quick around here, that's all I can say.

And then Aunty Ange wants to leave.

As we leave I can see Aunty Jean in the kitchen. She looks sad, bent over. She is basting something, the smell rolls from the ladle, with the steam, out of the window. Tea sloshes forward and up my throat a way. Aunty Ange doesn't look to the left, doesn't see the vapour even though I know she can smell the cooking too.

I walk slower. Slow down. The door is open; the food is just there, on the other side. The steam floats up; I can imagine it as flavour as it breaks up in the fresh air. I'm so hungry. Aunty Jean is cooking but no one is welcome anymore. The tea is turning into a cold stone in my empty stomach. I hold my arms across my stomach and keep walking. I focus on Aunty Ange's shoulder,

her shirt is covering a tattoo, some kind of Celtic symbol I try and remember as we walk through the gate. I close it behind me. *Martha Smart at rear*. My stomach makes a squealing sound, 'ere it seems to say, 'ere.

Aunty Ange doesn't want to talk. She drops me home. She doesn't come in. She'll see me tomorrow.

The first thing I do after closing the front door is go into the kitchen. I check through the cupboards again. I'm looking for old boxes of cereal, two minute noodles, a half empty sauce bottle – anything. I can't work out where the food is. A frantic feeling comes into my chest, as if the hunger and the groaning that was in my stomach have come up to my chest. It's coming up to my throat; it's coming out of my mouth. I realise I've been two days without food. I didn't eat at Ben Crow's party. I ate with that lot of idiots at Henry's. Munchies. When was that? Sunday? No, it was Monday morning. Well Sunday night really. Slept all day Monday. No Taf. Monday night come home, no Mum. No Dizzy. No food.

I'm fucking starving but, you know, glad in a way that I didn't eat with Aunty Jean and Malcolm. Especially Malcolm. Mum would've hated that. She'd been so sure of the outcome of the referendum, right until the day of the vote. She'd say to me Australians won't vote for a Monarchy and basically that's what a vote against the Republic will be. Anything would be better; Aussie's would vote for anything other than that. Born to rule? It's against the entire ethos of the country. But as the date got closer, she began to think it was only South Australians

who were opposed to the idea of a monarchy. Free settlers. Then not even South Australians, maybe it was just people in Noarlunga who were egalitarian. After all, it was the suburb that contributed the most to the canned food drives every Christmas. Then, ultimately, quite late in the piece and probably because Malcolm moved into Seaford, she thought it was only Port Noarlunga South that thought that way.

So I'm glad I didn't eat. Remembering not eating the food that my Aunty Jean had cooked which had made that sweet, steaming smell is making my stomach roll around and around. *Oh My Walla*. It comes into my head. *Oh My Walla, it's grumbling, it's tumbling*. An Adnyamathanha man had sung it around a camp fire at Flinders Ranges. Mum made me bring my guitar; we sang songs around our own camp fire. Wilpena Pound. It was spring. On the last night, we had gone to a story-telling session, held near the camp site office, 'Adnyamathanha Dreamtime Stories'. He had sung some songs. I remember he said that the Adnyamathanha people like their food, we like a feed he said. All of this is coming back to me now. He had sung *Oh My Walla* and invited us to sing along which Mum did. I was mortified. When the damper was cooked he stopped playing guitar and stopped singing half way through a song. We all thought that was funny. We went and ate the damper together.

Oh my walla.

I head towards Mum's room. The sun is setting; her room is pink, like a little girl's room. But dark, like you have to go through a forest to get to it. I will count out all the twenty cent pieces I

can find, in her room, in the bottom of old handbags and in my purse and I'll take it to the fish and chip shop and get min chips with heaps of chicken salt.

This is my plan. I notice there's a light blinking on the answering machine.

Mum!?

It's Christies Beach. I'll call him that. You know him as that. You read her second book. Yes, I read it too. So what? It was just words on a page. Words are nothing. I knew the real Christies Beach and I knew the other guy, the real Melbourne. I still know him, the middle class writer. I've read his book too. Mum's not in his novel. Port Noarlunga South is - right at the end. Melbourne's novel ends in Port Noarlunga South. You can find out who he is if you really want to. Christies Beach, well he's still done nothing as far as I know; still pining away for Mum, living at his parent's place in Reynella. He doesn't even live at Christies Beach anymore but we can still call him that. Melbourne still lives in Melbourne.

I'll describe Christies Beach to you. I don't know if he comes over any more. His eyes are always rimmed red from the dope. It's constant. He's stoned as. He's usually got a beard though he shaved every day in Mum's book, but really, in real life, it's red and tufts hang over his lips. His shirts are always too tight. I don't like him. He wasn't nice to me when I was a kid. But I bet you do. To you, he's the devoted working class hero. A man of few words, you think. He's the silent, strong type who could be hurt nevertheless. You're a fucking snob. He's a stoner who gets his

kicks from hurting the feelings of little kids. Mum made the rest up.

Hey Gen. Hey Libby. I was sorry to hear about Dizzy. I don't know if you want to, um, catch up Gen. Anyway, gimme a call. Um, just whenever you can.

For a moment I thought it was Mum and then it was him and I hate him. I hate his voice that isn't my Mum's. Fuck you. Dizzy didn't like you either. She never went anywhere near you.

She's got too many boyfriends. How was I going to tell the cops that? How would that look? Sound? Read her books, I could say, tell them to make it up from there like you do. Or don't read the books, just read the reviews. Scandalous. Mum said she only had ex-boyfriends. It's just that they were always hanging around. After a while, the numbers start to add up.

It was Del, another of Mum's ex's, who came around and helped us bury Dizzy. That would have killed Christies Beach. Neither of us wanted to touch Dizzy's body after we'd found her. Del came over when we called. Straight away. He did some new age bullshit over Dizzy's body and wrapped it in a sheet. Mum didn't even roll her eyes. He made us take turns digging the hole and then again filling the hole. He'd collected some wildflowers from his own garden in Willunga and he gave them to us to place on the grave. He invited us to say a prayer but Mum drew the line at that. He made a cross from sticks lying around under the Pine tree and we rested the flowers against it.

I wonder if I should ring Del now. He could bring me some food. He would too. Probably something made of rabbit though. Those rabbit nuggets he makes. Or that rabbit stew Nanna loves that he used to make for her when him and Mum were together. I don't think I could face it. He has gone a bit crazy down there in Willunga. Mum reckons it's the chemicals they put on the vines. She said she went crazy when she lived there with him; I can't remember it I was just a little kid. He's got cats now, a lot of cats. He's probably feeding them rabbit.

So I keep heading down the hall towards Mum's room. What else is there to do? I'm thinking about my Mum, wishing I hadn't gone to that stupid party with Bridie, wishing I'd been here when Mum found out about the failure of the Republic. I wish I had been here when Australia chose the Monarchy. She says I make her feel sane. She says I make her hopeful for the future.

It's funny, because at Tatachilla Lutheran College, they are using me as an example of a hopeless future. Taf. No Uni. From a single mother. What do you expect? Look at Ben Crow. Look at his mother. I didn't want to go to that party. I knew that those girls would be looking at me as some kind of bullet that had to be dodged or else they could end up that way too. I was probably already pregnant, according to them. That party? That's what I chose to do instead of being with my Mum.

In my own defence, I honestly didn't think it was going to go down like that. Mum had been so positive, so confident. Her and her friends. All of them. They were laughing when I left.

I lay across Mum's bed. To be honest, I cried. It's ridiculous, I know, because nothing has happened to my Mum and I am practically an adult and even this afternoon at Nanna's it was obvious I was on the adult's table. I was there for everything. Nothing was being hidden from me. All that stuff about Aunty Ange's Dad. Her real Dad. Mum had told me about it. She had cried then too. She said it was purely animal, her crying, instinctual because nothing would change between her and her sister and nothing has. But watching Nanna like that. Sometimes just thinking about the people you love can make you cry.

I lay on the bed with the telly on trying not to think about Mum and not to think about you. 'Today Tonight' is on. You probably don't watch that. You probably get your news from the ABC. Two neighbours are having a fight. One is a Greek guy, or some kind of Wog, he is standing in front of fruit trees. They are covered in mesh to stop the birds eating the fruit. Looks like apricots. I'm hungry. I can't understand what he saying, he's waving one arm and his mouth is moving, I can't tell if he's talking or eating an apricot. He's pointing over the fence. Next the reporter is standing on a chair looking over the fence. The next scene is obviously what he is seeing. There are car bodies, lined up neatly but with grass growing in tufts. There are two dogs, ugly all right, one with those light blue eyes; the really scary ones. The man takes an apricot seed out of his mouth and throws it over the fence.

Whose side are you on? The reporter seems to be asking, his hands opened held out to one side and then the other. I can't hear him. The sound is too low, turned it down when Aunty Ange got here, can't be bothered turning it back up. Can't be bothered with full sentences. Can't be

bothered. The neighbour with the cars and his wife are staying in their front yard. His hands are flailing around them; I can't hear if he is talking or if he is shooing flies, or perhaps apricot seeds, from himself and his wife. She stands close to him, with one shoulder tilted down; she is patting a dog who is out of shot. Are these the bad guys? I roll over, away from the screen. It becomes noise, I make a plan.

I roll off the bed, I start collecting the ten cent pieces from Mum's various coin jars. \$1.60. I look in the handbags in the bottom of Mum's cupboard. I find two twenty cent pieces in the one with flowers on it. In another, the one she calls her buckle bag, I find an old purse that still had her old student card and \$2.10 in five cent pieces. I remember the fish and chip shop is closed, I don't care, I'll spend my riches at the Taf caf tomorrow.

Tonight, I'm gonna read one of my Mum's chapters. I don't give a fuck. It's what you would do. I'm not going to pretend there will be an answer there, in those words, on that paper on the table. There might be an answer for you, maybe. I just want my Mum. I would usually hear her late into the night, reading her own words. Sounding 'em out. I know it was for you, but I was here, it was my lullaby. I'm still here.

Chapter Two

Melbourne, Friday December 1st, 1972

Johnny walked into the ward, shaking hands with the other new fathers as if he knew them. He nodded politely to the mothers and the grandmothers. A smile and a wink for the nurses, even Rosemary, with her funny eye turning now to study the front of her uniform. A kiss then, for Mary, on the top of her head. He was like water, it was his self that was running across the floor between the beds, splashing up against the windows and finally blessing her.

“She's beautiful Mary,” he said, loud enough she thought to herself. “A full head of hair, just like Jeannie had. Do you remember?”

Mary nodded. She felt her mouth was full of water. She swallowed and swallowed straightening her nightie and pushing herself up on the pillows.

“You saw her?” She watched Johnny's eyes; light blue sky like half the kids, the other half had hers, wet brown, sad. This baby had hers. He was scoping the room; finally his eyes came back to her; her face, her chin, her mouth and then her eyes. Mary turned away. She pulled her hair back from her face, tried to comb it with her fingers and flatten it with her palms.

“You look beautiful too, love,” he said. He's saying all the right things, Mary thought.

“How are the kids?” she asked quietly. She was looking at the curve of her own toes under the

blanket near the end of the bed.

"They're all right love. Jeannie's looking after 'em all."

Mary's eyes widened. She turned her head towards him, her eyes stayed on her toes, her eyebrows lifted, her mouth open but silent, her chin asking.

"Louise is there. With them." He said quickly.

"Are they...are the kids...are they looking forward to meeting... the new baby?" Her hands holding on tightly to the sheet, as if the bed was moving downhill.

"Well, the boys, you know, Petey's ok but Junior had his heart set on a boy. The girls are happy. For some reason they are all worried about you. They thought you weren't coming back."

Opposite Mary, in the ward, a young mother passed her baby to an older woman dressed in black. The mothers in the ward were all younger than her and every one Italian. There were so many Italians in Melbourne. Their own mothers sat beside them, dressed in black, holding the baby half the day. Mary wished she could wish for a mother and then scolded herself for the thought. Her own mother had left town, left her and her sisters without even a word. She hadn't really been a mother to Mary and was no grandmother at all to the kids. But Mary was, and she would be a good grandmother one day, too.

The men came in groups to visit the new mothers, beautifully dressed, you couldn't tell who was the husband or the brother or a friend. Mary didn't like to watch too closely. She looked away when they came in, concentrating on reading her book or if she was holding the baby, keeping it close to her and the blanket up high. Patting down her hair she would hate them. Bastards, she

would think, sometimes even say, quietly, under her breath.

If Johnny saw her looking at the men? Would he know then? Put two and two together? He was suspicious that Mary had told him about the pregnancy so late, but he had come around. He seemed happy. But what if he suspected? He would never suspect. And if he did?

“How long are you sticking around?” she asked.

“Hey, I just got here.”

“Oh you know what I mean.”

“I know. It was just a joke.” He looked as if he was going to ask her a question; he opened his mouth, took a breath, closed his mouth and swallowed.

She thought she would have cuts across her skin, scars, a tattoo, a letter; some kind of sign to show what she had been through, what she had done. Every day of the pregnancy, she looked for a sign. She would check herself in the shower, feeling all around her growing belly. She would stand in front of the mirror staring while the kids ran in the room reflected behind her. Day after day, there was nothing to show that this pregnancy was any different to the others. Johnny acted just the same way he always had; when he was around. Mary was sure, though, that if she looked up quickly, before he was ready, she would find Johnny glaring at her, branding her with his eyes for exactly what she was.

“Well, I’ll be off pretty soon, I guess. Check on the kids. I can bring them in tomorrow, if you

want.” Johnny was sitting on the visitor's chair with one leg crossed high against his other leg. He studied the cuff on the bottom of his pants, his enthusiasm leaking away.

He's clever, Mary thought. He wants me to break and he can be casual, he can wait, after everything he's put me through. Johnny uncrossed his legs and stretched them under her bed, the shirt sleeves rode up his arms as he stretched his fingers towards the ceiling before linking them behind his head. He stretched his neck and his shoulders and then crossed his arms across his chest. He uncrossed his arms and stared at his hands. To Mary, it seemed that every movement was designed, an act to convince her that he knew about her but he wasn't going to say. She would have to say it. He's got it all in his hands now, she thought. He started examining his shirt cuffs, running his fingers around the sleeve near his wrist, tugging them neatly towards his hands. He examined his fingernails. He was waiting.

Rosemary came in then, carrying a bundle to the bed across the ward and Johnny's eyes lifted to follow her as she moved around the room. Even from across the room, you could see the tufts of dark hair poking out of the top of the baby's blanket. Johnny was watching. Rosemary was leaning over the bed, unsuccessfully attempting to pass a baby to one of the young Italian mothers. The young woman had been asleep and was brushing the nurse away, showing her palm, no, no, no.

The whole ward was watching. Rosemary nodded and mewed to the mother, it's ok, it's ok, she said, pushing the baby forward. The mother's protests grew louder and she pulled further back

into her pillow shaking her head and pointing.

Johnny stood up.

“Johnny,” was all she said. They had been married for a dozen years and she had said everything to him before. Don't get involved, she thought, there's too much at stake. She just said his name.

Johnny had his head tilted back, surveying the scene through his lids, his eyes moving up and down beneath them, up and down. Mary followed his eyes and noticed now that the young Italian woman was beautiful and exotic and that Rosemary had a trim figure beneath her uniform. She watched his face; he was biting his lower lip. Mary imagined the inevitable, one scene followed by another through her mind; it only took seconds. She saw the Italian man coming in and finding Johnny with his wife, the fighting, fists held up, the unspoken score to settle. Rosemary, how easily he'd fool her, the poor girl, left behind. How did he do it? He stood perfectly still, like an animal hunting. Mary wondered what went through his head at these moments. Was he planning his strategy, his game plan or was it instinct, the lion in the man pissing everywhere.

“Excuse me, Miss,” Johnny spoke at last. “I think that one's ours.”

Did he know? He knew.

“Must be your Spanish blood,” he said to Mary as he passed her the new baby. He said it as if he knew everything. As if he knew things about her that she didn’t.

“Imagine confusing our little girl with one of those dago brats,” he whispered.

Mary bit her lip at the unfairness, her eyes burnt with the tears she held back. After all his women, here she was, caught. He wasn’t saying anything still. Perhaps he didn’t know. After all, what did he have? Rumours? Do men gossip? None of the women at the footy club knew anything or else they might have used it. Then it would still be rumours but that’s all she’d ever had on him.

Mary looked at her brand new baby daughter. She looked like her father. The truth would be clear to everyone soon. Every time Johnny had gotten himself into trouble, he’d packed them up and they’d taken off. It was a pattern, he’d disappear for a weekend, then more and more over weeks then he’d be back with a new plan, a dream, an opportunity that could only be realized somewhere else. And they’d all follow.

“If you watch the house as we drive away, you can watch it get smaller and smaller until it’s just a little itty bitty dot,” Johnny told the kids as they drove away that first time. He was always making up stories and when they were young the children would believe him. Victoria and Junior had looked out the back window and kept looking out the back window until they stopped at Tailem Bend. Jeannie, the oldest, wasn’t even five when they left the first time they first left Adelaide, four kids under five. She remembered but she didn’t know how she’d done it.

Jeannie alone had stared ahead, her dark brows pushed together and her little hands holding each other tight. Mary held the baby, Petey in the front seat until he cried to be with the others. How much did any of them understand? She passed the baby into the back seat, Jeannie tried to hold her brother and straighten her skirt out from under her baby brother's chubby feet.

They would take the Great Ocean Road to Melbourne was the story Johnny would tell Mary. Before they left, this is how Johnny would sell the move to Melbourne. Sitting together in their small room, in the short time before the kids, he would hold an invisible steering wheel guiding his invisible car around the tight bends of the coast road. His right arm would be leaning out of the imaginary open window. In the story, he'd wave at the sights, pointing them out to Mary. There's London Bridge, there's the Apostles and on that side, pointing across the roof of the imaginary car, the Otways.

Queen Mary he'd called her back then, when they were first together, and she would protest. "Not her," Mary would plead in the dark streets behind the Hackney Hotel, "She was fat and insane. She couldn't have babies," but then she would giggle, giving the game away. Mary had only been living in Adelaide for a few months when they met. Come to join her brothers, already living in Port Adelaide, they had jobs on the dock. That's how they knew Johnny and his mate, Jimmy Boylan. Jimmy would be lookout for Johnny and Mary. He would watch out for Mary's brothers, when they were all drinking at the Hackney. Or watch for the nuns when they were in the city or someone who might tell the nuns. Mary and Johnny didn't do much anyway, a lot of whispering. As long as she was back at the Girls' Home by curfew, she thought.

Mary had started going to the local Catholic Church when she moved to the city. Going to church was a ploy many of the girls used to get a day out and they could sneak away to see their sweethearts. Those that didn't have a sweetheart would go so they could see Father Edgar. Father Edgar gave Mary a bible and then other books to read. John Steinbeck, one after the other: 'East of Eden', 'Of Mice and Men', 'Grapes of Wrath'. Mary felt that John Steinbeck was the best person she had ever known, the more she read his words, the less the nun's words meant to her; the Bible just another book. They were all stories now and she loved stories. Anything could happen. When Johnny started telling her stories, she was ready to listen.

Johnny had worn people out with his stories, other girlfriends. Too soon to talk like that, they would say, they didn't want to join him. Jimmy would listen for hours, nodding and agreeing and saying, 'yeah you should' every few minutes. The men on the docks would walk away saying 'good luck with that mate'. Mary's brothers were happy to listen and they'd ask lots of questions. How would you do that? One would ask and then Johnny would say, easy and another story would start.

He talked and talked but Johnny mainly told stories about taking off. Sometimes it made the listener feel like they were lesser because they wanted to stay where they were. He wanted to go to here and there, each destination more exciting and with more opportunities. The next place is where he would have it all. When he told Mary about where he could go, he included her and the stories became where they could go, which was anywhere.

They got married. They moved out of Hackney, where they had a room for a little while. Windsor Gardens first; Jimmy's neighbourhood. First step, Johnny had said when they moved across to Unley. Then they moved again to the other side of Goodwood Road into a big, cold house where they only lived in the two back rooms. Jeannie and Victoria were born there. They were baptized by Father Edgar. He said he was glad to have Mary back in the church.

Johnny was happy enough at first to go to the church. He liked getting dressed up and he found a new audience for his stories on the steps after the morning sermon. Girls in white skirts would listen to his stories as their parents fussed over Mary and his two baby girls, Jeannie and Tori. Father Edgar would encourage Johnny to come to confession, he took the communion, he might find peace but Johnny resisted.

"Admit nothing," he'd laugh and the girls and their parents would laugh.

Then they moved to Port Pirie. Johnny said that they could save their money, there was work in the country. He had work in the railway yard on Ellen Street. There would be help for Mary, with the girls, that was the story. They had the two boys there, in Pirie, John Junior first and then eleven months later, Peter. Both times, Mary had made the trip to Adelaide to have the babies. Johnny had stayed behind. Mary had some cousins who came in to look after him and the children.

Father Edgar visited Mary in the hospital and told her she had done a fine job for God and the

church.

Mary had taken the opportunity to confess when he came to visit her after Petey was born.

“Father, I hate my husband.”

“Pray to God, Mary,” Father Edgar told her

“For what, Father?”

“Pray to God to stop hating your husband.”

Ellen Street was a break-of-gauge railway station and a lot of goods had to be transloaded. The money wasn't that good but they had a house and Mary had food on the table, for a while. Most of Johnny's wage was coming home, they were settled and there was no talk of moving anywhere else. Even Melbourne and the Great Ocean Road were forgotten. Mary thought this might have been because of her prayers. Mary tried to enjoy her blessings: fussing around the house moving their few possessions and the furniture that came with the house into different settings. Mary would plan dinner for the entire afternoon, waiting in the evening for Johnny to return, sitting with her ankles crossed when the children were in bed like she thought a happy wife would.

Mary struggled to make conversation. After she had told Johnny everything the children had done that day and he had told her what this bloke or that had been up to, there wasn't much more to say. Mary remonstrated with herself during the day, this evening would be the one where she would sparkle again, where Johnny would make her promises. She would grow tired

though, with the children, and then she would hate him for making her have all these babies and she didn't want sweet talk because that just lead to babies. She complained about what the children had done in the day and when he told her his tales, she could only reply that all men were bastards.

He stopped coming home on a Thursday night, pay day. He'd take his cheque godknowswhere and wouldn't come home until there was no money left. Monday night, Johnny would come home from work wearing someone else's shirt. He'd bring home some mince or some chops and potatoes and Mary would cook it straight away. The children would suck on the bones, scrape the last of the mash potato from their little bowls with their fingers. Little Petey would cry at the end of the meal and reach for her breast and the cold of the Girls' Home would come back to her then as if she'd never left.

Johnny was called Lightfingers by his co-workers at the rails, but he was a popular bloke and everyone re-distributed a bit. He liked the girls and his nickname was more to honour his distribution of selected goods to the small towns' prettier women and girls. His wife was thin and they knew he had a bunch of kids but they didn't put the ideas together when Johnny was buying the rounds at the pub.

One day there was a knock at the door Mary knew not to answer; she'd learnt that already in Windsor Gardens. The knocking had a tapping, an urgency that came before yelling. She herded the children into the back room. The curtains were opened a little and Mary could see the top of

a head pacing behind the fence. The hair was thin.

“I know you’re in there. I know who you are, you skinny bitch. Do you know where your husband is?”

Mary left the room, closed the door behind her. She could hear Petey crying.

“My daughter has been through enough, she doesn’t need the likes of him, a married man with a mob of bloody kids, hanging around her and her son. He’s filthy. Everyone, even our Alice, knows he’s off with everything with a pulse. You tell him he can keep all this shit as well. I’m leaving it here. You tell your husband, you tell him, I know where this stuff comes from. I’ll call the police.”

Mary didn’t open the door straight away but she waited and waited. She wanted to see what was left behind but she waited until it was dark. When she opened the door, the first thing she saw, by the harsh light above the front door, was a bracelet with a heart, half was silver and half was a turquoise blue stone. The colour matched Johnny’s eyes. Her children’s eyes. There was a shirt, a blouse really, so sheer and lovely. There were other bits and pieces, a bottle of perfume, stockings still in the packet, writing paper edged in flowers, torn into pieces. Amongst these feminine things, strewn, were the blocks, the Little Golden Books, a plastic horse, the toys he had bought for another woman’s child.

Within the week, they were heading back to Adelaide. Mary couldn't help but remember her last trip to Adelaide, when she had left Pirie to go and live in the Girls' Home. It was the same escape from the same poverty – marriage hadn't saved her at all. Now she had children to worry about, to keep out of the homes. She missed her Dad even though he'd been gone for years and he hadn't been able to keep her either. What good would he be now even if he had lived?

Mary could see how it looked to have what she lacked. That lack now walked in clothes, wore bracelets, had one child, a son who sat on a blanket playing with a pony that he could hope one day, when he grew up, to own. There was someone now who had a life that wasn't hers, who had a name; Alice. Such a light name. All the reasons for escaping Pirie were still the same but now those reasons came with her when she left and filled all the space where hope used to be.

Johnny's union mates from Ellen Street came through in Adelaide and got him a job on the goods containers at Mile End. Alice's Dad, happy that they'd left, didn't tell anyone higher where Johnny had been getting his daughter's 'stuff' from but he was always looking over his shoulder and there were no more extras, not that Mary or the children would have noticed anyway. They moved south, as far south of Adelaide as they could get. As far away from Pirie. Across a bay so wide, no one knew them. It seemed that the new suburbs in the south, South Road seemingly endless, those bends above the gully of O'Halloran Hill, were far enough away from the city to keep his troubles from their door.

There were no apologies or explanations. The goods yard paid the men on a Monday and the

pay came home and Mary, with all the utilities on and food in the cupboard, didn't ask for either. Johnny would walk in the door on a Monday night with his shirt unbuttoned, a wad of cash in his pocket, sit at the table with the children taking it in turns on his lap like it'd always been this way. There was a time of peace. The girls were enrolled in the local Catholic school. Soon, Mary forgot as well, forgot there had been any other way, forgot Alice and forgot where listening to Johnny's stories had always got her.

One day, out of the blue, Johnny started referring to Adelaide as a small pond. He was a big fish, he said. He loved the metaphor. They were swimming, they needed a stream or a river, not a pond. Then it was just 'the pond'. The citizens of Adelaide were various pond creatures. South Australia hadn't changed since Playford got in, bloody years ago. Everyone said it. And there was no sign of him ever getting voted out or of anything changing.

He talked and talked about Melbourne and about the Great Ocean Road. Built by warriors, he would say. He would describe the roads to Mary, like he had when they were courting and she would listen the way she listened to the children. She would watch him, nodding, smiling from outside of herself. The water was better in Melbourne, the lights come on half an hour earlier, there is more to do; Johnny Cash and June Carter played there but not in Adelaide. It was the safe place they went to when they couldn't talk about anything else like where he stayed last weekend, bloody Adelaide, too small. Where was the money they'd saved or the rest of his wage? Pond dwellers all of them. Who was that calling in the middle of the night? Nothing else to do in this one horse do nothing town.

So when Johnny came home and said they were going to Melbourne, Mary thought yes, I know, one day. Johnny had cardboard boxes though, this time. He was packing them. Mary walked in a daze, following Johnny around the house as he swept rooms into boxes or bins or cupboards.

“Nothing’ll change, not without us doing it,” he told her.

“Will it change though Johnny?” she asked him. It hadn’t before, or if it had, it had changed back. She wanted to have hope, like when they were courting, like when she first heard those stories. She realised, in that moment, that this was what she had thought was love - hope. Maybe that is what they would call the new baby. Number five.

The other kids were older now. Sometimes, she talked to Jeannie like they were friends; spoke of the dreams she’d had when she’d been at the Girl’s Home. Jeannie would get scared when Mary told her those stories. Mary thought of Jeannie as a little mother, thought they were the same. Jeannie’s eyes, so much like her fathers, would widen at stories of the nuns. Jeannie would cuddle herself, or pull her little brother close, when Mary told her stories about the cold nights and the thin blankets and all the lonely girls. Mary would always finish, but I’ve got you now, we’ve got each other, we’ll never be lonely again

“How would you feel if we had another baby?” Mary asked but when she saw the look of fear on Jeannie’s face, eyes wider than they’d ever been, she stopped.

Before they left Adelaide, they went to visit Mary's mother. Margery had recently moved from Port Pirie in to the city, into a big house in Hackney right near where Johnny and Mary had first met. As soon as she'd moved here, her latest husband had died. They found her holed up in one room at the end of a long hallway at the back of the house.

Johnny walked into the house like he walked everywhere calling out to Margery as walked down the dark hall, Mary and the children trying to keep up with him.

Mary had been reminded then on the Girls' Home, when she'd first been taken there. It was an orphanage, the other girls told her that quick enough, but her parents were still alive, her mother had taken her to the home. Her brothers were gone straight away. Her sister was with her at first, she told her to ignore the others, that she knew what was what, but she was gone soon too and then it became harder to believe that any of them had ever lived.

Sister Josephine, the only young nun in the home, would encourage Mary to think of them as gone. She told Mary to think of the church as her family now, they were more constant and surely more real. Josephine would hold Mary's hand, pat it and tell her to forget but she could remember walking behind her mother up that long hallway, her mother wasn't holding her hand, but she knew to keep up. She could see her mother's dark curls, just like her own up ahead of her in the hallway. But why would your mother leave you, Josephine asked her, if she was alive? Mary didn't hear from anyone, months passed and Josephine was there every day and Father Edgar. She had just met Johnny, she had started to believe them and then she had

word that her Dad had died. Her real Dad.

“It takes time, doesn’t it, for the pain to go away, Johnny said. From the paleness of his forlorn neck, you’d think he’d known Margery’s latest husband but they had never met; they’d only seen Margery once the whole time they were in Pirie.

Mary could tell from the look in his eye, the way he kept moving that Johnny was looking for an escape and he was looking for what he could get. He would only get what Margery wanted to give him, Mary knew that too. He looked over the furniture, there was a lot but it looked like it had belonged to a bachelor, all of it was dark, as dark as the hallway. Johnny walked close to the screen door leading to the sleep out but didn’t open it, wouldn’t go out there with the bags of old clothes and shoes.

“We would be able to help if we weren’t already committed to ...going...to live ...in Melbourne. My sister is there.”

“What help could you be to me?” Margery asked him. “Looks like you’ve got enough on your plate already.”

Margery didn’t look at the children at all; she kept her eyes steady just above their small heads, even when she bent down to let them hug her. Mary avoided Margery’s gaze, she was sure her mother would see she was pregnant. Mary held her cardigan in front of her stomach but Margery never looked. It seemed to Mary like her mother was waiting for them to ask for

something.

“Do you have any beer?” Johnny called out. Then more quietly, “Any left from the wake?”

There were three beers left, long necks. Johnny drank them. He told stories about his own parents, his sister Louise. Johnny told Margery that they would be staying at Louise’s house in Melbourne. She was a nurse now. Margery sipped her tea and encouraged him to talk. It was nice to have a man in the house again, she said. He reminded her of her first husband. Or was it her second? Johnny laughed in all the right places.

Petey went to sleep in Mary’s arms; chubby and blonde like an angel but no one looked. Mary asked Jeannie to take the other two out and they played in the neat garden. Mary watched them walk out together and thought about the baby inside of her. She thought about telling her husband and her mother right there. She wasn’t sure if she could make a sound or if she could, if she would be heard. She coughed.

When Johnny was drunk enough he asked if he could have the shoes. He asked Mary to get them and she coughed again at the cold leather. They drove through the city, Adelaide, past the Botanic Gardens, along North Terrace, the hospital, the university, the museum. Mary drove, Johnny directed her west. They called in to see Jimmy still living in Windsor Gardens and Johnny gave him a pair of the shoes. The two of them talked in the front yard, their dark heads held close together, looking at the shoes. Johnny came back to the car. There were two more stops,

two more pairs of shoes given to mates. It seemed to Mary that they were really going to Melbourne this time.

After a week of frenzied activity, where he had packed and cleaned and collected everything they needed, put the big stuff onto a container, given away the rest of the shoes, bought a new car on hire purchase, organised for Jimmy to rent their house, Johnny disappeared.

He didn't come home from work on Thursday night. No word. Mary unpacked blankets and pillows, pulled clothes and toys out of bags. Jimmy turned up late Friday with his few possessions to move in, Johnny had let him take over the lease. Mary dragged everything into the kid's rooms and Jimmy unpacked his stuff in the front room. There was awkwardness as Jimmy cooked his three chops and ate them in front of them all but he gave Mary as much bread as she and the children could eat. Mary unpacked the dripping from the box marked kitchen ware and the children ate, finishing before Jimmy and returning to stare as he finished.

Over the weekend Jimmy bought the kids fish and chips and all the trappings for a Sunday roast. Mary took out more and more kitchenware, they took the dining chairs from atop the table and spread the lounge suite out into the room. Jimmy put his one chair in the corner across from his telly and put his feet up on Mary's coffee table. The children ran around the room, jumping over and under his legs and he would catch them, hold them and then set them free. Out of habit Mary kept moving the children out of the way but Jimmy said he liked it and told her not to worry.

On Monday, Jimmy went to work. When he came home, he had news. Johnny had moved in with a woman they all knew from the Emu Hotel. She was very beautiful; a divorcee with her own trust house and only two kids, Johnny was living there. Just across Beach Road and down Elizabeth Street, Mary could go there if she wanted to, Jimmy said, he'd take her. Johnny had given Jimmy some money for Mary and he'd spent it on groceries. They spent that week eating and pretending that they were a family.

On Friday, the electricity was turned off and Jimmy didn't come home. The night before, Jimmy had come home with beers, had shared them with Mary, had reached out to her, he had held his hand on her waist. You are gaining weight Mary, he said with his hand not moving. Mary could see the hairs on his top lip were covered in droplets of sweat. She couldn't bear to kiss Jimmy, she turned away and let him hold her. They were on her lounge, the children asleep, Mary's neck was cricked against the arm rest, her face pushed into the back, she felt Jimmy shiver, her skirt was damp.

On Friday night, in the dark with the children asleep in two's on the lounge and in Jimmy's chair, Mary calculated how many months pregnant she was. She felt her boobs. She was thinking about getting Jimmy to think he was the father. He was interested in her and unlike Johnny, he seemed to like family life. If he thought this baby was his, he'd be more likely to look after the rest too. He wasn't here now though, she told herself. It wasn't much of a choice, she thought, sitting in the dark, with chunks of meat Jimmy had brought home going off in the fridge. In the

dark, one candle burning on her side table, Mary counted weeks on her fingers, tried to count forward to when the baby might be born and tried to imagine where she might be.

So there had been another time, Margery could remember it now if she tried. In the hospital, the new baby in Johnny's arms, another man's baby in his arms, as she regrets her one mistake, as she starts to tell herself the story of her one mistake, Margery forgets that there had been another time when she was going to pass one man's baby off as another's. She was going to pass Johnny's baby off as Jimmy's. Of course she had forgotten, the very idea. Jimmy had left her and the kids high and dry before he'd even taken them on. In less than a year, Jimmy had met his first wife, he'd given her all those kids and then he'd left her with nothing as well. At least Johnny came back.

But there was another week with nothing, a week when she forgot about Jimmy, who was staying wherever Johnny was. Father Edgar had visited with some cans of food she had heated in a billy over a fire in the back yard, she briefly wondered what he would be like as a normal man. She hid from the landlord who came by the second Tuesday without rent, Jimmy hadn't paid it, but she searched his hand for a wedding ring, peeking between the curtains in the front room. Mary kept the girls home from school, boiled water on the fire for baths, for washing their underthings. She was waiting, but she didn't know what for. Then Johnny reappeared in the early hours of Sunday morning. He lay on the floor at the end of them all, flat on his back. In the morning Petey had found his way to his father's arm and was snuggled against him.

Johnny acted as if he'd never left, a few loose ends he said and didn't even try to explain the bruise on his cheek that had turned blue by Tailem Bend and green by the time they got to Bordertown. Johnny drove straight through to Melbourne. They didn't take the Great Ocean Road.

The girls were enrolled straight away at school, their third already, a local Catholic Primary. Some of the school mothers tried to be friendly, if only out of curiosity. They smiled at Mary but she looked away too quickly for them to say anything, clutching her jacket in front of her. They stopped talking, their mouths still open, standing right next to her as she watched the classroom door waiting for the girls to come out. While Mary was proud of her children, she was terrified that someone would notice her.

They were living with Johnny's sister, she'll be like a sister to you too Johnny had said, once, but it was a long time ago and there was no pretending that Louise was going to be a sister to anyone except Johnny. Mary was frightened in a way that she hadn't been before, she clung to Johnny, the cause of her misery, her only friend.

But then, out of the blue, Mary did make a friend. Lorna. Her husband, Leon, knew Johnny and Jimmy, the whole lot of them, from Adelaide. Leon had moved to Melbourne in the 60's and was the drunkest of them all. Leon would have adventures, the other blokes called them, getting home. When he first moved to Melbourne, it was rumoured that he had ended up there after a big night in Adelaide and when Lorna came to get him, they decided to stay. They would laugh

about the time he drove the wrong way down Port Road, thinking the lights of the on-coming cars were cruise ships in the harbor. They still talked about the time they had found him, asleep in his car in a ditch; they had towed the car out with him still asleep in the front passenger seat; Leon hadn't remembered a thing. Sometimes, Leon would drive as far as he could with one eye closed and then pull over and walk the rest of the way; it was the day after just such a night that Lorna and Mary became friends.

Mary had started going back to bed after dropping the girls at school, if the boys didn't have kinder, she would nap with Petey, closing the bedroom door if JJ wouldn't lie down. Mary was tired, from the pregnancy and from not telling. She stayed in her bed reading or lying on her side on a bed in the kid's room, watching the boys and the street out the window until the last moment she could before getting up, showering, cleaning the house and putting the wash on. Then she would go back down to the school, pick the kids up. She would be busy when Louise got home. She found that if she did it the opposite way she would spend the afternoon holding back tears sitting stiffly in a chair in the lounge room.

When Johnny called, asked her to pick up Lorna, she had to pat down her hair and get dressed and wash her face and run out of the house.

Lorna laughed at her when she opened her front door. It was Mary's exact fear.

"You've still got your nightie on, look, you bloody idiot."

Mary looked down at herself and saw her nightie hanging over the top of her pants, she didn't want to look up, she felt like she'd been caught, but Lorna was standing next to her and then putting her arm around her and then they were inside.

"You can use my room if you want to take it off, ha ha ha," and Lorna shoved her into the bedroom. The bed was unmade, the sheets were red. There was a long mirror in the corner. While Mary slipped her jumper over her head, then her nightie and then slid her nightie back over, Lorna continued to talk on the other side of the door.

"Of course, you can get away with it, you're so slim. If I tried going out without my bra on, I'd knock someone's fucking eye out."

Mary came out brushing the front of her jumper down and patting her hair in turns. Lorna laughed again but then she was holding a little boy up in the air.

"This is Leon Tapale Junior, we call him LeeLee. Isn't he lovely?"

Mary noticed that Lorna stopped looking at the boy as soon as she put him down. He picked a crayon up off the floor and stuck it in his mouth and crawled into a corner of the room where another child was hiding under blankets on the couch.

"That's Suzi, my daughter. She's home sick. Suzi, can you watch your brother, we're just going out to get the car."

Lorna swung a huge leather bag on to one shoulder and led them out the front door.

“My old man, you met him yet? He is a DRUNK. Beautiful bloke, truly, wouldn’t harm a hair, a true old fashioned gentleman, but he loves his booze. Every cuppla weeks, I go and pick the car up. Usually it’s closer to home, I walk. Me and the kids, we make an *activity* out of it. Ha ha ha. Your husband, I know my Leon thinks the world of him. And you’ve got a whole load of kids too. It’s a wonder we didn’t become friends in Adelaide, it is a pretty small place. Where are you from?”

Mary didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure what to answer.

“Trick question?” Lorna asked. The way she said it seemed so funny, she looked right at Mary who shrugged and laughed. Giggled.

“Here,” she said finally. Out of the corner of her eye, Mary saw cars driving by and she imagined those drivers seeing her, a young woman with a car and a friend. If she saw herself, she imagined she could be going out for lunch. You couldn’t possibly know how worn her clothes were or how her pants hung on her hips; not if you were looking from a passing car.

“Here” said Lorna.

“Well, here, in Melbourne” started Mary, still laughing. “In St Kilda now, but we’re looking for a place. We’ve been living with Johnny’s sister....”

“No. Here. Here is the car. Just there on the left.” Ha ha ha ha ha.

Lorna jumped out of the car as soon as it stopped and didn’t look back. Mary wondered if she was supposed to just drive off. But then Lorna was back, she leaned back into the car through the window she’d left open.

“It all seems in order. Another lucky escape, hey. Plus I got to meet you. Come by this weekend. I can make my famous potato salad. Ha ha. Fatten you up. Oh, and Mary,” Lorna said finally, over her shoulder as she opened her own car door, “your hair looks fine, stop fussing about it. Ha.”

Lorna was the first person Mary told she was pregnant. She had been hiding the baby, it was easy she wasn't showing, only her breasts. She wasn't sure how she felt about a new baby but she found she liked working out what she thought by hearing what she said to Lorna. Lorna never offered opinions. She would only say, “some people might think this or that”. Not her, she would say, she didn't know. She had no idea about God and if they were deciding on something and Mary brought up God or religion, she'd say, “fuck that, stick to the facts”. When Mary told her that she was pregnant, Lorna asked whose it was.

“What do you mean, silly, it's mine,” answered Mary. They both laughed. They laughed so much. They laughed when Mary told Lorna that adultery was a mortal sin. They laughed at everything.

“What did the old man say then?”

“I haven't told him yet.”

“I suppose he's had his say, um, already. Are you worried?”

“Well, he's been complaining a bit lately, the kids are growing so big.”

“Are you gonna keep it?”

Mary nodded yes, yes, of course to Lorna's impassive face. They were Catholics.

Lorna only shrugged at mortal sins.

“Some would say four kids is enough, but I’m glad. It’ll be a play mate for LeeLee.”

They had made their plans, the way they did now they were friends, for hand-me-downs and play dates and babysitting until the near future was taken care of. They covered the pregnancy and birth and first months in the life of the baby so fully that afternoon that Mary had almost forgotten about Johnny.

She would tell him though, she would tell Johnny later that night, that very night, when they were together in bed in Louise’s front room.

“When were you going to tell me?”

“I’m telling you now.”

”Don’t I get a say?”

“What do you mean, a say? You’ve already had your say.”

“That sounds like Lorna Tapale talking.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s giving you strange ideas.”

“What do you mean?”

“Keep your voice down. Louise will hear you. What I mean is, well, Lorna isn’t such a good friend when you’re not around.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Language. That’s what I mean. You would never have talked like that before Lorna.”

“So, that’s what you mean? Lorna isn’t a good friend because she gives me strange ideas about swearing?”

“And...when you weren’t around...she. Well, let’s just say, *she* came on to *me*.”

After all the lies, the fact that she believed this one, that she gave up her only friend because Johnny told her that they had slept together, it wasn’t against Lorna, it was against vulnerability. It was against hunger, it was against the dark. The answer wasn’t outside, it wasn’t in Melbourne, it wasn’t even in her. Finally, Mary lost hope.

Afterwards, after the tears over her lost friend, Johnny was calm. He was solicitous, as if he was talking about someone else’s baby. He offered advice like a sister. Louise was a nurse; she’d know someone in Melbourne. It would be too much with another kid with them just starting out here. Mary begged him not to ask Louise and he agreed not to. He said, ok you win. He had gone out in the evenings, scouting he called it. He found someone, finally, through a barmaid at a pub across town, down in Frankston. They met the woman, she’d asked them to bring whisky. Johnny took care of it all, he negotiated, they could do it now; he was like a broker. Mary drank half the whisky, lay down.

She asked the woman, as she had once asked Lorna, “What if you believe in God?”

The woman didn’t look at her. She washed her hands and placed a stack of towels underneath Mary. “This is nature,” the woman said, “it’s different from God.”

Afterwards, through the shock and tears with so much of her coming out there on the table, she could see Johnny and the woman, Mary didn't even know her name, drinking the rest of the whisky. Johnny drank the whisky with the woman as if he had no stake in the outcome at all. As if *they* were old friends. When the bleeding wouldn't stop, Mary had to go to hospital but the two of them were drunk. She went in a taxi. Alone. Johnny wasn't there when the police came. He said sorry. He said he was sorry for how it turned out. He said Louise had found out anyway. He said that she said that they should have asked her.

She swore to herself she would never tell Jeannie that story. She swore she would never tell Father Edgar or anyone. She thought of Lorna Tapale, she would never have to tell her but she wouldn't have judged her anyway. Mary felt God's eyes on her, she tried to make them soften but in her mind, they were now as hard as the nun's gazes. Mary couldn't remember what she had even worried about before, where her shame had come from. She saw now, too late, that she had been innocent.

Nothing would go right for them after that. Two months, three months, they couldn't get a place to rent, anywhere, no matter how dingy and awful, there was a shortage of rental properties and no one wanted to let to a family with so many children. When landlords would say that, or even when they wouldn't, it would be assumed that it was the kids, Johnny would look at Mary and with a sly nod that said see, I was right, too many, it was for the best. Every time they missed out, he would take some small joy before he would start to complain again about having

to live with Louise.

“See, she’s like my mother,” he would say, a practiced answer that he never said in front of Louise who would probably have taken it as a compliment anyway. If Mary even commented on some difference between Melbourne and Adelaide, Johnny took it as a complaint. He couldn’t abide his wife complaining and he took every criticism of Melbourne as a slight on his character. Sometimes, more and more it seemed, he would blame her; it was Mary who was unsophisticated, a pessimist.

Then it was winter. Mary had lost so much weight from the blood poisoning and the kids kept her ragged. Johnny was getting more work than he had in Adelaide and yet they never seemed to have any money. It was so cold. Louise refused to turn on the heater when she wasn’t there and Mary and the children huddled under blankets. Mary knitted furiously, gloves and scarves and cardigans and high polo neck jumpers with wool they gave away at the church.

“Well it was your church’s fault you had all the babies. Of anyone, they should be doing something to help.” It was Louise’s favorite come back, inherited, like so many traits, from her own mother. They had inherited so few from their father who Mary remembered as a kind man, smiling. He had left, gone back to Tasmania, straight after his wife died. From her mother, Louise had inherited most of her ideas, her broad, low body, her nose, seemingly forced up into her forehead, her way of looking at people with her head tilted slightly, like they were a question. From their father Jack, both Louise and Johnny had inherited their love of drink.

Mary would sit sipping her wine while Johnny and Louise drank more seriously. At first, at the start of the night, after work and putting the children to bed, the drinking would be business like. The glasses were large and they filled them up and poured them down their throats. The fun would start later, after they had been drinking for some time. Memories of their parents, of growing up would have them laughing at the beginning of the night and crying at the end sometimes with exactly the same story: one of their parent's fights would have them remembering through their red teeth, Louise would have her forehead resting on her arm on the table, her broad back shaking and would sit up wiping her eyes -with laughter or sadness. Mary sat with them as long as she could but she was sad all the time and that ruined their evening.

She started to miss her sisters, her mother, the loneliness was that bad. Mary sometimes missed her Dad but he had been dead so long; her Papa loved the drink too. She missed Lorna; she missed the idea of a friend. Then later, she started to miss the baby who had died, a little girl; even with so many children climbing on her, her thoughts would go to the one that wasn't with them. She would see the baby in a shape in the blanket and flinch. The children would stop then too; sometimes Petey would cry, he couldn't get close enough to her, but mostly they were quiet when their mother was quiet.

Mary suspected Johnny had met someone but didn't have the strength to ask.

In the hospital, Johnny holds the baby close when Rosemary returns to collect her. No worries, he assures the young nurse, innocent mistake, no harm done. Johnny undid his two top shirt buttons, Rosemary blushed, and then he put the baby against him. He looked up at Mary smiling.

“I heard it’s the thing to do with babies. For fathers to do. Hold the baby against their skin, like this. It helps with bonding.”

When Mary first met Bob, she didn't even know he was Italian and it wasn't until months afterwards that she even knew his name was actually Roberto. He played footy and he was good at it. He drank beer after the game in the club with the rest of them; sometimes he came and sat with the women sipping their shandies, which was unusual, but there seemed no loss of face when he returned to the men at the bar. He was tall and Mary had always thought of Italians as shorter, like Dean Martin. His eyes were light, some colour green that she hadn't seen before and he only seemed to see, to look at, what was before him. Mary never saw him gazing around. She could watch him unafraid that he would look up and catch her.

In the footy club, the women chatted around her, Wendy Shaw and Nancy Windybank taking the lead as usual. Mary sat at the end of the long table, a subject of interest rather than a fellow or a sister. They all knew Johnny Come Lately had raced off Long Tall Sally and they had sided with Mary, out of relief that it wasn't their husband racing Sally off. Now they were stuck with her. Mary missed Lorna Tapale, would often imagine her here, imagine what she would say to Nancy

Windybank. Then she would remember the truth about Lorna Tapale.

Sometimes one of the lower caste women would talk to her.

“Your children are beautiful Mary; you must be very proud.”

They would look together towards the children, usually dancing around the jukebox in the corner of the club room. Playing the Beatles.

“Yes, the boys are like their father,” said Nancy Windybank. There was a tittering over the sticky circles and the failed raffle tickets on the table. Mary consciously sat straight in her chair though her insides wanted to shrink into the plastic and she felt it was only her knitted cardigan that was holding her up. Mary imagined that Johnny had it off with Nancy Windybank. Why else would she talk to her? Nancy was drawn so close to Mary that she would risk exposing herself to her fellow crows.

“Oh, I think JJ is more like you Mary. He has your eyes. And little Victoria looks like you but Petey and Jeannie are Johnny *all over*.” The words brought everyone’s eyes back to Mary, she stared at the kids.

“Yes, you have dark eyes,” it was the woman closest to her, lower than Lucy Windybank but above her. “Quite pretty.”

Obla-di, Obla-da drifted across the clubroom. On the dance floor, in the corner, the kids danced and passed Petey between them, bouncing him in the air, him happy to stay the baby, even

though he was getting ready to start school. In the game, the children would throw him higher and higher until Mary was ready to call out, but then he was passed to Jeannie who stopped and straightened up her brother's clothes and danced him gently from side to side while the other kids sang. Mary turned back to the table and saw that all the other women were watching her children too and she filled out her cardigan and took a sip of her drink.

"Now look at that," said Nancy, to herself, ignoring the other women as Bob walked towards the children, stopping at the jukebox. It was the first time Mary looked at him.

"Funny, he never brings his wife in," said Wendy Shaw. Wendy, holding on to the number two position with both hands, was always pointing out the interesting to Nancy. The two women talked to each other ignorant to the other women who were listening intently nevertheless.

"He's handsome. I bet she's pretty." Nancy pursed her lips as if she had just applied lipstick.

"Do you like him? You might have a chance; Italian women are only pretty when they're young." said Wendy.

Mary could hear Lorna's voice above these women,

"Meeeeoooww!" she said, quietly. Nancy looked up quickly. She considered Mary again but it was really Lorna.

"Hey Bob?" called Wendy across the clubroom ignoring Mary and Nancy. Bob was talking to Mary's children who were surrounding the jukebox and making suggestions, holding their brother up. Petey was singing with his eyes closed. Bob tickled him under the chin, poked JJ in the ribs. He turned to the table of women when he heard his name. He turned back to the

jukebox, pressed his letter and number and Obla-di, Obla-da came on again. The children jumped up and down with joy before resuming their dancing.

“Hello Wendy, hello ladies,” he said.

“Good game today, Bob,” said Nancy. Bob bowed to them. Mary could see the hair growing on the back of his neck.

“I had a couple of lucky breaks in the square. Thank you though.” Bob nodded again. There was silence at the table: Wendy seemed blocked as if the next thing out of her mouth would be bad and she was trying to keep it in. As one, the ladies picked up their drinks and sipped. Bob laughed. Even Mary, who was a split second behind the others, took a hurried lick.

“Ha,” he said, “Now all together, drink.” He held his hands up like a conductor. He looked like he could wait all day but the ladies were finished with him, they laughed politely and turned to each other.

“Beautiful kids you have there, Mrs.”

Mary was watching the kids.

“Thank you,” she said politely. She was getting ready to call out to Victoria and JJ who were trying to dance on the same spot.

“And smart too, Mrs.”

“Please, call me Mary,” she said.

He reminded her of her first words to him later, when they were together, just the two of them, out of ear shot of the children. He said it was her naturalness that had charmed him, she was so different from those other women. He told her he had seen beauty in her quiet sadness. Her politeness was poetic.

“Mary,” he said her name slowly.

She was trying still to remain within the accepted boundaries, her accepted boundaries, which was inside her cardigan. She was frightened and had a feeling of being chased but she couldn't see what was chasing her. It was like a dream. The women were watching her. She sat still but felt like she was moving, very slowly, into the centre of them.

“Are you clever, like your kids?”

“Me. Ha. No. I - I like to read,” it had popped out and her mouth shut quickly behind the words.

Nancy Windybank and Wendy Shaw were glaring at Bob and Mary who had spoiled their entertainment in so many ways.

“I have been reading the Australian writer, Patrick White. Have you read him?”

Mary nodded and then shook her head. She laughed and nodded once more and stood up pulling her cardigan down over her bum as she walked away, excused herself with, “Sorry, um, the kids.”

Bob looked up then at the other women, made the sounds required for his leave and returned to the men.

Mary could hear twittering sounds from the women, it dried the circles spilt on the table into letter C's.

"So are you going to read that book he said, Patrick White?" asked the woman sitting next to Mary, she was ambitious, by the end of the season she would be sitting next to Nancy. Mary scoffed into her glass. Jeannie dropped Petey into Mary's lap and she sat back in her seat, comfortable at last.

"Oh, I'm too busy for that," she said.

"For *that*?" There was more laughter at Mary who felt there was nowhere, and there never would be anywhere, that she could hide.

Every day Mary thought Johnny would pack them up and take them home to Adelaide, but he didn't. Every night he and Louise would sit drinking, remembering or scheming, until it seemed that this was to be their life now and then suddenly the trust had a house for them, after six months. They moved into a place in Richmond, on the wrong side of Bridge Road, but it was their own. They'd been rushed through because they had so many children.

Johnny had taken the boys to watch the footy the first weekend they heard the sirens from their backyard. Mary had followed, the cold mornings suddenly beautiful as they walked the fresh streets, heard the bird calls tee-ying above them, the wind coming up quickly, trees shivering and rain falling from their leaves, thin yellow pointed carpeting the footpaths. Mary grew strong

walking the streets.

The library was an old building with huge front doors which opened up onto the street. Mary stood in the street with the children looking in for the longest time. She still had books from the Chelsea Library, near Louise's house, and she was sure they wouldn't give her a card.

Mary hadn't read Patrick White. She had kept reading John Steinbeck, it was enough, she thought. She asked the librarian which one she should read and the woman behind the counter suggested *Voss*, it was the one everyone read, but the copy was already borrowed. Instead she borrowed *Riders in the Chariot*.

In the way that John Steinbeck had helped her see herself once, Patrick White helped her see herself now. Was she different or was she just now seeing herself for the first time? She was Ruth Godbold and there was honour in her sacrifice; she was Mary Hare, lonely in her broken down castle. Whenever he saw her with the children, Bob would come over, ask her where she was up to in the book, what she thought. Talking to Bob, or Roberto as she came to call him, helped her to see herself in the characters, to see the power in the words. It helped her to see other Australians too, to recognize them in the novel. They *were* petty, they *were* competing, they *did* lie. Everyone did everything. Even her.

It was a short affair. It started as Himmelfarb was crucified. Mary read *The Eye of the Storm* next and they broke up when Elizabeth Hunter found out her husband was dying. She realises that

she finally loves him, that she has been a monster and maybe always will be. Two books and that was it.

She broke up with Bob. She was scared someone would find out, the women at the footy club seemed to know about the affair before her. Bob wasn't going to leave his wife but Johnny might leave her. She was sure he was seeing someone else. She held Bob while he cried; she didn't think it was for her. He would miss the children as well, he said, it was a haven for him. He sniffed into her hair; she felt the intake of breath on her neck and was disgusted, so eager was she to be free. One more time, he said and she agreed. He held her face, with his hands, close to his, he was like an actor. She had to close her eyes. She kept them closed and when she heard him ugg-ugging over her, she turned her head away as well.

At the end, Mary couldn't remember what she had been thinking at the beginning. She felt she had been caught up like so much flotsam, like rubbish that is swept away by the rains or blown into the corners by the wind. But then she was in the eye of the storm, she wasn't the rubbish, she could see it all flying around her, life, each part separate and clear as it passed her by. In that quiet place, just like Elizabeth Hunter, she had power, she could stop, find somewhere safe and dry for herself and make her own decisions.

Or so she thought.

All the signs were there. Johnny was promoted at work. Johnny started staying out a couple of

nights a week. He was involved with the union movement now, he said, he was organising. It was an exciting time, he said. They were striking – for wages, for the right to negotiate, to get Australia out of the Vietnam War, to support the tram workers union, to get O’Shea out of prison. Each week it was something new. Solidarity, he said. He was behind Gough. They all were, he said, it was time.

Then, suddenly, he was home every night, watching the front door, laughing nervously with the children. Mary was happier when he wasn’t there; now she was nervous too. She was pregnant. She hadn’t forgotten to tell Johnny this time; this time she was hiding from him as well. He was hiding too Mary recognized now that she was doing it. The house in Richmond grew smaller. It seemed to be hiding as well, behind the brush fence, the windows looked like lidded eyes peering over the top.

Johnny started talking about The Great Ocean Road again. After all this time. They never did get to see it, did they? We could go to Adelaide for a visit, he said. Dunstan was in. There was a lot happening in South Australia, Johnny said. Jimmy had told him of some opportunities in the building industry. Get out of Transport, he said. Too many rough heads. Giving the whole union movement a bad name.

It was the end of September before she told him she was pregnant. They had heard the sirens from the finals over their back fence and Mary looked up towards it, when she looked back Johnny was staring at her stomach. He could see she was pregnant. She was already over six

months gone. There was nothing he could do about it, she'd made sure of that and he didn't say a word. It was too late. She stopped holding her stomach in right then. She started wearing the one maternity dress she had from when she was had Petey.

The last weeks passed quickly, much more quickly than they had for the other pregnancies. Mary was torn between wanting the days to go quickly and wanting the baby to stay inside her forever. She didn't know who the father was, not really, she told herself, and wouldn't know until she saw the baby. She imagined that everything would change on that day, if it was going to.

"They said you can leave, today, if you want," Johnny told her.

"Really, so soon?" Mary hands were held tight to the sides of the bed. She felt like she was sliding, that she would go over the edge, a waterfall at the end of the bed, if she didn't hold on.

"Well, you're an old hand at this. They'd need your bed for women who weren't as good at it as you."

"Good at *it*?" She sounded like Nancy Windybank.

He looked closely at her, his eyes stayed on her and he turned his head to listen; it was there, between them, the lie (or the truth) and Mary waited for it to fall onto the floor or explode or spin around the ward like a hurricane but it didn't. It stayed perfectly still, if you moved your head slightly to the left or to the right, it disappeared. Johnny didn't move his head.

"Good at being a Mum. To our kids."

Mary heard the word 'our'.

"It would be better for them anyway. The kids. They want their mother and the nurses here don't want a mob running all over the place. Plus, tomorrow is voting day. It's the day we've been waiting for. Whitlam is going to get in. It's gonna be big. It's gonna be huge. Just look at the papers."

Johnny tried to reach behind him with one hand for the newspaper on the table under the window while he held the baby girl resting along his other arm.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I believe you." Mary was exhausted. It was total, as if she was about to finish a marathon but the finish line kept moving further and further away from her. It was out of sight now. Maybe she would be trying to finish this marathon forever.

"What shall we call this one?" Johnny asked. He was undeterred by anything Mary said or did.

"How about we call her Gough? After your mate."

"Ha, no way. She's too beautiful. We could call her Margaret though. It would be a sign of the times. What do you think?"

"It's close to my Mum's."

"Yeah. Good. Margaret."

"No, I mean it's too close." But she spoke too quietly and it seemed that everything was decided.

The other nurse, not Rosemary, brought in paperwork. They were getting them ready to leave.

Did she want to call that name out for the rest of her life? When she'd called it out in vain so many times as a child. Would call it out now, though, still, if it would be worth it. Mary started to cry.

"Ah love, I'm sorry. We can call her whatever you want. You'll be ok, when we get home. I'm sorry. I haven't been much help, have I? I thought you were ok. You always seem ok."

Mary rested her head on his shoulder. She could smell the stuff he'd put in his hair. It was sweet, like a woman's perfume. She rested her head on his shoulder in the car, driving home from the hospital. That night, she leant against him as they sat on the couch, her head in his neck, him telling her his plans for moving back to Adelaide. They would be on the right side of history this time, she'd see. Mary noticed the smell grow faint in the darkening evening, only the sharpest part of the perfume remained, it hung like an unasked for promise.

Chapter Two

Port Noarlunga, Wednesday, November 10th, 1999

My Nana reckons I could dance before I could crawl. Lifting myself up on my little arms, I would sway from side to side while she sang.

She told me the story again when I rang her. I can still see you, right here on my bed, she said when I rang her after Taf. I was upset, I hadn't slept, had a horrible day. She was in bed she told me. Her back was playing up. I imagined her in the waterbed, newspaper or a book on what would always be Papa's side. I thought about the character Mary in Mum's story. Was it Nana?

And you could sing before you could talk, she said. Talk properly. Ask Cherry. You were in the back of your Aunty Vicki's and your Uncle Jim's car. They'd taken you out. You had been copying everything they had said all day, little parrot you were, such a little dear, but then John Farnham came on the car radio and you started singing. *Touch of Paradise*. They couldn't believe it.

I know Nanna. And my Mum was left on the floor playing with the telephone when she was a baby and managed to get through to someone. When Nanna spoke to the lady at the other end of the line, she told Nanna that my Mum had been asking for Johnny Farnham. My Mum was always singing *Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head* when she was little.

Is some knowledge inherited?

My Mum always referred to John Farnham as Johnny. She was a little girl when he had his first hits, *Sadie the Cleaning Lady* and *Raindrops Keep Falling on Your Head*. That phone story is famous in our family. Then, when Johnny came back with a vengeance and released *Whispering Jack* in 1986, staying on the charts for twenty five weeks with the hit single *You're the Voice*, Mum already had me. We were already living at Port Noarlunga. On the weekends, Mum and her brothers and sisters would get together at one of their houses and no party would be complete until they stood arm in arm in a circle singing *Chain Reaction*.

Mum loves Johnny Farnham like she loves the Republic. Like she loved the Republic. What's it called now? The failed Republic. If she'd thought about it, she could have seen this coming. People were always scoffing at her love of Johnny. People would ask who her favourite singers were - she always had a long list but it would always include Johnny Farnham. What kind of country, she would ask me, imagine a country, she would tell me, where a talent like Johnny is not celebrated. Is cringed at. Listen to *Please Don't Ask Me*, Goble's heart felt call to an unrequited love that can't even be spoken of, the cracking pain in John's voice. Listen to it.

You would know Mum's argument about quality from her first novel. Most people can't listen to John Farnham sing and not recognise the quality. I mean they can't. They either don't know quality or something else is going on. Mum felt that way about the Republic. She had spoken to

a few people, her middle class friends she called them, the m.c., who were considering voting NO because they were worried about the model. Can you imagine a country, she would ask, that would rather be a Monarchy than an imperfect Republic? Something else was going on, she said, she couldn't work out what it was, she said. At least she hadn't yet.

Whatever it is, whatever else is going on in this country, she would have thought it was the reason the Republican vote didn't get through and she'd say it was the reason I got a bad mark on my Taf essay. Nanna was nice about it, she said they must be jealous, which is what she says every time, but I really needed my Mum. She would have said it was because Taf is so Taf. She would have said the teacher had an inferiority complex and that was the reason he was working at Taf in the first place. Or if he didn't have issues before starting at Taf, he'd have 'em now. She would have said the class, who laughed at me and agreed with him, were suck-'oles and try hards.

I think she would have thought the essay was all right.

We had to write about a song that had inspired us and I chose *Playing to Win* by John Farnham. He wrote the song; a lot of people don't know that about John Farnham, he's a songwriter too. He wrote it when he was still with Little River Band, having replaced Glenn Shorrock.

At the time, John Farnham was collecting songs for *Whispering Jack*. He was putting it together,

the final throw of the dice for him and famously, for producer Glenn Wheatly who had mortgaged his house. John had spent many years in the cabaret wasteland before being offered the role of lead singer in LRB. John Farnham wanted out of the band, felt like he was being held back and the song reflects his feelings. He is 'playing to win this time' and knowing his history, the many times when he was just playing, 'oh what a fool'. Not this time. You can hear the defiance in his voice, 'if you want it, come and get it' , you can hear it in the steady beat and the immediate call of David Briggs' lead guitar at the start, well, well well, well well. 'You don't have a chance if you don't move now.'

So, I wrote a bit about the origin of the song, placed it in history, in the history of Australian music. I discussed the musicality, I analysed the lyrics of the song. At the end of the essay, I wrote about how I had used this song to inspire me many times when I had troubles or when I thought about how my life was going to be. Really opened up, I did. I wrote about my Mum and how she loved the song and how she loved Johnny Farnham. He gave me a credit and then scoffed at John Farnham in front of the class and said he didn't sing, that he only screamed. He only screamed? A credit? Then that class of idiots guffawing along with him. Him smirking. Smirking! What had he fucking won? What had any of them fucking won? Then I had to sit there while he gave everyone back their essays – three of them had chosen Jimi Hendrix, one Bob Dylan, one The Beach Boys and all the rest, seriously, were The Beatles.

Well, don't worry about them, Nanna said, they're just jealous because you have natural born talent.

There's some pretty good musicians in the class, Nanna.

Yeah, but none of 'em'd be as good as you I bet.

Nanna's good, but she's not my Mum. I cannot imagine what my Mum would have said about this, especially after the vote against the Republic. She would have gone spare. She thought *Playing to Win* would have been a good song for the Republic Movement. She also thought more people, namely Malcolm Turmoil, should have mentioned Henry Lawson and his mother who never got over the failure to get a Republic last time Australia got to have a vote. She thought along with the YES button, there should have been one that said 100 YEARS because she thought that's how long it would be before we got another chance; that's how long it had taken to get the chance this time. Mum would have rolled it all together into one huge conspiracy of cultural cringe of which I was yet another victim alongside Henry Lawson, for god's sake.

But it would have been good, she would have been angry. Nanna is piteous. Poor baby. Don't worry. Mewing. I tell her about my nightmare instead, the one I'd had in the middle of the night. Nanna always listens to your dreams.

I fell asleep straight after I collected all the coins and realised the fish and chip shop wasn't open on a Monday night. When I woke up the news was still on but the sun had set. The telly was so loud. It woke me up. Malcolm Turmoil was speaking about John Howard, I could hear it clearly.

History will remember him for only one thing. He was the Prime Minister who broke a nations' heart.

In the dream I was having a dream. I wasn't sure when I woke up. My Mum was in it. And Dizzy. I was lying in Mum's bed, that's why it seemed so real, it was like I had just rolled back over and there they were. I was telling Mum how I hadn't eaten the food at Aunty Jeannie's. Mum seemed happy; she was leaning back with her feet on her desk the same way Aunty Ange had. She had her papers in her hands; I could see her hand writing on them. Where is the food, Mum? Somehow that became where is Dizzy, Mum? Dizzy's gone she said. Broke our heart.

And I was awake. And the telly was really, really loud. I quickly turned it off. I jumped back in the bed, sitting up, my knees under my chin, the quilt up to my neck. My eyes were darting around the room. The only light came from the lamp next to the bed which had been on for three days. I could see the darkness yawning out of the hallway. The blinds were still open and I could see the silhouettes of the trees moving about outside. With the telly off I could hear the wind oohooohoo across the roof and the ocean hushing on the shore. I could hear a swing or a gate or something whining and banging up the street. I could hear, in the room, a slow tapping chach, chach, chach. Then a wisp of wind across my neck.

On Mum's desk, I see a corner of one edge of one of the stacks of paper is moving. It is waving to me. On the other side of the desk another piece of paper waves. Another fans up, a few pages

Poor baby says Nanna. That sounds so scary. Do you wanna come and stay here with me, love? I don't. I have people coming over, I tell her.

I've got Mum's story in my head now too. Mum used to say, on her sadder days, that reading books separated you from people, every book was another step away from them, a place you'd been that they haven't and maybe never would.

I changed the subject.

Nanna, you lived in Melbourne, right?

Yes, we did, on and off for years. Your mother was born there.

Why did you move?

Oh, your father, I mean Papa, running from trouble, usually.

Did you live in Port Pirie?

Well, I grew up in Pirie, but no, I never lived there with your father, I mean your Papa.

And Aunty Ange?

No, she was born in Adelaide. Libby, don't tell me you are going to make me go through all this again?

Now that I'm writing this, I realise how my Nanna always says 'your father' first, it's like a verbal tick she's grown from complaining to her children about their father, now she's doing it to me. Then, before we hung up, out of the blue, she told me this story:

On one of their trips, they had left late at night. Papa had driven through the night, the kids all stretched out asleep. They had stopped just as the sun was coming up and Nanna had taken over. Papa had fallen straight to sleep. Snoring. But he had sat straight up on the back seat and screamed STOP! On the road before them, arched across the horizon and blending into the dry plains stretching beyond them was a flock of sheep.

None of us would be here now if it wasn't for him. None of us.

I think it's the first good story about Papa I've ever heard come out of her mouth. Nanna seemed a bit put out herself and said her farewells quickly for once.

After the class, the humiliation, two of the other students came up to me: Noah, who's a weirdo drummer who wears a cap and is older than the rest of us, a lot older, nearly thirty or something and Donald who has an accent and a thick fringe which stands straight up and black rimmed Buddy Holly glasses. It was Donald who had picked The Beach Boys.

That was fucked in there. I can't tell if Donald is slow or shy. It's the accent.

Are you ok? Asked Noah.

My Mum's gone missing.

It was the first time I'd said it out loud. Knowing that she wasn't home, that I wouldn't be able to describe the teacher, how the class had acted, even this scene with Noah and Donald to her, when I got home. Then their reaction! Noah looked scared. His eyes, which I'd always thought were too close together, were suddenly wide. He took his cap off. He's not bald. He leaned so far forward, I thought his chin was going to touch the straw in my drink.

What has happened?

Donald sat mutely, staring at my drink until I offered him a sip and then he coughed and said no thank you. I told them everything: Mum missing, my family fighting, the cops, no food. I cast my hand over the Burger Rings and the large Farmers Union Iced Coffee and the buttered bread roll I'd bought with the coins as an explanation. I even told them a little bit about Saturday night, trapped in Willunga with a herd of ferals. Donald laughed then. Bogans, he said. Noah and I nodded. We nodded at the same time. We were both looking at Donald, nodding.

So that's, basically, how I got here, with Noah and Donald bringing food over any minute. Two absolute weirdos with no social skills, cooking god knows what, sitting here. There's a shitload of other stuff going through my head, namely where's my fucking Mum. I keep thinking about

that wind that came out of nowhere last night and the lights going out and weighing up whether it will be worth having those two in my house to avoid freaking out.

So I'm here, waiting for them and wanting to start another chapter of Mum's book. *She looked hard at him when he walked in at the end of the day to see if he suspected that she was leaving, catching the Overland tonight at 7.45pm from Keswick Station.*

It's the next story. It's my story. My Mum has told me this one. The night she took me away. I know who R-O-B is now. Mum told me that he was an asshole. I'm not exactly sure what that means. She said that when I came along, she knew she had to get away from him. She told me that he was always very sorry and she really felt sorry for him and she knew he was missing out but that he would fuck up our lives as well as his if we stayed. Maybe that's what Nanna means by saying Mum's selfish. They say Adelaide is a small place, but I've never seen him, or any of his family, since that day.

I don't want to fall into the same trap as you though, reader. Thinking that because the writer has the same amount of brothers and sisters, or because her parents moved or perhaps because she found out her sister had a different father a couple of years ago that the rest of the story isn't made up. Mum was Nanna's fifth child but in the story, the fifth child is aborted. Is my Mum saying something there? Death of the writer? That's cop thinking and you know how often they get it wrong.

Mum's moving the story along, that's all. She's setting up the characters, she's putting them there, down to earth and then she's watching as well. Same as us.

Believe me, I know this first hand. She's not just telling you what's happening like I am. Even though some of it might be happening or might have happened, she's picking bits to tell you. She's making things happen because she wants to tell you something bigger. Like that story she wrote about me, where I had my period. I don't remember it in real life, in the story, I needed her and she's trying to get to me but first she has to meet her drug dealer. That may or may not have happened. I don't remember her not being there. Here.

I was a night owl, even as a baby, according to my Mum and on the weekends, when they were still together, R-O-B would stay up with me and we would Rage together. Is that in the story? Later, Mum would tape Rage for me and when most babies would have been watching Mr Doobie, I was watching music videos. Probably John Farnham, long, oilskin jacket, dancing with his mullet flowing behind him, his microphone stand twirling above him.

One man to start the trouble, one drop from a poison pen, once chance without another, one link in a chain reaction, one link in a chain reaction.

Noah comes in holding a large pot with a tea towel tucked under the lid. He's wearing the cap

again. Noah is holding the pot with his fingertips and he rushes in and puts it down on the counter. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band* is playing on the record player. It was a coincidence, I wasn't trying to impress anyone. Everyone likes the Beatles. When he heard what was playing, Noah's face lit up, like he was the biggest fan in the world, like he fucking invented liking the Beatles.

Not listening to Farnsey, he says, but then he sees my face and stops talking about music.

I've got some bread rolls but no butter or spread. Hopefully you've got that.

Nope. Nothing. Like I said.

Ok, no worries. Wow. You weren't joking. She left you nothing. You could see him thinking, rubbing his hands on the front of his jeans. Which are acid wash, by the way. With the cap!

Donald walked in behind Noah with his fringe standing straighter than ever, holding a box of wine. Stanley's Dry Red. He pushed his glasses up his nose.

Hello, Libby, he said. He needs to use the bathroom and I rush to light the candles, one on the sink, one on the cistern and one on the window sill. I start explaining but then I stop, I'm not embarrassed. I couldn't give a flying fuck what these Doobies think. They're here to help me, to support me I know, but I can't imagine there's too many other places for them to be.

It's just like my place in Hackham West, said Noah but I don't believe him. Noah whispers to me that Donald goes to the toilet straight away wherever they go. First thing he does. We are laughing when Donald emerges and he scowls at us from behind his glasses frames. Noah has done this to him before. I can't help but think of Lorna Tapale, meow, but like the nodding earlier in the day, the laughing makes me and Noah friends.

I try to act embarrassed to make Donald feel more comfortable. I take them on the tour of shame, starting with the bathroom and the kitchen. The wiring has been out for a few years now. Mum was going through a renovation stage, some of it worked out, some of it not so much.

Did she do these floors? Noah talking like an adult, reminding me that he's older than me. Mature age student, probably.

Yeah, she sanded them back. Funny story really, Mum and a friend were sanding and the glue, you know, it's pretty toxic. Anyway, they decided that they were going to do a 'dancing in the kitchen' motif. I thought they were high and told them so. They stopped sanding, went through my bedroom, all the magazines they could find, some old concert programmes cutting out photos and pictures. They didn't have enough to even cover a corner of the kitchen before they straightened up and had to ask themselves what they were doing. They went back to sanding

but then Mum's friends started crying. They eventually got someone in to do it.

I think the tour's gonna take too long. I just explained the lights. Mum knocked down the wall that was here, where the bench is now. There were some wires exposed. Three. She took a chance on which ones were meant to go together and let's just say, she got it wrong. You could see the sparks starting over here and running up the wall and across the ceiling, then they just stopped. There, you can see the burnt bit. We've tried to get electricians in to give us a quote, but nobody will take it on. Too big a job.

I'm warming up to the role of story-teller, I'm the grown up, I'm in my element but Donald and Noah are kind of spoiling the picture.

Your Mum sounds very interesting Libby, said Donald in that stilted, unnatural sounding voice.

Do you think she would've liked us? It's Noah asking and now I'm pissed off, straight away, because he's talking about my Mum in the past tense for starters. She's been gone for three days and they haven't found a body or anything to suggest she's not alive anymore. Also, she preferred to hate strangers to start with and then grow to like them rather than the other way around. Plus this guy's eyes are too close together and he's wearing that stupid cap even now.

She hates any guys that like me I said. I was trying to be mean but then I realised what I'd said and my neck started growing red, in splotches and then joining all the way to the top of my

head.

Guys that like you? Noah repeated.

Well, not saying that you like me or anything.

Oh, but I do like you Libby, I do. Noah, swinging around me like an idiot. Putting his ridiculous face close to mine and pulling away until I want to smack him.

I, um, I like you too Libby.

Thanks Donald, I like you too. My Mum probably would've liked you.

But not me? Noah playing mock sadness now. And after I made you these delicious chops.

Noah went back to the kitchen; Donald went and stood by the book shelf.

Is this your mother? Donald held up one of Mum's novels. She likes to place them on her bookshelf alongside books written by her heroes and favourites.

Is this your mother's? Noah has found the bucket bong in the cupboard under the sink.

Yes, I said.

Do you think she'd mind if I used it?

No, I don't think she'd mind. Maybe she would like you. After all.

Noah filled the bucket up in the sink. There was a knife in the bottom of the bucket that he hadn't noticed, he rolled his sleeve up and plucked it out. Sometimes Mum would get p'noid and her friends would tease her and it would always end up with a knife in the bottom of the bucket. I didn't bother to explain and after a quick look back over his shoulders and raised eyebrows, Noah didn't ask. There was some dope left in the cone. Noah unscrewed the lid with the half-filled cone piece and pushed the sliced-off two-litre coke bottle down to the bottom of the bucket. He then carefully screwed the lid back on to the bottle, lit the dope and started pulling the contraption slowly up, the water pulling in the smoke. He pulled the bottle up, the dope burning, until the sliced base of the bottle rested almost level with the water. Then he unscrewed the lid, put his mouth over the top and gulped down the thick smoke.

Whoa was all he could say before he coughed out the smoke and then hacked away for a few minutes and then said Whoa, again. You're gonna be fucked, I said and he tried to say you've got to cough to get off but started coughing again. I was right. He stumbled over to the table and sat down, arms and legs spread, his eyes even smaller and closer, if that's possible, smiling.

Holy shit, he said.

We gonna eat? Asked Donald who seemed not to hear the coughing or smell the marijuana in the air or notice Noah spreading over the dining room table.

In a minute, man, in a minute. Let's talk about Libby's Mum. Where is she? Wheeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrre is she? Where is sssssshhhhhhhheeeeeeeeeee? I have to laugh, even

though the question is the worst thing I've ever heard. I can't imagine my Mum like this, but she must have been once.

I had to show Noah how to use the oven, how open the door, pushing it to one side, pulling the on the ignition switch and lighting the gas at the back all at the same time. Keep the chops warm.

Noah was telling us about his mate, the lead singer of a band he'd been in before Taf. They'd got pretty big, if Port Noarlunga Hotel is pretty big, and they had some pretty earnest fans. This one guy, a fan, he'd come to every gig and stand right near the speaker staring up at Tom, the lead singer. Just staring at him. Then afterwards, he'd always grab Tom and get him in a corner and would be talking to him and Tom was this really nice guy and he'd kind of put up with it. One night after a gig, this guy, the fan, he offers Tom a lift home but then takes off down the coast, wants Tom to see this shack he's got on the Coorong. Tom had to tell the ferry operator at Wellington. He locked Tom in the driver's area with him until this guy fucked off. They got the guy, he had a restraining order or something. The band broke up after that. That's how Noah ended up at TAFE.

Have you taken my Mum somewhere. You. Yes you. Have you kidnapped her and taken her to a secluded cabin on the Coorong? Are you eating Coorong Mullet and watching the pelicans fly over, so thick it's hard to believe. Smelling the air for shells and seaweed and ocean and sand. I

reckon my Mum would like that and if you didn't hurt her, I'd forgive you for what you are doing to me right now.

The chops were shit. Noah scooping his finger in the gravy, wiping the sides with a rub and then slurping it into his mouth. He's got the munchies so bad. He goes to the cupboards, can't believe they're empty, can't believe they're still empty. They're getting ready to leave, you know, TAFE tomorrow and all that and I'm kind of making conversation as quickly as I can to keep them here a bit longer and when I stop talking, they won't start and I can hear that there is no wind tonight. There are no sounds at all and it's worse.

It's late. Nearly midnight. There is a knock at the door. Noah jumps in his chair and nearly screams, he's got himself into quite a state. I'm breathing heavily too, the first tap of the door knock was light and I thought it was Dizzy tapping down the hall. Waiting for Donald and Noah to leave and for me to stay here alone, when I wasn't talking, the quiet, it was like the air was waiting, it seemed expectant. I thought the sound it expected was Dizzy tapping down the hall.

Then the door opens; it's not locked. It's my cousin, Cherry. She looks like she's been crying. She's carrying a pillow and a bag which has a huge packet of Twisties and a two-litre Coke, full, poking out the top. She's got her dog Captain with her. She puts him down and he sniffs around the house, along the bottom of the front curtains, into the corners of the kitchen then to Noah's knee.

He can probably smell my dog, he says.

He's looking for Dizzy, says Cherry, picking up Captain and hugging the little dog. Oh poor Dizzy. Poor Captain. Poor you's.

Cherry didn't seem to see Noah and Donald at first. She hugged me straight away, with one arm around her quilt and then put her stuff on the couch.

Nanna thought it might be a good idea for me to come and keep you company. Well, I thought it was a good idea, too, when my parents started acting like a cunts. I had to get out of there. Is it ok? I heard your Mum's fucked off somewhere.

Cherry looked at Donald and Noah then, turned her head towards them, but her mouth was still talking to me. Kind of like Nanna.

I didn't want to live with them either, while their going through their mid-life, don't worry about that. I'm broke, end of story. I don't know what shit's going on with them, no-one does. I reckon your Mum's got the right idea though, get the fuck out of here. Who are you guys?

I'm Noah, this is Donald. We're studying music with Libby.

At Taf?

Do you all call it that? Asked Noah. Yeah, Taf.

What instruments?

I'm a drummer, Donald piano.

What's wrong with him?

He's German.

I'm Dutch. I'm from the Netherland's. I've been in Australia for twelve years.

Wanna drink? Asked Cherry.

I can drink like a German.

Whoa Donald. Noah started getting competitive. Cherry gave me a sly look out the corner of one eye and then laughed.

Hang on a minute fellas, I better have a little chat with my little cousin.

Cherry takes me down the hall into Mum's room. She closes the louvered doors that are never closed and lowers her voice.

Has your Mum got any dope?

I don't know, Aunty Ange was here yesterday.

It's all right, I've got a bit. Now, those two knob-ends, do you like one of 'em?

Nah, not really. They just came over to be nice. I told them about Mum.

Yeah, what the fuck's with that? Honestly, she's like the only normal one of 'em and now she's done this. Are you worried?

We were just talking about kidnapping. That freaked me out a bit.

Freak me out Frank as my old man would say.

Weird shit's been happening around here as well.

Like what? Should I be scared? I can stay here then, tonight? That's cool right?

I'm glad you're here.

Ok, let's hang with these gumbo-ya yas.

Time stretched out and then snapped back. That's honestly how it felt. They smoked Cherry's weed, which wasn't as strong as my Mum's. I didn't have any. I thought I'd end up going to bed. I did drink. Cherry had tiny bottles of alcohol in the bag with the Coke. Her parents, Uncle Jimmy and Aunty Vic, collect them, I've seen them myself on the shelf above their bar. She also had a third of a bottle of Johnny Walker left over from last weekend. She divvied up the drinks, we skolled the little bottles – Crème de Menthe, Bacardi, Vodka, Tequila. Smoke drifted to the ceiling. The Twisties bag was ripped open and Noah cleared the little bottles into a plastic bag to make space for it in the middle of the table.

Save them, Cherry ordered, I'm going to re-fill them and put them back. The way they are right now, I don't think my olds'll notice. I can just use water for the Vodka, the Bacardi.

Tea for the Scotch, I said. I thought I might like a cup of tea. What time was it?

Tequila could be water too.

Do we have any food colouring?

We didn't have anything. Not even teabags. That game was over.

Game's over, I said.

Time to go, looks like. Cherry got rid of them, just like that. Noah beeped the horn as he drove away.

Fucking Knob-head, Cherry said. Now that they're gone let's drink this and she pulled a bottle of Passion pop from her clothes bag.

Pop. Looooovvvve that sound, Cherry said. We pissed ourselves.

My shoulders are fucking caning. My guts is hurting too, from laughing. And my jaw. I'm still laughing now. We'd pulled my mattress into Mum's room, made a bed on the floor and Cherry was in Mum's bed. Cherry and I had been telling each other stories right up until she fell asleep. I was still laughing from the last one. About how Papa had been working at Roxby and had had knock-off drinks before climbing on the bus home and falling asleep. A group, Cherry called them mindas, got on to the bus and their carer counted Papa as one of them and they left another one behind.

Laughing, laughing, laughing, snoring. Just like that. Then, as soon as Cherry's snoring, I hear a tapping up the hall. I try to scream and I can't. It's like a horrible dream. Then the black shadow is coming in the room, I think I would wet the bed if I hadn't just gone. Everything inside me feels loose.

It's Captain. She crosses my mattress, over my feet with two little hops and up onto Mum's bed. Cherry rolls over and stops snoring. Conventional, she says, in her sleep.

The sun's coming up; it's reflected on the itchy-bomb trees in the backyard. Are they really called itchy-bomb trees? I can't describe this to you. It's a sunrise. Ok. I want to sleep. I want to keep on sleeping; this tired feeling can hold me under. I know how Mary felt. The thought of going on without my mother, without knowing where she is, is exhausting. Avoiding the thoughts of going on without my mother is exhausting. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to avoid thinking about it. Where could she possibly be where she couldn't contact me? In this day and age.

I roll over. My mind's not gonna stop and let me sleep. What can I do? I will call the cops, Stewie, see if he's got any leads. See if they've found out anything. I could make a few enquiries myself. I could ring Del, get him to help. He'd love it, he always wanted to be a detective. Call some of Mum's friends. Who did Aunty Ange say cried at Mum's Republic party? Fiona? I can't remember; I'm too tired. Maybe I should have done this earlier. It's been three days; if she was

in the Coorong? Is that where she is now? Why is that the place now? First thing. I gotta sleep now. Too tired.

Cherry is calling Captain, I think in her sleep and Captain is yipping in response but it sounds like she's asleep too. I pull the quilt up to cover my ears but the yip comes through. Enough. Shhhhh, I try. Cherry rolls onto her back, waking Captain up and starts snoring. Captain runs tap tap up the hall and then I can hear that she is at the front window, yipping at the early morning walkers. It's that time already. Oh please, I just want to sleep a little bit, even half an hour. The pigeons in the palm tree out the front have started their racket. Cherry's snoring has become a deep throated whipping sound when she breathes in. Coughing, some kind of chewing sound and then she's rolling over and the sounds stop for a while. I quickly, quickly try and go to sleep.

I have to get up. The bathroom's still dark even though the sun's up; there's ivy all over the windows. I'm fine though, I know where my arse is. It's my Mum's voice coming to me.

When I get out of the shower, I go to my own room to get dressed and there is a fucking bird in my room. We'd opened the windows last night. It's a fucking pigeon. My heart is beating and I'm sweating from the shower already. I close the door, but not fast enough, fucking Captain is in my room running around and around and jumping high and then getting up onto my chair and then my desk and jumping from there. Over and over again while the bird bounced against

the ceiling trying to escape. Each bounce it would drop a little. Captain was watching, moving his head to follow the bird, ready and waiting on my desk to time her leap with one of the bird's drops. I pull a window down so that the opening is at the top and try and stop Captain but she leaps and finally catches the bird. She has it on my bed base. She's turning in circles, trying to see the whole bird like when she tries to catch her own tail. Oi, fucking Oi Captain. I'm naked, flicking my towel at her, drop it, drop it. Her head is held up high, she's looking at me, jaunty. She puts the bird down gently at the end of the bed. It flinches twice and then flaps out of the window, grey feathers floating down behind it. There are black feathers left behind with blood on the quill; Captain takes one between her paws and starts licking it.

I yawn so big that my eyes fill with tears. Fuck. Time. Fuck. I have to run around my room to get ready. I will clean up later, the black feathers. I put the kettle on; I need tea. I put my guitar back in its case. There is a pile of music under it. I can see *That's Freedom*; I remember singing it last night with Cherry. Both of us were remembering our parents singing it, remembering as if hers were gone too, were missing. It made both of us feel better. Then I remember there are no teabags and I skol some water from the tap in the kitchen. I'm dry as a nun's. I run to the bus stop.

I miss the early bus and get in a few minutes after start of class and can tell straight away that Noah or Dennis, let's face it, it's Noah, has told the teacher, and it seems like the whole class, about my Mum. Fucking hell. The teacher asks me if I'm ok. It's the first time he's ever asked me that. I don't answer. I say nothing. I'm too tired. He tells me, in front of the class mind you, that I

can take some time if I need to. Fucking A, I think. I need time off this afternoon. Actually, straight after performance, I say. I've got an...appointment. Teacher gives me a cock-eyed look, thinks I'm pulling one over on him but he can't say anything now, not in front of the whole class.

Performance is the only thing worth doing in Taf Professional Music Cert Bullshit. Half the class can't even read music. Banging away. When we break up into groups, Noah and Dennis and I go together. Usually the teacher would split us up, but not today. We do *Help*, the Beatles version not the John Farnham version. We play it through until we've got it right. Nice. Sweet as. Good, says Dennis. The rest of the class are jamming; one person in the group might have the melody and the rest move their hands up and down their instrument until they catch it. Ha. But it's true.

We have time, while they work it out, to talk about the two versions of the song. Well, I basically tell them the discussion I've had with my Mum. She likes the John Farnham version because it is honest, it is a cry of desperation from a singer wearing his heart on his sleeve, whereas, the Beatle's version is a cry but played out with a jaunty swinging tune to hide the singer's need. I prefer the Beatles. I reckon it's sadder that he had to hide behind such a tune, it adds another level to his pain. I don't remember how we finished it.

Then I'm crying, just like that, again. The whole fucking class stops playing. I'm not crying loud or anything, not howling just a few sniffs, my shoulders, you know, I'm covering my face, but everyone just stops and stares at me.

It's ok, don't worry, she's ok. It's Noah. I know he's trying to be nice, but is this guy my Dad or something? He's not wearing the cap today, though, he looks heaps better and he is a really good drummer and his singing is ok too. Kind of quiet. It's just I'm thinking about my Mum. He counts us in and we start playing: Dennis on the piano upbeat, buoyant, adding a few rolls and Noah hitting the drums with purpose. Everyone in the class has to play to his rhythm. I join in half way through the first verse, *won't you please, please help me*. Nobody in the class sings.

Straight after performance, as discussed, I got the fuck out of there. I walked. Past the library, the health centre, across the 'Nades car park, Colonnades Shopping centre that is, on to Beach Road. There's no footpath until you reach the bridge over the train track so I just walk on the gravel, close to the bark chips and trees. I can keep my head down, foot following foot, crunch, crunch, crunch and the whizzing of cars, some louder, older; I don't look up. The cop shop is at the corner of Beach Road and Dyson. It's across from junk food corner. I walk it off.

The reception of the police station is made of those glass blocks you see in bathrooms. The place looks a giant toilet. There are mirrors behind the police officers at the desk. There are tiles across the floor, stiff backed blue chairs against the glass blocks. Two women are sitting while another writes at a blue ledge. Bleak.

I can't remember the names of the police officers, Stewie and Pies is all that comes to me. I tell

the tall woman behind the counter that my Mum is missing, I've spoken to the police, no I don't have the number the police officers gave me, I didn't even realise there was a number, well the police officers would have given you a number. She stares at me with a look of fucking disdain. Then I remember Beardsy. At the mention of his name, her mouth shuts and she puts down her pen and then picked it up again to write my name. I also mention Malcolm's name. I don't fucking care, I'm not trying to prove anything.

Beardsy, Sergeant Beards, came out from behind one of the mirrored walls.

Come with me Ms Smart.

The woman behind the desk lowered her eyes when I looked at her. Why be a bitch?

He didn't fuck around, got straight down to it as soon as I was seated at the bare table in the interview room.

Ms Smart, we have thousands and thousands of these kinds of incidents every year. Every year!

Most of them turn up. That's the story.

Are you looking for my Mum? I asked him.

I can tell you we've checked her bank account, it hasn't been touched. We've let our guys here know to keep an eye out. There has been no body found. You know, Ms Smart, some people just want out. It's tough to face it, we think we know someone, but this happens literally thousands of times every year. That's the story.

What should I do?

Just go about your normal life. You can check in with us.

My normal life...was with my Mum.

He was standing up and moving towards the door. I felt like the walls of the room were moving in and then moving out and my head was spinning. I knew I had to stand up but I couldn't. Beardsy stood holding the door open for me. I lifted my arm and put it on the table but that's as far as I got.

Do you need a moment?

I couldn't answer. I couldn't talk or move; it was gravity that pushed my head down onto my arm.

I'll give you a moment. He closed the door. I wonder if he locked it. I'm still wondering when, true to his word, he is back moments later.

I gotta go, but I'll give you a lift. You live near Southport, right?

I had my head resting on my arm the whole drive. I sat in the back seat and he talked to me over his shoulder.

I spoke to your...erm...uncle. There has been a spike in missing person reports since the referendum. You're not alone, Ms Smart. There has been an increase across the state, and

probably across the country. And I voted *Yes* too.

We weren't in a police car but when I came in the front door, Cherry was scrambling to push the bucket bong, still filled with water, into the bottom of the empty food cupboard. I took it off her and put it under the sink.

Cops? She asked.

How'd you know?

The cut of his jib.

He thinks my Mum has gone somewhere because of the Republic.

Really?

He said that other people have. Maybe she did.

Nah, I don't reckon.

Well, what then?

Maybe it's got something to do with what's going on with my Mum and Dad.

She never said anything about Aunty Vicki and Uncle Jim. What is going on with them?

I don't know. They've both lost a shitload of weight. Have you seen them?

Mum hasn't hung out with them for ages. If anyone would know anything, it'd be Aunty Ange and she doesn't know fuck all.

How was Taf?

Hellish.

Did you see Sisco and Poncho?

Yep, they were there. They were cool. I went to the police station as well. I mean, that's why I was with Beardsy.

Beardsy?

Yep, that's his name.

I made your bed. Sorry about Captain this morning. He must have caught a bird and brought it in.

Nah, it flew in.

Did Captain kill it? What did you do with the body?

The body. The body. A body and then it is the body. I can't hear the term one more time. Del had said it when I rang him. They will find a body. My mother is a body. The bird, flying and then not, had become a body, another missing body. As casual as conversation. I go to my bed. I lay under the fresh sheets, the sun is shining through the window. I lay very still. I imagine that I am only a body. I sleep.

When I wake up it's dark. I lie in bed for a while with my eyes open but not seeing anything. In my dream, I was in surf lifesavings again. We were at Port Noarlunga, I remembered the day.

We were on the rubber ducky going out to the reef. This was the day Emu, my coach, swam through a tunnel under the reef. Except in my dream, it's my Mum who is going to swim through the tunnel. Like in real life, Emu jumped into the water, on the deep side of the reef but in the dream, Mum jumped in straight after him; they were both treading water above the long dark reeds that grow on the far side of the reef.

Emu duck dived, just like he did that day and after a moment, Mum followed him. She didn't have her goggles on. I was worried about that. I waited, like I did on that day with Mum standing next to me, but this time I was waiting for her too. Emu came out, the streams of blood running down him, scratched from the reef, laughing how he had put on weight since the last time he'd tried it. It was all the same. I waited for Mum. I asked Emu, he laughed, she's fine he said. She's fine. On her way. I can see her now. There she is. I couldn't see, the sun was too bright, then I was awake.

I go into Cherry's room. Captain is on the end of my Mum's bed growling at me. Cherry is lying on her side, propped on one shoulder and has her back to me. She looks around quickly, I've scared her.

Fuck it's you. How are you feeling?

I slept for ages. I'm hungry.

Yeah, ages. Bridie came over, her and I went shopping, made pasta. It's in the kitchen.

Wow, thanks. Great.

I went to the kitchen, filled a bowl with the creamy blump, Bridie's diet must be over, and then came to eat it on the end of my Mum's bed. I had to shove Captain. I pulled the quilt over my legs. I started spooning the noodles into my mouth, bent around the bowl, and didn't stop until the bowl was empty. I put it on the floor and Captain bounced from Cherry down onto the floor, tip tip tip around the bed, to lick it clean.

It was when Captain returned to the bed moments later, that I noticed the paper, white beneath the dog's black fur spread across the bed. Cherry was reading Mum's novel. She saw me looking.

I've been reading it all day. While you were at Taf. While you slept. It's after midnight, you know. I've finished it. I was just reading the bit about you again. When it was all happening, I was just kid, what, seven? I knew something, because my parents would talk about absolutely everything in front of me. I didn't really understand though. Not like reading it, you know, like that.

Cherry put her open palm above the papers and moved her hand in a circle over them.

Mum said it was made up, I said. She made it up.

Yeah, well obviously it can't all be true. Hang on, have you read it yet?

I only read the bit that was kind of like Nanna, but it wasn't Nanna. It was more like Nanna's explanation, if she could give one. But it wasn't her, it wasn't Nanna, I already asked her.

You asked her. What? If she scored some other dude.

Well, we already know that don't we. Aunty Ange. Blood tests. No, I asked her about moving.

Well, that's not an important part of the story. They did go to Melbourne.

Yes, but Mum wasn't....I mean, Mum *was* born. Nanna's fifth child.

Cherry wouldn't take no for an answer.

That one, she said, the one under the cup with the pipe, that's the one about Nanna. This one here is the one where you're a baby. You must know which bits of that one are true. And the last chapter, the one over there, under the Dictaphone, let's just say, it would explain a lot about this family. Actually, that's probably the first chapter.

I've read it now, the one about me, the one Cherry had with her in bed. Who cares about the order. I've read it and you haven't. I don't want to spoil it for you. I will say one thing though; in some ways, I don't know my mother any more than you do. I feel bad about all that 'you don't know her, I do' stuff at the start. I don't know her. Maybe you do. I don't know myself even. My Dad. Where I come from. I heard the stories, just like Cherry. Mum taking me on the train to

stay with Aunty Louise. Papa's sister. Yes, she was a nurse. Those stories, though, that was only the beginning.

I don't want to talk to you like this, like I talk to Cherry. Like I'd talk to my Mum.

I had my Mum every day, it was a conversation. I had her responses to me. It's not like her responses to the world. It's not like what she has to say about that to you. Or how she says it; that's made up. That's from her to you. It's not the same.

Chapter Three

Port Noarlunga, Monday August 4th, 1986

She looked hard at him when he walked in at the end of the day to see if he suspected that she was leaving him, catching the Overland tonight at 7.45pm from Keswick Railway Station. He'd been working for three weeks casual at Hills and she could see that his blue overalls were smeared black with dirt and oil. Some of it had spread to one side of his face and the back of his neck. His Mum dropped him off, she worked at Monroe's, at Edwardstown and picked him up on the way home on Lonsdale Highway. He left his boots on the front porch and as he came through the door, the bottom of his pants, ripped and filthy, dragged under his heels. His face was hiding, unshaven beneath long hair covering his long forehead which was lowered in, she had come to realise, practised remorse.

The baby leaned one chubby hand on her mother's wrist, climbed up onto her feet and then and toddled towards her Daddy.

"Hello little one," he said and threw her into the air twice, kissed her cheek and put her down,

"More after I have a shower ok baby girl."

He sat down at the dining table and lit a cigarette. The baby returned to her mother who was sitting on the floor folding fresh washing. She looked at her daughter's fair head and wondered, not for the first time, how anything so pure and beautiful could come from him.

"Tough day?" Eve asked.

“Yep. Fucked.”

She was silent and Rob could have become suspicious right then. Normally, she would have assumed, with that response, that Rob was about to talk about quitting. Usually, she would have started on him. She would have reminded him again about his lack of skills, education and having to start somewhere. She might have dared to say his mother, his family, were dragging him down. She could have even been cruel, the bruises were still purple, no green yet, and so he would still take it. His mother and father and sisters, their life – awful. Or she might have said, as she must have in the past, that it wasn't too late for him, for her. They could go back to school. They could be different. She could have included him in her dream for a better life, together they could heal from what he had done to her. But Eve said nothing.

When Rob left for footy practice, Eve would take the clothes she was folding now, the nappies, towels, make up and the shampoo and toothpaste and put it in the luggage her mother had lent her. It was hidden around the side of the house. Her younger sister, Angelina, who had only just got her licence and had already bought herself a car, would pick her and the baby up and they would drive to Mum's before they went to the train station. She was going to write him a letter. She would leave it for him on the dining table and then by the time he got home from practice (around nine, he never stayed back) she would already be on her way.

He stood up from the table and she thought he was heading towards the bathroom but he reached for one of his lined notebooks and sat back down and lit another cigarette. He took dice and a pen from his front pocket. His black hands moved across the page, threw the dice, lit another cigarette, threw the dice and wrote another score. It was a game he had made up himself in which he played a series of footy, he selected the teams from the SANFL, he rolled the dice and they won or lost. She could never understand the game but it was one of the things that had convinced her, once upon a time, that there was more to him than met the eye. His focus was complete, writing in that curled left handed way, leaning on both elbows as if trying to hide from a cheat and then leaning back again to roll the dice and take a drag on his cigarette. He would get into a rhythm that might last for hours. She watched him, calculating the minutes until her escape with each rattle of the dice in his hand; she watched his hand, he threw, she thought of the rest of the washing on the line, he picked up the dice and rattled them, she thought of nappies, perhaps she should get disposables, the dice fell again and as he scribbled, she wondered if they would need jackets. He looked up at her.

“Just one game,” he said.

She shook her head and her eyes flicked to the clock. His eyes followed her. His eyes narrowed.

“What?”

“It's just that I know you have footy practice,” she said.

“And?”

“Nothing.” She had never encouraged him to go to practice before, he might suspect.

“Are you still in a shit about the weekend? I won’t go tonight if you don't want me to?”

“No... it's fine,” she said. He was staring at her. “I was just thinking...about the time.....you know... if you were gonna have a shower...” she let her voice drift off. It was like when she slowed her breathing to make the baby go to sleep. Rob went back to his game. She looked at the clock again; her sister would be there in an hour and a half, there was enough time. Plenty of time. She might have to send him a letter from Melbourne. The dice were rattled and thrown.

She had been thinking about what she would write in the letter all day and it had been drafted very differently in her mind many times. Habit kept her asking how he could do it, how could you, she wrote. She kept listing his previous crimes. She knew how he could do it, he had answered that question many times, with the back of his hand, just like that. She didn't really think he'd suffer that much without her. She was the one who was tied down with the baby, he could go back to doing what he wanted, hanging out with friends. He could probably go and live back home. His crimes were a list going back almost to the start of their relationship and a wound that he could re-open now just by raising his voice.

One image kept coming back to her. It was the only other time there had been a witness apart from last weekend. It was when she had first found out she was pregnant. They had been eating fish and chips sitting in a circle on the floor of the rumpus room around the white paper, Rob, her and his cousin, Andy. They had been hanging together the whole summer. Andy had finished his chemotherapy in November and little red wisps of hair were starting to grow on the

back of his neck. She had pulled off his beanie to see the rest of his head. It was a moment of levity.

“Leave it,” Rob had said, almost under his breath and then with the back of his hand had pulled back and hit her. She had been lifted slightly off the ground, and had rocked backwards, legs still crossed.

“Hey, why the fuck did you do that?” Andy yelled. She had run away, run home and cried and cried. Rob hadn't come around for ages after that and she'd had to tell her Mum she was pregnant by herself. Andy never came around again. He'd had nothing more to do with his cousin's family and hadn't even seen the baby.

She didn't want to write all this in a letter but she couldn't help seeing it. The pushing and shoving, it had been an extension of childhood in a way, a continuation of the fighting she'd done with her brothers and sisters and the other boys in the neighbourhood. She honestly couldn't remember the first time it went beyond that but there must have been a first time. She had tried to break up with him many times before she got pregnant and she couldn't remember why she had gone back to him. One time she could remember, he had sat on the front lawn crying and her mother had said, go and see him, he obviously loves you. Each memory came to her, the crime and the cast and she realised, there was always a cast. It seemed that a witness was required for her to remember.

Last Friday night, they had been out and he had beaten her and she had been saved by strangers, three young men, locals she vaguely recognised. Had she gone to Primary School with one of them? They had stepped in and afterwards it was like she was standing next to them, watching the scene. Rob had gone back into the pub, they had left but then he had come back out. She had hidden in the car park. Between the cars. He was calling out and she was trying to breathe quietly, wiping her nose, trying not to sniff. Eve saw that now. Somehow she hadn't seen it all before, the pattern of their lives, it had been hidden, staying home as much as they could, avoiding jealousy and anger, inevitably being drawn into life, this, his remorse. Now she couldn't stop seeing it.

Eve had already decided that she wasn't going to put any of this in the letter. The clicking and roll of the dice on the table, and her thoughts, were interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. It was Smithy, he wasn't going to footy practice tonight, his hammy was still tight. Wolfman would have to make his own way there.

"That's it. Not going. You happy now?"

"What? I want you to go."

"You do, do you? That'd be a change. What are you up to then? Eh?"

She instinctively brought the baby back onto her lap. The little girl squirmed and arched until her mother let her up. There was nothing else except the light piles of small clothes on the floor.

"It's just that I was going to hang around with my sister today."

"So? You can still do that. I'll babysit."

"We're going to have a spa. The baby loves that, splashing around, we'll take her."

"Maybe I'll come?"

"God, does it have to be so difficult? This is why I wanted you to go to footy practice, if you must know, because I knew you'd make it hard." She could feel the heat rounding to her face from behind her ears.

"How the fuck am I making it hard? Just what the fuck do what you want?"

He sat back at the table, pressed down at the part at the centre of his notebook, took up his pen and picked up the dice without looking at either. His eyes were staring straight forward. His jaw was working and you could see the muscles popping beneath the beard and the dirt. She was mesmerised by his jaw, the pulse of the popping muscle setting the rhythm. Time slowed down and suddenly she could hear the waves crashing on the shore at Southport Beach. She began to fold in on herself, like the tiny clothes around her, her shoulders slowly rounding, her head dropping, her neck short.

He picked up the dice and threw them at her. A die went into one of the piles of clothes and stayed, snug in the centre of the singlets. The other bounced off the bone on the top of her forehead and then the side table and then bounced ineffectually against the glass of the sliding door before dropping onto the carpet.

“The baby,” she screamed.

“Well, see what you make me do. You’re a liar.” He pushed his arm across the table, sweeping his own book and pens and ashtray and cigarettes onto the floor. He stood up but then the baby toddled on her little legs up to him, thinking it was time to play. He shook his head and went into the bathroom. The little girl’s cries filled the air.

In the car park, that final time, the asphalt shining in the lights from the nearby service station, he had kicked her. He had spun around and kicked her in the face. She’d fallen back against the wire fence that backed up to the servo. She could see the LPG tanks on the other side of the wire. She held tight to the wire fence and tried to hide her face behind her arms. Eve had brought Rob out here when he’d started up in the pub. She didn’t want anyone else to see this. Her brother Peter was in there. She could manage it, Eve thought. She couldn’t. It was the first time she’d been out in months, maybe years, maybe ever. She had a baby. She didn’t want to go home. That was it. Rob had wanted to go home. Kick.

Dad lived behind the pub, somewhere on Timothy Road. He’d bought a house there after he and Mum separated. Eve hadn’t even seen it. She knew it was number 9. Rob had stopped calling out her name but she was too scared to move; too scared to look around the side of the car, even through the window. She thought of lying on her stomach but then she was worried that she would be stuck if he found her like that. She wouldn’t be able to get up and run. She

stayed squatting and breathing, her thighs and her chest burning. The moon rose in the sky, she could see it in the tallest eucalypts that grew along the creek.

She stood up. The lights of the pub flashed, the lights of the service station held and the streetlights flickered across the road. At the entrance, she could see some people but she didn't recognise any of their forms. She looked at the entrance to the car park and beyond that Timothy Road. Could she make it? Would Dad let her stay there tonight? She felt her cheek, it was grazed but there was no blood. She hoped she didn't look too terrible.

She ran across the car park, up the slope towards the street. She ran straight across the street, under the streetlight and hid herself behind a bush in the front garden of a Spanish style house. Bent at the waist, she waited and waited again for the sound of footsteps following her. The house's front light turned on and somewhere in the distance a dog started barking. Apart from the mournful dog the only other sound was the few cars driving up South Road; their sound like the ocean she would hear at home. It seemed so far away, even though Morphett Vale was only a ten minute drive. She wondered how she was going to ever get home again.

Next to the bush was the letterbox with the number twenty three. Methodically, she walked up the street, trying to stay in the shadows when she wasn't checking the next letterbox and the next number. There was number 9. She ran up the drive way and then up the winding steps and then she was in front of the wide doors and pressing the bell which had her surname printed

neatly beneath it. Eve kept looking behind her, down the winding path, across the wide driveway and back up the street over and over again but no one came.

Her Dad opened the door in his jocks. Hello love, he said, as if this was a regular visit. Come in, come in. They didn't talk much, she told him that she'd been beaten, kicked and that she'd been saved, by strangers. He put her in the spare bed; they'd talk in the morning. When her brother came up those same winding steps, drunk, two hours later, her Dad had answered the door still in his jocks but with a cricket bat resting on one shoulder.

In the morning her brother took her to her mother's to pick up the baby. Her Dad had called before they'd arrived, told her mother everything. He suggested his sister's place in Melbourne. He'd buy the train ticket. Just get Eve and the baby to the station tomorrow night.

Sunday, Eve went home. Rob was fully clothed asleep sitting up at the dining room table. He didn't wake up when she walked in but waited until Eve had a chance to see the faint cuts on his wrists before he started to stir. It was Sunday. Rob moped around the house, Eve stayed snuggling in bed with the baby. He cleaned the kitchen and she cooked them tea. They ate it silently in front of the television. Monday she'd started getting ready. He left early, her and the baby went back to sleep, she'd half-heartedly sorted the laundry, half the clothes were on the line still. Drying. Even though she knew what time the train left, she'd kept waiting and waiting.

While Rob was in the shower, she slung the baby on one hip and went out the back. Eve took the clothes off the line, some of them were still damp, but she stuffed them all into a pillow case and threw it over the fence into the paddock at the back of the house. Back inside, she took half the piles of clothes into the baby's room and shoved the folded clothes into another pillowcase. She felt the burn on her forehead, the little bump that hurt to touch. She left the small pile of bibs with the dice sitting in the middle of them on the floor.

Eve had to walk a line, she couldn't be too nice or else he would know something was up. If he guessed she was leaving... The dice thrown so soon after the car park; it would usually take weeks for Rob to hurt her again. She went into her own bedroom, put the baby to play on the bed and put her sneakers on. She grabbed a bag and filled it with her bathers and her make-up and towels. She put some baby clothes in the bag, the little girl's cardigan, two skivvies, some leggings. She put her bathers on top. The shower stopped. Eve put the bag on the dining room table, pulling the zip up enough so that only the towel and bathers could be seen. Carefully, holding back her hurrying legs, into the baby's room, she picked up the pillow case and took it out to the back yard. Rob came out the shower just as she was walking out the sliding door but she kept her head down and if he was wondering what she was doing, he didn't ask. She went to the back fence, one look behind her at the sliding door to make sure he wasn't standing there, wet, towel around his waist, hair still in his eyes watching her. She thought she saw him, but it was the old apricot tree in the corner of her eye. She threw the bag over the fence with the other.

She was breathing loudly again, just like in the car park. She felt like the world could hear her breathing. She felt like the world could hear her heart, see it moving in her chest. She even looked down at herself to see if she could see her heart, her chest rose and fell like the deep. She felt sweat pooling under her eyes. Eve thought to herself that she didn't even know you could sweat from there. A sudden wind blew the leaves that lay in the yard up into the air. They circled the old apricot tree before disappearing into the grey sky. Afterwards, her eyes were dry.

"See that?" he said from the doorway. "A mini- tornado." He was dressed.

"Yeah. It was cool."

"Sorry about before, hey. I just hate work, you know. Wish I didn't have to go. Hate leaving you two every day."

"Yeah, really looks like it when you throw shit at me."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry baby. I'll do whatever you say"

"Go to footy. Let me go and have a spa with my sister." She nodded towards the bag on the table.

"Sure. I'm gonna go. I need a run anyway."

He kissed her and held her and the baby in his arms. She noticed again the way he played the mourner, his face serious, there was some pay off for him in all of this. He wore the sadness like a coat, he liked the weight of it on his shoulders. He put his wet head against her hair. The baby

squirmed and pushed at his head violently. She could tell by his face that he felt the baby was scorning him and this gave him more sadness, more happiness. She saw that Rob was sick, that he had a sickness and he was like an animal that was sick: his hair stuck up, his eyes were cloudy and darting, his shoulders were slanted, his chest too flat. He walked bent forward, the hair there was slick against his exposed neck. He was always protecting himself. Even though he was newly showered, she could smell a sick smell on his clothes, like something gone sour.

She didn't think about the letter again until her sister got there. She was early. Angelina was always early. Rob was running late. They were all in the dining room together. Angelina was making eyes at her, trying to get her attention, but Eve knew that Rob was also watching her eyes.

All ready for a spa? Eve said. She could see that he wasn't go to leave until they did, so she picked up her bag from the table, kissed him and held the baby up for him to kiss her as well and then they left; got in her sister's car, window down calling goodbye, the baby waving, see you later.

There was a game they would play with their friends, her and Angelina, silent twins they called it, they would mimic each other's movements, slowly taking a drink, brushing their hair, mirror images. They did this now. Angelina followed her actions as they moved to the car. Turn right, she directed her sister, and then, stop. She ran in front of the car, across the road, along the

neighbour's fence to the two pillow cases, picked them up, ran back to the car.

They were both talking so fast.

"I can't believe he was there."

"I know; his lift to footy cancelled. He had to organise someone else. You were early."

"Only a little. Are we really having a spa?"

"What do you think?" Her sister laughed and they both started giggling. For a while they were laughing against their will, they couldn't stop, one of them would stop, sigh, take a breath and then they would start again. There was no joy in it, only relief.

Angelina had been the first person to express anything like happiness that Eve was pregnant. Her mother and father, in a rare moment of unity since the divorce, had called a family meeting, her brother had come over to Mum's house, they announced it to both of them, her brother and sister, as if it was a sentence. Her brother was, inexplicably it seemed to her, really angry. Great, he had said, just great. Angelina, who was still fourteen at the time, almost still a child herself, ran at her and hugged her stomach. They didn't share a room anymore so her sister had come into hers after it was all done and they talked about all the fun they'd have with the baby once it was born.

By the time it was announced to her sister and brother, she had known for two weeks, her mother had known for two days. It had been her mother's birthday when she told her. Rob had gone with her to the hospital, Eve had the test, she was told to go home and bring her mother in the following week. She was five months pregnant. Rob disappeared. She'd waited too long. She kept waiting. Eve waited for Rob to come around so that they could tell her mother together. When he didn't come, she waited for the time to be right. Eve waited until she felt that the minutes were hours and then days and that they passed over her but she wasn't touched by them. But of course she was because then it was her Mum's birthday and Eve had to go back to the hospital the appointment the next morning. She waited until she couldn't wait anymore.

"Mum, I've got a surprise for you."

"Oh goody, I love surprises."

"Two surprises."

"Two. Even better. Gimme, gimme." Her mother plucked at her.

"Here is one." Eve gave her mother the present, it was wrapped, it was a record.

"Julio Iglesias. I love him. Thank you, darling." Kiss. "Now where's the other one."

"The other surprise," Eve was talking slowly, waiting even now. "Is that I'm pregnant."

Her mother breathed in. It was a breath that took in the whole room, Eve felt herself caught up in the furniture, the clothes on the back of the chair, the curtains lifting, all of it flying towards

the centre of her mother. Grit from the carpets and the sideboards and the corners flew into their hair. The trees in the front yard bent towards them, branches whipping and leaves flying inside onto the carpet. The pages in the books on the table beside her opened like a brush. The tea in her mother's cup pushed against one side like a tidal change, like a new tilt on the axis. Outside of the house, Eve imagined cars moving up the street, pulled towards them by the force of her mother's breath, the houses of her neighbours loosening on their foundations, screen doors swinging open and flying up the street, letterboxes twisting to face them.

"I always prayed for this not to happen to my daughter."

That night, her mother had prayed. What to do? It went around in her head and she rolled from side to side in the big bed she used to share with her husband.

Adopt, abortion, keep the baby. Her daughter raise it or raise it herself? Eve was too young, she thought the girl already wanted too much from life. This pregnancy was proof enough of that. What about the girl's education; she'd end up the same as her. This idea tortured the mother the most, even though her daughter was in a much worse position than she'd ever been in.

In the morning, though, she found her daughter dressed and waiting for her. Eve was keeping the baby, she'd decided. They went to the hospital and told the doctor. The doctor didn't seem to care this week. Good luck to you then, he said. The week before he'd seem to hold the power

of the whole world in his pale hands as he pushed on her roughly, but this week, he was nobody. Eve was the one who had the power. She didn't have to ask him if she could have her baby. She didn't even have to ask her Mum. There was no one who could tell her off or ground her or punish her; it couldn't be changed.

Eve's Mum was angry with her. She was standing over her and Angelina, on a chair, pulling a large suitcase out from the top of the linen closet. It was stuck and she was getting angrier and angrier.

"All you had to do was write him a letter, Eve. You had time. Now you're doing it. Now! I would've thought you'd give it a bit more thought."

"Leave her alone Mum, he was an arsehole, remember?" said Angelina.

"Language. Still, she is ruining a man's life. You want to put some thought into the words you use."

"I have been thinking about it Mum. I have. The whole time."

"It's just like you to leave everything until the last minute."

The suitcase slipped from behind the hinge of the closet door and came free at last. It was covered in dust. It had a huge buckle across the middle which had rusted a little. It had been in the closet since the Pacific Cruise Eve's Mum and Dad had been on when they were still

married. There was a napkin with the liner name printed on it. Her Mum plucked it from the case and pushed it up into her sleeve. She tipped the pillow cases onto one side and re-folded the lot, tut-tutting, and packed it into the case.

Eve sat in her Mum's big chair with the notepad on her lap trying even now to think what to write. How to tell Rob that she was leaving him? Start with the history, the first slap, those last kicks in the car park? Should she tell him that she didn't blame him so much as his up-bringing? That she wasn't going to live like that, like his Mum, face pushed to the floor over a piece of bacon given to the dog. That it was over this time, really over. She wasn't coming back to him, ever. Should she talk about love? Tell him that she didn't love him anymore? It all felt like she was asking for permission, and she wasn't.

In the end she wrote, *I don't want to be with you anymore. Move out of the house and stay away from me. I will contact you about visiting the baby.* She left the letter at her Mum's, in a sealed envelope, knowing she'd be disappointed if she read it, but what else was there to say? Mum would give it to him after she had left.

Angelina helped her onto the train; dragging the huge suitcase for her while she pushed and stowed the pram. When they were settled, she pointed out that Eve and the baby were dressed almost exactly the same: black leggings, white shirt under a blue jumper. They had different coloured coats which she took off and put across their seats. The little girl's hair was lighter and

in pony tails on either side of her head. Her part was crooked. She was happy, looking at the lights coming on outside and inside the train, standing on the seat in her tiny patent leather shoes.

“I’ve got to get off this train.”

“Ok then. Hang on a sec. Come here baby, give a kiss goodbye to your Aunty Angelina.”

“I will miss you guys. Come home. Ok?”

The tears were the burning kind that you hold onto, that squeeze across your eyes as you try to stop them, into your nose and, if you are lying down, drip into your ears. Eve blinked and blinked, oh don’t make me cry, and she gave a little laugh, a quick hug and a pat for her sister’s shoulder as she moved off between the seats. The windows were fogging up. Then the train was moving, steadily building up a rhythm on the tracks, there was a groaning sound as metal was moved and the train crossed onto the double gauge of the interstate line and then click click click until they reached the Adelaide Hills and then it was the sound of the wind and the plants whipping the sides of the train. The rhythms and the swaying put them to sleep before the lights went out.

Following the tracks back to Adelaide, while they slept wrapped in the warmth of their coats, following roads south to him while they dreamt to the steady sway of the train, where he stood outside the dark house. Not even a lamp shone. Rob’s first thoughts, not even thoughts but

feelings that came not from his brain but from his organs, were angry. Why weren't they home yet? He climbed through a window down the side of the house; he didn't have a key. His confusion, if not his anger, would last until morning when he would get the letter. His Dad would move his clothes and records and record player out of the house that night. In one day, it all became clear.

Aunty Louise was a stranger. She picked Eve and the baby up from the train station with one of her daughters, a quiet girl the same age as Angelina who pulled away from the baby in the back seat of the car. As they drove out of the city, Louise pointed out the sights as if they were on holiday, the Botanic Garden, the State Library and then the new buildings, what wasn't built when her Mum and Dad lived there twenty years earlier, when Eve was born. At Aunty Louise's house, people walked in and out of rooms, Eve's cousins, there were six of them and her uncle, who appeared in what looked like a tuxedo, ready for his Freemasons' meeting. They fussed over the baby, one or another. There didn't seem to be space for all of them at the same time. Eve didn't know what to do. Her Aunt worked the night shift as a nurse and when she left, Eve and the baby were left alone in the lounge room. Eve didn't know how to use the television remote control so she watched British television all night on the ABC. They fell asleep on the couch, her and the baby, the two of them huddled together, legs curled like they were on a motionless train still using their coats as blankets.

Eve heard noises in the night, upstairs. Crying and doors opening and closing. She saw the shape of her Aunt against the kitchen window in the middle of the night, swaying. It was like she was

floating outside the train, outside the window, they were rocking and she was still. More crying and then moaning; upstairs and then coming down the stairs but never all the way. It was the quiet cousin, Faith. She was just a sound but then the light came on. Faith was sitting on the third step, sliding up to the fourth and then the fifth but keeping her foot on the third, stretching it towards the second. Moaning; looking towards them on the couch. Aunty Louise appeared in the light of the stairwell, she nearly blocked the light with her long night gown and her hair loose on her shoulders.

“Oh Faith,” was all she said.

Faith pointed towards them on the couch. Her and Eve’s eyes met. Eve had been pretending to be asleep. The baby moved and called out.

“You’ll wake up the baby. Faith. Are you listening to me? It’s the middle of the night.”

“It’s ok Aunty Louise,” she said but Louise acted as if she hadn’t heard.

“Come along, back to bed.” Her Aunt sounded easy-going. The light went out and the sounds stopped.

In the morning, the family began moving in and out of rooms again. The baby wandered among them touching a knee or giving another a high five; she even went straight up to Uncle and babbled something at him. He laughed and tried to get Faith to join in with them, unsuccessfully. The baby was undaunted and she waved her chubby hand furiously at Faith and Uncle when they left. The other cousins drifted away and Aunty Louise drifted back upstairs

with her coffee cup.

After only a little while, Eve and the baby were both dressed and sitting on the couch again, the day stretching out before them, so many English country-sides on the telly. She couldn't remember what she had done all day back in Adelaide only two days ago.

In her Aunt's house, Eve was reminded how distant her father was. Even before the divorce, she would always be trying, always sitting up straight. She hadn't even been to see his house, it was as foreign as this one. There was a photo of him and Louise together on the shelf above the television. It was an old photo; both of them were thinner and Dad's hair was thicker. Louise looks at her brother, young Dad, adoringly while he looks, laughing, mouth wide, into the camera. He has his arm around her shoulder, you can see his fingers digging into her arm. Aunt Louise looks like she is trying to get his attention.

Eve had been given a key in case she wanted to go out so she unfolded the pram, put on her shoes and went into the street. The light was different. It was overcast and cold. There were a lot of plane trees on the streets; the pavement was buckled with their roots. At the end of the street she could see traffic. The cars rushed by. At the lights, not ten minutes from the house, an elderly woman greeted her. At first Eve couldn't hear what she was saying.

"I said, there's a lot of Chinese round here now, isn't there?"

She looked around. There were no people at the intersection except them.

"I'm not from around here," Eve said.

"Where are you from then?" the old lady asked her in the most unfriendly way.

"I'm from Adelaide."

"Do you have Chinese there?"

"Chinese?"

"People. Chinese people." The lady looked away from her in disgust and took off; she was half way across when the lights changed.

Eve held the pram back, walked slowly until the old lady was a shadow ahead of her and then she was gone. She lingered at shop windows: an art shop with a trestle and paint brushes and coloured pencils and paper, home wares with a range of measures, of light blue mixing bowls, of all kinds of utensils, a tailor with a dummy in the window, thick embroidered material draped over one shoulder. The shops were flat against the street and went up into the sky. She looked above her and saw faces in the architecture.

A tall man with a long beard saw her looking up and spoke to her.

"Where are you from?"

"Adelaide."

"That place is owned by _____. Do you know him? He's quite famous around here? So where

are you staying? Near here?" People in Melbourne were so curious; or she was an oddity.

"Yep, just around here, with my Aunt's family. I'm not sure of the name of the street, begins with an A, I think. Just back there; just around the corner." Eve kept talking as she moved away. When she was far enough down the street, she turned back to call goodbye but he had already walked into the bottle shop.

She pushed the pram across a park, gum trees and hillocks and then garden, circles of flowers with paths running between them in a maze pattern. The path was stones and the pram couldn't get through so Eve took the baby out and carried her between the bushes, both of them leaning into the flowers and breathing in the sweet smell. The clouds cleared and the sun came out at last. She held her face up to it as the little girl tested her chubby legs amongst the flowers. She let the baby push the pram for a while until she got tired and fell asleep.

On the other side of the park, there were even more buildings and traffic and people – the other streets had been relatively quiet Eve now realised. This street had cars and trams and amongst the shops, clothes and jewellery and antiques, were restaurants and cafes with chairs and tables out on the pavement, al fresco, and waiters moving back and forth between the crowds walking past.

Eve saw a book shop ahead, she pushed the pram through the wide doors and moved between the white shelves, rolling the pram around the tight corners between the cook books, the travel

books, biographies until she reached the section labelled *literature*. She searched for authors she recognised. There weren't many. John Steinbeck, one of her Mum's favourite. There was Shakespeare of course, unfathomable. They had done Hamlet in Mrs Lea's class. It all seemed so long ago now. She didn't fare any better in *Australian Literature*. She had heard of Patrick White from her mother, who said his books were too rude for her and that he was some kind of pervert. She had heard of Thomas Keneally but she couldn't remember where from.

A few months earlier she had gone into the city, as nervous there in Adelaide as she was here in Melbourne and she wasn't even the city proper here. She had visited the Adelaide TAFE with the idea of returning to study, now that the baby was getting older. The person in the office looked her up and down and gave her the forms.

"What are you thinking of doing?"

"I'm not sure. I like reading," Eve had said.

"You could do English. Which authors do you like?"

"I like all kinds of books. I'm reading Ruth Park."

"Well that's not strictly literature. We don't do that here. Anyone else?"

Eve had gone blank. She mentioned a few others. She tried to remember books she had read in high school. To each writer, the office worker said no, until Eve mentioned John Steinbeck and then she said maybe.

Eve had wanted to run onto the street but she took the forms and walked away as slowly as she could. She had sat in Light Square watching other people come and go from their lunch breaks. She had sat there for so long, lunch time finished and her bum got wet from the grass. Eve was embarrassed to the tips of her hair. She had scrunched the papers into the bottom of her handbag and hadn't looked at them again. She thought about it now, in the book shop, with fresh embarrassment. She wondered if she would ever look at books the same way again. Until she had met the woman at the TAFE, she didn't even know there were different classes of books. She thought, till this day, that if the office staff were that horrible, how much nastier would the teachers be.

But the future suddenly held all kinds of opportunities. There was a coffee shop at the back of the book shop. She took out her purse, she still had a twenty dollar note. She broke it to buy a cappuccino. She had never drunk a coffee before. She waited by the counter.

"It's ok I'll bring it over."

" Oh. Oh."

Eve sat down, sweating again, this time her legs. At eye level across the room she saw the name John Irving. She had read *The World According to Garp*. Even now Eve felt ashamed that she couldn't remember any other writers when the TAFE officer asked her. But now, she

remembered. John Irving. Probably not *literature*. She'd never know now. She walked over to the new book section and picked it up, *Cider House Rules*. She read it as she sipped the sweet drink, she had put three sugars in it, skipping pages at the front of the book.

She read,

People only ask questions when they are ready to hear the answers.

Eve shook her handbag so that everything fell into one corner. She filtered the coins from the stray chewies, pen lids and buttons, through her fingers. There were coins behind the material of her handbag, Eve could feel them, she poked her finger through the hole and pulled them out too. She had just enough to buy the book. Eve walked back to her Aunt's with her head held up in the sun which had come out again. Her feet barely touched the ground, she felt like she was walking on her toes. The little girl woke up half way home and they sang songs as they rolled over the wavy footpaths.

"Well, I've been on the phone to your Father, back in Adelaide. He said him and your Mother went around to the house and he's gone."

"Dad's gone?" she asked.

"No, your fella. Rob. He's gone. All 'is stuff's gone anyway."

"Wow. That's...good. Did Dad tell you anything else?"

“He had to go to hospital. Your fella. Rob. Threw himself off a bridge. The one near where you live. He had taken a whole lot of Panadol and wrapped himself in a quilt and jumped off the bridge. Apparently it isn’t very deep, the river near your place.”

Aunty Louise was still drinking from the coffee cup. It was covered in clouds and said something about the mornings; Eve tried to read what it said as it moved between her Aunt’s mouth and her leg where she rested it between sips.

Eve shook her head, “No, it’s not very deep.” She didn’t know what to say. She didn’t feel anything for Rob anymore. Even looking at her daughter’s blue eyes, she felt nothing. No sensation of anything. It was all gone. Just like that.

“And not very high either, I imagine, the bridge over your river. A coward’s way it is, drowning but it’s actually very hard to drown yourself.”

“No, it’s not high, I suppose.”

“Well, I’m a nurse,” said Aunty Louise, “and if he really wants to top himself, I can tell him how to do it properly. He’ll need something a bit stronger than Panadol.”

Eve was thinking about the depth of the Onkaparinga River under the bridge near her place. She had slid down the sand hills near the bridge, the ones that separate the river from the beach.

Some days her brother would wax her sled so much, she would fly into the dirty water. She never swam there.

“The higher the water, the lower the bridge, I suppose,” she said.

“I can show him what to do if he really wants to do it properly. I told your Dad. I’m a nurse. I’ll send him some stuff he can use. If he’s serious.”

There were tunnels that ran through the sand hills from when Port Noarlunga was a working port. Goods would be taken through the sand hills and then along the river to Old Noarlunga. Eve had walked those sand hills, along the lip of the river and over the top but she had never found an opening. The tunnels were hidden beneath the sand, and then when the council banned sand sledding, beneath the pig face and grasses that grew afresh on the steep hills. It was an idea, tunnels beneath them, sand pouring into them, that Eve liked to scare herself with.

Only pelicans swam there. They owned the river, knew the depths. They would swim under the bridge, amongst the reeds and fishing lines no matter the tide. It’s easy they seemed to say. Watch me.

“I can give him a strong tip.” Aunty Louise was winding up or getting started. She went into the kitchen and sloshed some scotch whisky into her coffee cup. Louise looked behind her and into Eve’s eyes. Too late.

“Rough night. Anyway, that’s me. You should ring your mother. You can stay here with us as long as you want. I’ve set you up a room now, first on your right at the top of the stairs. But if your fella wants any advice, you can let him know I’ve got plenty for him. I’m a nurse.”

Eve went up to the room, her and the little girl held their books in front of them on the bed. Eve worried about the fate of Dr Wilbur and Homer and all those poor girls who had to have abortions and not anything else.

By the time she got home to Adelaide, Eve felt like she knew what an abandoned orphan would feel like and it wasn’t just because of *Cider House Rules*. She missed her mother, her sister and even her brother, so much that she would spontaneously start to cry whenever she thought about them. Her cousins were kind and she had become close to one who was the same age but it was hard to keep the baby from trouble in the busy house. Faith cried in the night again, many times, moving up and down the stairs, staying closer to the top and moving towards her room as the days passed. On the last night Faith had opened the bedroom door and had stood over them. Eve had feigned sleep again with squinted eyes, holding the baby and her own body so tight, ready to respond if Faith moved to touch them.

She was stiff for the train ride home. In the day this time, nine hours, the baby running up and down the aisle of the train and her apologising. There was one other young couple, probably

older than her still, the girl had her shoes off, painted nails, feet resting in his lap. They made friends with the baby and entertained her with peek-a-boo and other games, practicing for the future they imagined or couldn't imagine. In a way Eve was practicing for the future too. She stared out of the window at the sheep in the field, turning into rocks. There were mostly grey heads above the seats as they passed through the pink grasses growing along the rail like a young beard. The land turned to a dark brown, like a cake that had failed, had fallen, but had been dusted with cocoa anyway. Her reflection was a wet eyed ghost floating above the lines of trees, following the creeks with them.

As the Overland rocked through the small towns that dotted the track, slowed through crossings, Eve would look for something sharp to catch her eye upon, an old rainwater tank tipped on its side, the slice of a skinny lamb's shoulder blade, even a single blade of grass before the softness of the land would return. She would seek out people in the middle of their lives, driving their cars or walking by the train track, fibro houses, clotheslines with clothes hanging on them and she would see her singular reflection and wonder, how did they do it?

After a couple of hours, the Grampians appeared in the distance, as if the colour was running out of a jagged sky. Dimboola had rusting swing sets in a dry park with black plastic, exposed and bunched up and ripped, lining a man-made creek. Brown water settled in pieces and around the tap which was turned off. Backyards jutted up against the railway line. On the fence of one house, she could see a for sale sign with SOLD printed diagonally across it. An old man stood in the driveway beside a trailer and watched the train go by. She wondered if he was watching it

for the first time, just moving in or if he was leaving and watching the Overland go by for the last time.

A few hours more, a couple more towns, a half an hour forward and they were coming into Murray Bridge and the baby was finally asleep. Eve thought she might take a day trip to Murray Bridge one day, visit the Bunyip put in your twenty cents and see the grotesque head rise and fall. This was coming home, the sweep of the train in an arc at the top of the valley, overlooking the river, the river crafts and the cows on the river banks. Across the bridge, looking into the windows of the big houses with their reflected views and then to the Murray Bridge train station, the sandstone building showing the importance the railway once had and hiding the poorest houses, visible in between, with dirt driveways and gardens trimmed by tyres.

The train stopped. Men, vaguely uniformed, milled about the station with the disembarking passengers, stepping aside for luggage when it approached. One lit a cigarette and then another. The wait continued and her thoughts went to the next train stations Goodwood and then Keswick and then she would have to go somewhere. Home. Her house. Eve imagined it dark and cold and smelling like the vermin waiting behind the walls. The train waited. She thought about getting off here, in Murray Bridge, starting again. How would you do that? Her thoughts went as far as considering the sleeping baby, it would be easier if she did it now. She could put the baby in the pram, roll across the station platform to the cafeteria, there is a light on still. Then what do you do? Rent a room at the Murray Bridge Hotel. The hotel motel at Port Noarlunga was fifty dollars a night, she had checked once, too expensive. Would it be less in

Murray Bridge? Or more? She thought of the book in her bag, worth half a night's stay in a hotel motel. Her Dad had paid for her train fare and Mum had given her what she had in her purse but Eve understood; that was it. She would have to go home.

Anti-climactically, the train waited another five minutes after she had come to this conclusion. She couldn't go back and forth on the pros and cons of getting off the train right now and starting a new life, because she had no money. She didn't even have enough money to pretend. She sat staring at her face becoming clearer and clearer in the window as night fell.

Finally the train took off and flashes of the backyards of Murray Bridge, backyards full of mud and car parts and then long wide streets with dry trees bent over and then the prison, just like a high school, Eve thought, except for the double fences and barbed wire. It felt like the train was going into the night, as if the night were somewhere else, they were leaving the day. There was a tunnel and it was completely night for a moment and her face in the window glass was completely clear; she looked scared and closed behind her dark fringe. Eve pushed her hair from her face and sat up straight until the end of the tunnel then she settled back and her hair fell into her eyes once more.

The bush reappeared then, untouched it seemed but then a solitary electricity pole connected to another and then nothing. On a dark, bald hill, a single smallish kangaroo stood silhouetted against the large gums trees and the next hill. The people in the train hummed and aahhed and

someone said, "there he is." And another said, "oh the baby missed it." Then it went quiet as the passengers prepared themselves for solid ground. In the last light, she saw tracks along the hills and the remains of fires which looked like a patch of the night breaking through the land. Then rows of olive trees as far as she could see, rows straight despite the decline. In Nairne, car lights started to come on. The train track went higher until they were amongst the top of the grey gums, with the koalas which Eve used the last of the light to look for. She didn't see one. Grey clouds hung in the sky and on the horizon there was the shadow of rain falling into the ocean. Nearly home.

When she got home, she turned every light on in the house, carrying the baby as she went. It was freezing, so she tried to light the gas heater in the lounge room, clicking and clicking away until her mother said, ok we have to go now. Just wait. But then the phone rang. She let it ring until her mother picked it up and passed it to her. It was her friend, Judy.

"You are the talk of the footy club," she said. Judy had known her from before she was pregnant. Judy had been dating another one of the footy team; they had broken up but she still came to watch the games.

"Who will I sit with on a Saturday now?" she asked Eve.

Hang on a second. Eve could hear that her friend was holding the phone to her chest. She was getting impatient, her mother and her sister were standing up looking at her. Her Mum was

rocking the baby on one hip.

"They're here," Judy said when she returned.

"Who?"

"Rob. He's here with Smithy. I gotta go. Call you back later."

They hung up.

"Well that's why I didn't want to answer. It was Judy. She said Rob was at her house. He'd just got there."

"Where does she live again?"

"Over in Reynella. It's ok."

Eve took the baby from her mother.

"Do you want Angelina to stay with you tonight?" she asked.

"Mum!"

"What?"

"Look at her. She doesn't want to stay."

"I do. I do. Please, let me stay," said Angelina quickly. "I can go to work from here. I'll go home with Mum, get my stuff, get my car."

They left and Eve tried to feel happy to be home. Piles of clean washing were still on the baby's bed. She moved them into drawers to make way for her sister. She finally got the heater started and kicked the fan to high. The record player and all the records were gone, she noticed, there was a rectangle of dust where it had been. Once the room started warming up, it was the only difference. The quilt was gone from the bed. She took a spare from the cupboard, lay down on the bed with the baby. The room with its ancient wall paper and mustard coloured curtains looked like a cheap motel. It reminded Eve of her of Murray Bridge fantasy.

The phone rang and Eve extricated herself without waking the little girl. Her breathing was deep and peaceful. It was Judy again.

"Rob's left," were her first words. "He seemed fine. He knows your back though. I don't know how."

They talked; there was a lot to catch up on. Eve told Judy about her Aunt drinking and her cousin climbing the stairs. Judy told her about what had happened last weekend at the footy club, which was what happened every weekend at the footy club. Angelina let herself in, locked the front door behind her and went, with her pillow and quilt and overnight bag and one of their old hockey sticks from home, straight into the baby's room. Time passed, Eve realised, not that much that anything new happened, but enough to know that some things don't change. The lights went out in her sister's room.

There was a knock at the front door, the handle twisted.

“There’s someone here,” Eve whispered into the phone.

Her sister came out of her room but she didn’t have the hockey stick. She was in her nightie and she held her arms close to her to hide her bosoms, to hold down the sheerness. She walked out of her bedroom keeping her eyes on the front door as she manoeuvred around the dining room table, towards her sister. They were both staring at the door when a hand punched through a panel of glass in the front door. A hand emerged through the small gap. It was cut and the blood dripped down the wooden part of the door. The hand kept reaching, the skin on the wrist slicing and bleeding anew, until it found the handle. Eve and her sister shared an expression, it went back and forward between them. Each sister could see that the other was scared and was seeing her own fear reflected.

The hand turned the handle, the door opened. It was him. The hand was held at his side, the blood dripped from the ends of his fingers. Eve couldn’t look away from the fingers and the red, drip, drip, drip against his bare leg. Rob was still wearing his footy shorts. He had run here. He didn’t seem out of breath. The blood dripped. The phone was frozen against her head. Judy was saying her name over and over, what’s going on, what’s going on, what’s going on?

“He’s here,” Eve said quietly into the mouth piece. She laid the phone on the table.

He took five long strides into the room, picked up the phone and smashed it against the table five times, hit, hit, hit, hit, hit; pieces of it flew into the air.

“Who-the-fuck-was-that?” he yelled.

“You’ll wake the baby,” she pleaded.

“Who. Was. That?” He spat.

“Judy. She’s still... she was still.... on the phone.” Eve looked at the phone, emptied out onto the table, drops of blood amongst the broken plastic.

“You fucking liar.”

Chapter Three

Port Noarlunga, Thursday November 11th, 1999

I can't finish. I can't go on. It hurts too much.

You can do it, Cherry encourages me, but I can't.

I can't, I say. I don't think I can handle it.

Why haven't you done this before?

I wanted to, believe me. Mum wouldn't let me. She said I was too young.

Pluck. Pluck. Blood.

She pulls out another hair. Tears fill my eyes again; I use the palms of my hands to wipe my face dry. The skin above my right eye is dark pink. Look at it, she says and holds the hair too close to my eyes for me to see. I try to focus but then she whips it away. She leans back to light her joint which has smouldered in the ashtray which sits between us on Mum's bed. The bed is covered by black hairs. They are Captains though.

We've both taken the day off. Cherry goes to Adelaide TAFE. She's doing design. It's her final year. You know what I'm doing. Cherry says that Professional Music at Noarlunga TAFE is the epitome of bogan. The epitome. There are more bogans in Professional Music at Noarlunga

TAFE than in any other course anywhere in Australia. But she's heard of my teacher, Lou Shaw, he's the best, she says. She's a bass player as well. As well as a painter. Anyway, she's right; stoner bogans.

Cherry has her own dealer. He came around last night. Craig. He sat and talked for an hour. I can't remember what it was about, he'd given up booze, I think. Cherry told me afterwards, after he'd left, that she always smokes his weed while he's talking, otherwise it wouldn't be worth it. She's offered me some; a few times but I get too paranoid; I think I'd freak out about Mum, you know, what's happened.

Maybe it's because of your background, Cherry says. She keeps saying stuff like this. Something to do with Mum's novel. Even though it's clear that it's not her, not my Mum. But she keeps saying it, then she says, I don't want to spoil it for you.

Then don't, I say. You are.

Could it be a message? Your Mum died in that second story too didn't she.

No, I said, please. Don't tell me what happens.

I didn't know you hadn't finished it. Sorry.

I nearly finished it. Don't tell me what happens in the last bit, please.

Your Mum's not in it.

For fuck's sake. I said don't fucking tell me. I mean, honestly, don't say anything else.

Silently, she pressed her hand to my forehead, the tweezers came towards my eye, just missed and then she plucked another hair.

Ouch, for fuck's sake. Ow-ow-ouch.

They're so thick. I'm pulling really hard here. They're thick and they're stuck. They're in so deep, look, my hand is leaving a mark on your head.

She held up a mirror and sure enough I could see the print of her hand, red, near my hairline.

The kids at school called me John Howard. I would brush it off, oh yeah, hilarious, real original, but they were relentless. Mum said one of the parents had made it up and told it to their kid. That's the kind of people, she said, that voted for John Howard, the parents of these kids. Bullies. Think it's ok to bully children. It's part of keeping everyone in their place.

Well, you must have heard one of these rants I say to Cherry.

She had. Cherry had stayed friends with Mum even after she'd grown up.

Looking in the mirror, I felt like I was growing up. One side of my face, at least, looked like it was on purpose. The arch of the brow looked like the brow of a woman you would see in a magazine or in a suit on the street. The fluffy bit in the middle, until so recently reminiscent of John Howard, now looked clean and like it was meant to be. It looked honest, which it wasn't, but was so much better. If I covered the right hand side of my face, I still looked like a child, like the photos of my childhood. Even my head tilted forward when I looked at myself like this. I was still the child staring out from beneath my brows.

We hadn't discussed whether Cherry would move in, but each day she had brought a new bag of clothes, she'd picked up her bass guitar, Captain's bed. She'd told her Dad. Uncle Jim said he understood. The fighting.

What about, I asked her. Despite the brows, or the one fine brow, I really didn't know what grown up people did; what they argued about. Cherry didn't know either. I don't listen, believe me, she said. You're lucky, not having a Dad. Or at least, not having to go through this. My Mum being a bitch to my Dad. I mean, in a way, we're the same, we've both got one good parent.

But what happened? It was all changing so quickly. Aunty Jean and Malcolm. It was a shock, but now I'm thinking it's just what everyone does, was there someone else with Cherry's parents? Both Uncle Jim and Aunty Vicki had lost so much weight, when you saw them, they were like

shadows. They even talked more quietly now, into each other, so that it was impossible for anyone to even get close enough to ask one of them what was going on. At least that's what my Mum had told me. I told Cherry. Everything was changing, Mum'd said, and not much of it for the better. It's true, Cherry said. Remember when we were kids?

But remembering being a kid just made me think about my Mum. Where was she? The violence of story, the blood dripping from his fingers. His? Rob's. Is it my Dad? Has something violent happened to my Mum? Is it in the story? Fucking Cherry. I don't want to know.

I'm glad Cherry's here though. She's cool. She's been going out in the city for years. She's had a serious boyfriend. She's like an adult, but she doesn't agree with the adults. Except my Mum. I'd love to complain about my Mum to her, how she wouldn't let me, for example, pluck my eyebrows. You don't want to fuck it up by doing it too soon, she'd say. Wait and see how you turn out, she'd say. All my friends could pluck their eyebrows. Look, they've done it too thin she'd say and she'd be right. That's what Cherry would say too.

I'd like to complain about my Mum taking off like this. Or whatever she's done. Is doing. How it's not fair. But I don't know what's happened and that stops me because if I start guessing now where will it end? I can't. I've stopped. I've stopped Cherry too, asked her not to try and guess. Most people turn up; that's what we say to ourselves about that.

We're still in our pj's. Cherry has put her hair into a pony tail, it is completely straight. She has a dark blue jumper with red deer on over her pj's. Her pj pants are covered in dachshunds. There is detail everywhere. Her tin has a picture of Jesus with a red glowing heart with 'holy smoke' written in gothic print. She has a copy of *The Artist as a Young Man* but she has pasted a photo of Michael Hutchence on the front cover. He is staring into a microphone, his dark curls move forward as he falls backwards, his shoulders, his white shirt held open with his sweat. Found it in a magazine, photocopied it, glued it on, no big deal she says. But why? I think. Why?

When we talk about Dizzy, which we do a lot, Cherry says poor Dizzy and hugs Captain. I miss her, she says. We miss her, don't we Captain. But it's ok to miss Dizzy, it's not betrayal, she isn't coming back. She is in the garden, in the ground under the little cross that Captain sniffs when she goes out there. All the petals have fallen off the flowers, the stalks bend their empty heads.

It's not ok to miss Mum though, not this way, not yet.

Del came around about then, with me half plucked. He knocked on the door and then came in, walked down the hall to Mum's room, gave me and Cherry a kiss and then sat at Mum's desk. He fiddled with the chair trying to push it up to accommodate his long legs but the system was stuck fast. Mum got the chair from the side of the road. Hard rubbish. Years ago. He stopped. Then he got up again and came over to look at me.

What's happened to you? You look like you've been in a scruff. A bit of biff, hey? Cherry held up the tweezers. Ah, secret women's business, he said.

He had been doing what he called 'detective work'. Del had worked in security for a while, on the trains, anti-graff squad. Transit Police. Left under suspicious circumstances, I don't know the whole story. He was relishing this though.

I'll tell you what he told me, I'll try, how he told me.

Detective work starts with the last known sighting of the missing person. I have identified that the said missing person, Genevieve Smart, was seen by a number of people early on the morning of 7th November in the year of our lord 1999 and last sighted by one Angela Smart, the younger sister of the aforementioned missing person, Genevieve Smart.

The aforesaid witnesses left Genevieve Smart alive and well at approximately 1.30am on Sunday, 7th day of November, 1999. Angela Smart confirmed that Genevieve Smart, was heading to bed when they departed. Ms Smart confirmed that they had locked the front door behind them. The last sighting of Genevieve Smart was of her back. She was entering this room, waving her arm in the air, like so, Del spun the chair around so his back was too us, to say goodbye to her friends. I suppose that would have placed her approximately here.

Del jumped up and stood in the door way his arm still raised, staring blankly for a moment, so convinced was he in his performance of my mother. Then he snapped out of it, looking back towards Cherry and me on the bed and smiled. Nodded.

I interrogated the witnesses, he said, meaning he'd talked to Aunty Ange.

Turns out no one had actually seen Gen asleep in her bed, Del went on. And Elizabeth Smart, didn't you tell me the bed was made when you got home? She could have made it after she got up in the morning but she might not have slept in it ... at all.

Del's eyes were wide and he leant towards us, his stare moving from me to Cherry and back to me.

Did you know she was still seeing Christies Beach? (Del used his real name, I won't)

Yeah I knew, I said even though I didn't think she was, not really, until he said it.

He wasn't invited to the party. No one at the party knew she was still seeing him.

She never told anyone that stuff. How did you find out?

I spoke to my niece, she's still friends with Christies Beach.

So what, he rang here looking for her, he doesn't know anything.

Could that be a ruse? A diversion to put the investigator off his track?

Investigators? There's only you?

When there's a missing person, the first suspect is always the boyfriend.

He's not her boyfriend.

The police told Libby that most missing people turn up within two weeks said Cherry. Nearly all of them. Statistically speaking.

Of course, of course, he said. The smile faded from his face. You're Mum'll turn up, Lib. Someone'd be spotting her. Don't worry about that.

He sat back down at the desk.

Cherry offered him a smoke.

I will if you don't mind, he said. Do you mind, he said offering his own pipe which he then took into the back yard. He smoked deeply, we could see him through the window, leaning back when he held in his breath and looking to the tops of the trees, hands on hips as he exhaled. He didn't cough. He held the pipe in his closed fist. He walked around the garden, kicking at the long grass. He cleared away the dead flowers from Dizzy's grave and brushed the dirt around the cross, straightening it. He squatted down next to it for the longest time. We could see the top of his head in the window, his blond hair darker in the shade. The sun had just gone past the

trees.

When he came back in he had some different ideas. I feel like she's on a journey, he said. With Dizzy. Or maybe not, maybe related to Dizzy somehow. I can see her, she is like a shadow and she has a shadow next to her. It is a golden trail or a track of some kind and there are trees, gum trees, white grey gums fat and she's walking between them.

I can't remember exactly what he was saying; it was fucking psychedelic, Cherry said so later. Craig's weed is pretty strong, she said. While Del was talking, Cherry caught my eye, raised her eyebrows, pursed her lips, twisting them to one side as if to stop herself from laughing. I started laughing; hysterically Cherry described it. It was hysterical. I couldn't stop. That didn't stop Del, he kept going, describing his vision. I laughed along with the story. He said something about a time machine. I kept taking deep breaths trying to stop the hiccupping laughter but nothing would stop it or Del, looking over my head, describing this new fantasy, which seemed to be happening on the ceiling where Mum was walking on some golden tree-lined journey.

I mean, honestly. He made cups of tea. Later he said he'd seen something in the sunlight. After he'd finished his tea, he admitted it was probably the dope. He wanted to go home. Cherry gave him a bud to have later. That'd be sweet, he said. He was practically straight when I saw him to the front door, he stood on the porch for a few moments.

A pelican flew over us, a huge dark shape in the sky. It came towards us and Del pointed it out.

Your Mum was always spotting pelicans, he said, she loved them. Del looked down at me, realised what he'd said.

I mean, she did that back when we were together. Not that she was dead or anything.

The pelican turned majestically, dipping one wing right before us, flew towards the ocean.

There you go, a good sign, he said .

I will go and speak to the cops Lib, Del said, but not today. Tomorrow morning maybe. When I've come down off this... um... phew. I wanna think about it all a bit more. Smoke a bit more, back at my own place. It was good to see you laughing though, with your cousin. Love you darling girl.

He beeped loudly as he drove away and waved. He was off, like the flidgeons, Nanna would say.

Cherry wants to talk about her childhood a lot. I'm interested in some of it. When she talks about my Mum, what she heard in her house. It was understood apparently that my Mum was a weirdo. She wasn't a good housewife. We all knew that; she admitted that. Uncle Jim had a joke about it. He said our house was the only one where you wiped your feet on the way out. Mum knew some of the things they said about her. One that Cherry confirmed was that her parents thought Mum had book smarts but not real life smarts. Mum knew they said this; they'd said it

to her.

What do you call this? she'd ask. What am I doing all the time except real life? Look at you, she'd say, look at everything we have, she'd say, and I didn't have to give up anything. I'm a fucking genius at real life.

Meanwhile, at Cherry's house, they were convinced that they had it right. Married, honest, hard-working, Aunty Vicki ironing while she watched afternoon telly and cooking them all enormous dinners which they would eat together at the table discussing what was wrong with everyone else, especially my Mum.

Meanwhile at my house, Mum worried about the ignorance of her family. They were getting life smart, she'd say, but not book smart. How could you learn anything if you were only talking to other people like you? When she read books, novels, she felt like she was spending her days with brilliant people, kind people, writers. She thought writers were the best people, she said but when people asked her what she did, Mum would tell them she was a single mother. Less trouble.

Both Cherry and I had been kids, listening to this. Now it had all gone quiet. What were we supposed to think now?

I couldn't bear anymore plucking of my right eyebrow after Del left. In the mirror I could see that the pink had turned into purple and in some parts it looked like it might turn black. There were three spots of dried blood. Cherry started plucking my left eyebrow, pressing her hand on the top of my head to get a grip. She was looking at me but not at me, not into me. I could look at her without her noticing, I couldn't see how we were like each other, maybe our small chins or the flatness of our cheeks. Cousins don't normally look like each other though, do they? Our Mums don't look like each other either but my Mum is heaps younger than Aunty Vic. I'm six years younger than Cherry, it's always seemed so many years difference until now.

Pluck. It began again. What did you do? Saturday night. You never told me.

I went to a party, that's all.

And? Pluck.

And I did what you do at a party I suppose.

Got with someone?

Cherry asked me but she wasn't looking at me. She punctuated her questions with plucks, holding the hair for me to see it and whisking it away before I could. She asked. I told her. I got with Henry.

Bridie's boyfriend?

They're not together.

But it's her Henry right?

I already feel guilty about it. Now Mum's gone, not that she'd give a shit, but it feels connected somehow. It does.

Now you sound like Del.

Ha ha. You smell like him.

I told her just about everything while she pulled and pushed at my forehead and plucked.

I told her about the party. We'd got there pretty early and sat at the back corner of the yard, near the bonfire. We, me and Bridie that is, had drunk all of our booze before anyone else even arrived but Ben Crow's Mum had champagne so after all the Vodka we were drinking this champagne. Fucking Adam and Kelly and a whole bunch of people from Tatachilla that you never need to think about again rocked up and Bridie was leaning all over them, god know what I said to Kelly but she said I was a fucking bitch. I fell over. Then they fucked off with my cd's. Mum's cd's. Our cd's. Everything turned to shit then. Ben Crow's Mum was spewing. Literally spewing. And crying. It was horrible. I was crying. The cd's were gone. The only one they left behind was *The Best of Bob Marley*. Ben Crow's Mum kept repeating how much she loved Bob Marley, how she might be rich now, private school rich, but she used to be poor. I wasn't always like this Libby, she kept saying right into my face, her breath was like coke and hay, as if it came from the bottom of somewhere. She kept burping. It was foul. When Bridie left, she was gonna leave me there, with that. She had a lift. I had to sit on her lap, fairly jump into the car at the last

minute. She would have left me there. I didn't know what else to do. Fuck. I'd gone to the party with her. Turned out she'd stolen Ben Crow's Mum's cask of white wine and she'd had to get out quick with it even though I think Ben Crow's Mum would have given it to her if she'd asked but she would probably have wanted to go with us to the next place, which was Henry's. Bridie was going to Henry's. I didn't want to go, just went to get out of Crow's. I don't even know whose car it was but he kept saying Henry was not going to be happy we'd come along. That was because Bridie had been acting crazy around Henry, kept calling and turning up, following him home from parties, going to his place after parties he wasn't even at. Just like this. She was determined that he was going to be her date to the school formal. She told me she's gonna wear him down and he told me he sees his only choice is to miss the formal altogether. I mean, school formals, who gives a fuck right? I don't want to see him ever again. I am hoping Bridie never, ever finds out.

I don't think she knows, Cherry said after I'd kind of taken a breath. I spent the other night with her while you slept and she didn't say anything.

Worse was that Mum and I had a massive fight before I left. She said I was acting like a baby. She said that this was the most important night of the year. She said it might even be the most important night of the century. She said it was a question of loyalty. It wasn't even worth it, I should have stayed. I should have just fucking stayed. God she was going on though. Bloody hell. Henry Lawson and his mother. I'm not joking. Does anyone even know who fucking Henry Lawson is? She never got over it, Mum said, the last failed Republic, Henry Lawson's mother.

Another hundred years, I bet you, she said. I can't even vote yet, I didn't even vote. I think she knew they'd lost before the party started. I did not want to stay and plus there was this party at Ben Crow's. Mum brought up heaps of stuff though: that time at the Falls Festival, I mean she brings that up every time but also when I missed Papa's wake thing, that thing they had in Norwood and the last time she went up to Quorn and I wouldn't go with her even though I'd said I would. Then she said you never wear that white tracksuit I bought you, which is a joke because the lady next door rants at her husband every Saturday morning and once we were listening to her and she said and you never wear that white tracksuit I bought you and we say it when one of us is going on. Usually Mum. But anyway, the fight was over. She took a few cd's she definitely wanted to play and I left. It was all finished when I left, I mean the fight, Aunty Ange and Emma and Sue Brumby were there, they were having fun, but I felt pretty bad and then I stayed out all weekend because, well, I was hanging around and then when I did get home she wasn't home.

Cherry wanted to know about Henry. My Henry; which he isn't. Not Henry Lawson. That's for sure. Cherry doesn't want to talk about the Republic; she's not enrolled so didn't take much notice. Henry, what could I tell her? Not that I'd spent half of Sunday hiding from all his friends in his bedroom. He'd said some sweet things, I wasn't going to tell her them. Or that I forgave him. In fact, he didn't apologise. Sneaking out of his parent's house. The bus home, thank god no one was on it. I was not going to describe that scene to her. Even his dog had sniffed me and trotted off when I'd try to pat him even though he'd spent half the day locked in the bedroom with me. I just said I hope I never see him again. That seemed to be enough.

She sat back looking at my eyebrows. Seems even she said. She had rolled a joint for Del but he'd smoked a pipe and she lit it up now, leaning back against Mum's pillows, staring at me, but not at me. She was looking just above my eyes.

When I was a kid, I remember my cousins, all a bit older than me, running around outside, going off, riding their bikes to the playground and I'd be sitting there with Nanna. They all said I was her favourite but it wasn't even like that. Next youngest was nicknamed Bubbles and she was definitely the favourite. The oldest, the first born grandchild, played the piano which was Nanna's dream, she was also a favourite.

I was the one who knew why it was Nanna's dream. Sitting with her while the other children ran free, I heard the stories. When she'd been in the girls' home, when she imagined her future, she couldn't imagine a family because she'd never known what it was to have one. Her parents did the least they could, she survived she said. In the girls' home she would see the piano in the corner, never opened, never played and she used that, she imagined a family sitting around a piano. We did now, every Christmas, my cousin was pretty good before she got kicked out of high school. I suppose she's still pretty good. I suppose Nanna's imagination wasn't good enough to imagine beyond that piano. A dusty organ sits behind her chair at the end of the couch on the other side of her table and knitting where my cousin would practice. Aunty Jean's kids had scattered, their stuff had started gathering dust.

Nanna's stories are like that too. Dusty. I imagine a dusty sheen in the air of the stories she tells, something like the waves of heat from the road on a hot day. Say she's talking about the swimming pool at Norwood. She was skinny back then, apparently. Hard to imagine when she's sitting there in her dressing gown. And brown as a berry in Summer she reckons. Went to the swimming pool every other week, spent her entire allowance on the entrance fee and an ice-ee when she got in. It was hot in the city, no escape from the heat on those long days. It was where she met Papa. He would go there every week. Their friends knew each other, they got together. He asked her to go steady under the gum trees next to the Norwood pool. Woollen bathers she wore, they hung from her. I imagine them yellowing under a layer of dust. But I did have nice eyes, she said.

I wasn't old then you know.

She looks old today. I asked her if she's worried about Mum and she says she's not but it looks like it's worrying her. She's gonna get such a belting when she gets back though, she says, she's not too old for a smack. I feel like she's said this before. She says she'd know if anything had happened to one of her children. I tell her what Del said earlier about Mum being on a journey with a dog and the pelican. I leave out the fact that he was on a stoner rant.

Yes, she says, well, Del and I are both Aquarians.

Hilarious, right?

I can't talk about Mum with Nanna because for some reason, everything keeps coming back to Papa. What a bastard he was. How selfish. It's mental. That's why I asked her how they met, so that she could remember something nice about him.

You still have nice eyes, Nanna, I say and then I skedaddle the hell out of there. Before she starts up. I'm on my bike. Cherry's gone to her parent's place, to have a shower there, to avoid our bathroom. I don't mind visiting Nanna. It was a short visit though, today. She stays with me, walking holding my hand, to the gate; closes it behind me after I push my bike out. I can't see her shoulders, only her head, grey hair sticking up and her hand waving. She stands up on tippy toes to call out to me that my eyebrows look nice.

There is a Northerly blowing, it comes up this time of the day. It'll still be blowing in December too. It's ok rolling down Aldam, the houses block most of the wind I suppose, but when I get onto the Espy I have to push hard to get each pedal down and I move the bike forward in short pushes along the path. People are flying past me in the other direction, their hair blows into their face; one guy on a fixee had his feet held out in front of him, the pedals spinning madly beneath his outstretched legs. My hair is pulled back flat against my skull. Even the ocean is struggling against this wind, small waves which also look like rabbits, ears blown back, break as far as the eye can see. My eyes water and the tears blow into my ears.

There is sand in the air, whipped from the sea and the sand up the side of the cliffs up here. I can smell it so sharp you could taste it, the salt. The seaweed slapped against the rocks, is that the smell? The smell of the ocean is like the sound of it; you hear it, the waves crashing for so long that it becomes just another sound, is it the sound of the cars on Commercial Road? Is it a plane flying over the ocean before turning back to land at Adelaide Airport. Is it the wind? Then one day, you walk down onto the beach and you watch the wave pull up the shore and crash onto the sand and you suddenly see what you've been hearing.

That's what I need to do. What is that smell in the air? I need to follow my nose down to the beach like Dizzy used to. Find the seaweed in clumps, lift it up and bury my nose in the smell underneath. Find the shells before they break or as they break into pieces, find the broken parts, the tiniest pieces and smell them. Follow the fox's trail underneath the box thorns, down the cliffs, try to find his scent underneath the walkers and their dogs, sniff out his cave, smell his piss and then when he dies, smell that sweetness in the air and know it comes from here.

I hear a beeping and a voice calling from a car stopped on the Espy,

Get a horse why don't ya?.

I raise my hand to give them the middle finger but it is Aunty Ange, elbow hanging out the Holden's window, and I lose momentum. The bike slows down too much, it stops and leans with

me still on it, against the fucking box thorns. I can hear Ange laughing.

You bloody idiot. I'll be over later. I'll see ya.

A car has to slow slightly as she pulls out in front of it and the driver presses on their horn and pulls right up to the back of her Holden. Aunty Ange puts her fist in the air, fuck you, you fucking fuckwit. The other driver keeps their hand on the horn. I can't tell if it's a man or a woman, it is wearing a navy ocker shirt and has long hair and what looks like boobs. The whole scene keeps moving south. I can see Aunty Ange's finger in the air above the scrubby bushes; I can hear the horn still bleating. Then I hear a screech at the round-a-bout and Ange has taken off. Then it's just me and the sound of the wind. I'm still attached to the box thorn. I free myself. I walk and push the stupid bike.

If I didn't have the bike, I would walk down to the sand. There are steps here at Seaford. I'd go down here. When the tide's high, the waves will come right up to the limestone at the bottom of the cliffs. Pool in the rocks. There is a track that runs through the grass which grows above the limestone and beneath the red of the cliffs. Dogs meet along that path when the tide is high. You can try and out-run the waves in the dark grey sand racing past the tumbling seaweed sponges and stepping up onto the rocks, holding fast against the spray. Then you come back up at Trigg's, there's more steps, another walkway. Or you can keep going and chance a dip around the point, if the tide is high, or walk onto the soft dry sand when it isn't. You can't outrun the

ocean at the point, there is no track or even rocks to climb onto until you get to Turtle Rock. And sometimes even Turtle Rock will be covered by sand.

It's all, as they say, academic; I've got the bike.

During the day, the last day I saw Mum, we went for a swim. On our beach. Not Trigg's or Seaford, they aren't beaches for swimming; too much seaweed for starters. The waves start too deep. There are too many surfers in winter and no-one in Summer. Our beach is at the bottom of long slanting concrete steps. I'm not sure if it even has a name, there is a tiny jut of sand and then the river and the ocean. Across the river is Southport, a long stretch of white beach to Port Noarlunga Jetty but this beach everyone sits close against the limestone. The rocks give no shade and in the glare of a hot day can be blinding. Even so, people place their towels out from the rock so that, from above, it must look like the coloured coast of a child's map.

People don't want to swim alone, Mum said that day.

As I walk, pushing the bike, I think, I wonder if she meant something more. She had pointed out the towels to me. She had pointed at the long empty beach across the river. I was walking like I'm walking now, eyes just ahead of me. Mum had dropped her shorts and t-shirt in a pile, took off her sunnies and pulled her goggles from around her neck up to her face and walked into the ocean. We were floating, waiting for waves, in between, Mum ducking under, swimming along

the ocean floor and coming back to me. I remember it because it was our last swim but also because it was the first swim of the season.

Zoe Gooch's Mum and Dad were there with their surf ski. The Townsend's neighbour, the guy with the grey mullet and the house with the stained glass windows was there. We ran into the Townsends, after our swim, as we walked back up the steps.

Voted yet? Mum asked them.

Yep, Richard said and then Lynda said, We went first thing this morning, how about you? Mum told them that she was heading there directly.

Make sure you do, Richard said, I've read some polls, we might not win. His dog was at the end of a long rope but it stayed close sniffing at me and Mum.

Tyson, get here, yelled Lynda Townsend, pulling the rope. Who wouldn't want it? She asked. I can't imagine anyone wanting to keep the Queen. Who is she? Some old biddy.

Anyway Lynda, anyway, Gen should go, you should go and do it. Vote.

I will. I will. I remember Mum was laughing. It was a happy day. Mum seemed happy.

I have to watch where I'm going here, walking across the car park. Cars are coming in. Parking to see if the wind has created surf. Taking off. It's the car park for the dog beach. People are opening doors for their dogs, their furs stands stiff in the wind. I crunch across the white lines

on the far side of the car park. I can't describe any of this to you. I wouldn't even have looked except I'm a slow moving target and as you can see from what I've told you already, people don't slow down around here. People of few words, they beep their horns instead. You have to move faster. And those dogs, they won't be on a leash, if one of them hates bikes, they'll be over here in a flash. I sit on the bike, kind of side saddle and roll for a while and then I'm across, back walking on the path, I stick to the left.

I remember Mum saying, people don't like to swim alone, but, she said, some people still do it. Sometimes you have to. She was trying to make a metaphor, she said. Stretch it out, she said. Australians want to swim together but why do we have to stay swimming with Great Britain? It's like England was a giant pre-historic shark, she'd said (it was on the way home, so we could talk about sharks), and we were feeder fish that stayed close to the shark, in the slip stream, keeping the shark clean and getting eaten ourselves. Now, that shark was tiny; nearly extinct. All we know how to do was look for another big shark and that was the USA. Why couldn't we be sharks ourselves? she said. Perhaps today, we could be shark eggs, wrapped tight, swaddled, bobbing in our own ocean. Will we be born or will we dry out on the sand and be chewed by one of these dogs?

We could, she said, we could. We could what, I said, be shark eggs? We laughed. She'd stretched it until it snapped.

I suddenly really wanted to be home. I don't want to think. I got on the bike and still pushing against the wind, pedalled the last part of the journey back.

When I get home, Cherry is still sitting on Mum's bed but her face is wet. She has the radio on. She listens to the oldies station, the same one as Mum. Kentucky Rain by Elvis is playing. 'Kentucky Rain keeps falling down, another hill another town that I go walking through, with the wind in my shoes, searching for you, in the cold Kentucky rain, rain, rain, rain, rain'.

My Mum's been fucking Malcolm, she says.

What the fuck? I say. I don't know what else to say after that. I couldn't think of anything worse. Not even Christies Beach.

My Dad just told me.

God, do you think it's true? I asked her. You can't just believe anything in this family.

My Mum *is* a fucking bitch, she said.

But it seems too far-fetched to even consider. I can't even imagine Uncle Jim and Aunty Vicki... I mean I don't want to.

My Dad said that Malcolm thinks he's some kind of Jack Thompson. He said that my Mum told him nothing had happened...yet.

Eeeewwwwww, I said.

I know right, Cherry said.

There seemed so much to take in. We just let Elvis sing for a while, his voice taking us through the rain, through the streets of Kentucky following the woman he loves in his wet shoes, talking to strangers, almost catching her, getting preachers to pray for him but finding out he'd missed her by one day, no two.

There are a lot of stalker songs on this station, she says to me at last.

Yeah, and a lot of songs about young girls tempting older men.

And heaps that are straight up about rooting.

Yeah the oldies are filthy, I said.

Cherry's long hair was still wet and she brushed it while it dried. She stopped crying, put on her make-up, put a shirt over her t-shirt and slipped on some ballet slippers without moving from the bed, or seemingly moving at all. We both stayed like that, listened to music, waiting for the next sex song, each of us trying to be the one to call it when another came on: Afternoon Delight, Are You Old Enough, Young Girl Get out of mind, Rich Girl. The DJ, John Dean from Afternoon Tunes with John Dean, played two songs by Neil Diamond and they were both rude enough to make us go ewww.

She rolled a joint and offered me a toke. I took one, what the hell.

The songs grew even more ridiculous and John Dean's voice already so low and smooth, 'you're cruising with John Dean', riffing about himself in the third person through every song's intro and timing it perfectly so that he could say, 'you're cruising' just as the singer started was now so funny that we would only talk while the songs were playing, giggling quietly when he was on. The rush to identify the sexy underscore of each tune had us questioning every lyric of every song. Even the ads were hilarious; Noel's Caravan's Caribbean theme inspired us to start a band, we would play the Noel's Caravan's theme song into the break. Cherry worked out the chords; she plays by ear. Then she gave it to me and I learnt it and she played her bass.

The sun started setting. The radio grew quiet, it seemed, as the room grew orange and Cherry, who's hair was now dry and make up was done and clothes were on, got up to turn it off. Captain who had been asleep on the bed got up when she did and tapped up the hallway to the kitchen. In the quiet we could hear her crunching on the green biscuits, scattering the other colours on the floor near the sink.

Do you want another toke?

I don't think so.

What about a drink?

Yeah, I said but then, immediately afterwards, the second I said Yeah, there was a loud knock on the front door.

I suddenly remembered Aunty Ange calling out of her car.

They gave me a drink. Aunty Ange gave me one of her ciders. Cherry drove to the pub and got a six pack of Coopers. There was Aunty Ange and two of her and Mum's other friends. Emma was drinking pales and Fiona had two bottles of Seaview Brut; she put one in the fridge. I didn't realise that I hadn't been looking at any of them until Aunty Ange asked me, Are you stoned? I said no and Cherry said as if.

But it's ok if she drinks is it? asked Fiona.

What would Gen think? Asked Emma. I think we should consider that.

Gen told me that she hoped Libby would be a dope smoking lesbian at least until she was twenty five so she wouldn't end up a drunken single mother, said Fiona, who didn't even smoke weed.

It sounded like it always did when they got together but without Mum and with me and Cherry instead. Aunty Ange kept reminding us that we were sitting at the adult's table until Emma told her to leave it.

First order of business, said Fiona who worked in some high powered government office in the city and would sometimes speak like this before she'd had enough to drink, who else got a call from Del? But before anyone answered, I interrupted. I interrupted!

Tell Aunty Ange what you just found out, I told Cherry. She did.

Emma and Aunty Ange work together at McCappins, so Emma knows who Malcolm is. They had to update Fiona a bit. Cherry told them the whole story, they laughed at the Jack Thompson reference and Fiona explained to us who he was, even though we didn't ask.

Jack Thompson looks a bit like Del, Fiona said, a normal Del, she said bringing us all back to the subject. Del had called them all, told them all that Mum was missing. He also told them all that she was still seeing Christies Beach.

Cherry and I looked at each other.

The oldies are filthy, she whispered to me.

She'd love us knowing that, said Emma.

Surely you knew, Aunty Ange asked. I admitted to her that I hadn't known.

I knew, said Emma, but she wanted it to be kept private. She didn't even want to tell me, I dropped over one day when I had an RDO.

Cherry and I mouthed, eeeeeewwwwww to each other.

Well, she wasn't exclusive, said Fiona. Her and I have been double dating with this guy she likes and one of his mates.

The conversation went around and around, like a whirlpool, the conversation starting at the top and swirling around until it seemed it had disappeared but then it would return. Back around. Back to Del.

Dude is a fucking weirdo, said Ange.

And that's something coming from you, said Emma.

He does have one point though, said Fiona, the cops aren't doing anything. I rang them this afternoon. They said that her family said that she was an unreliable character and that they had other more pressing cases. They said that their officers knew about it, they had distributed her photograph but that most missing persons turn up within a week.

Her family? They mean fucking Malcolm, said Cherry.

Your family's always been like this to your Aunt, I'm afraid, said Emma.

Don't look at me, said Ange, they're only my half-family. I didn't talk to the fucking cops.

All three of them looked at me. Cherry looked at me.

I didn't say nothing, I said.

So now what? We wait for Del to pick up the scent? Imagine Del looking for you, said Fiona.

Be all right if you were lost at the bottom of the garden, said Ange.

Yeah, with the fairies, I said. I was in the whirlpool.

They told each other what they had told Del: Fiona had told him about the research that Mum had been doing up at Port Augusta, they had driven up together for the camel races a couple of months ago; Emma told him that she had organised to go jetty jumping with Mum Sunday afternoon but they had cancelled Saturday night because they thought they'd be too hungover. Ange had told him that her and Mum had found out they were half-sisters. They'd known for nearly two years but it hadn't got back to Del yet. None of it seemed important.

Should we be worried? Asked Emma.

Mmm, umm, maybe we should talk about this later? Said Fiona with a head tilt towards me.

She's at the adults table, said Aunty Ange.

I can't think of another time when she's done this, can you's? asked Emma.

What about that time she took off with us to Melrose, said Fiona.

Yeah, but she was with us.

Apart from leaving it up to Del to continue the investigation or harass the police to do their job, which Fiona volunteered for, no one could think of anything to do.

I don't want to tell you about the rest of last night. Anything. I want to die. I have never felt this sick in my life; I think I might actually be dying. Behind my eyes is a brick that hurts when I move my head, which I have to do to sip water. I can't even keep down water though. It sloshes around until I start to sweat and then it all rushes out of me, out of my throat in a gush into the bucket Cherry left me. Then I'm freezing. I can't bear to even hold the wet flannel that one minute ago was all that was keeping me from spontaneously combusting. I'm shivering so hard.

You have alcohol poisoning Cherry tells me. Please, I say, can you get Captain off me. Captain keeps trying to lick my mouth. I duck my head under my quilt. Come here Captain, she says. I'll have to close your door, she says, call out if you need anything else.

I call in sick to Taf. You'll need a doctor's certificate they say. More than two days, she says. I won't have one, I say before I quickly hang up to run to the toilet. Then I hunch back to my bed before the sweat dries and the shivering starts. I'm bent over like an old lady. Friday. The worst day ever.

I can see Mum's manuscript all over the floor. If I read any of it, I can't remember. There are boot prints on some of the pages. They look like Aunty Ange's but I cannot remember a thing.

I'm sure Cherry or Ange will enjoy telling me everything later. I remember that they were making jokes about me sitting at the adult's table. This is what you do at the adult's table they kept saying.

I can't say more. The memories are painful, physically painful. I hunch and shiver and sip and sweat, in the moment when everything is quiet, is balanced and waiting for the next thing, to hunch or shiver or sip or sweat, I write to you.

But the sound of the pen scratching on the paper, the thinking to write a word; a word. Too much. Wait. Wait. Later.

I've slept. The sun has moved past my window so the day must be half way through. The roof of my mouth is dry as a nun's; I skol the rest of my water. My nose is blocked and so is one of my ears. My right shoulder is stiff from where I've laid on it with my hand held above my head like I was answering a teacher. I think of a teacher and of answering a question, any question. I can see the papers on the ground and wonder if I can still read. Seriously, I think I might have brain damage.

Last night. Everything was fine. We were here; it was like Mum was here too. We were telling stories about her. Aunty Ange was doing impressions of her walk. I recognised it straight away. The way she kept her shoulders straight up, didn't move her hips and only one of her arms. Look

at me, she was saying, I'm Genevieve, listen to me. She was pretending to read poetry. The poems were so funny. I wish I could remember some of it. Something about Mum having heaps of brown furniture and clothes and hair and even her thongs were brown. Brown on brown on brown on brown. It's coming back to me, and more.

We went out. To the Emu. I don't know whose idea it was. Was it Cherry? Or Fiona's, she'd run out of booze. Aunty Ange drove. She threw water on me while I was on the dance floor. For fuck's sake that's right. She just came up and threw it over me. I was dancing with Cherry and a couple of her friends; Craig was there. It was all over me, my hair was dripping in my face. They were staring at me, Cherry's friends on the dance floor. Who the fuck was that? one of them asked. It was our Aunty, Cherry told them.

Afterwards, Aunty Ange said she was sorry; said it was a trick she played on my Mum once. Emma said it was equally hilarious and no-one tired of it. You're a fuckhead, Cherry said in such a way that Aunty Ange didn't even say anything. Fiona got into a fight with the bouncer, he said she'd had too much to drink, so we had to leave anyway. My hair and everything, which Cherry had done before we left, was fucked.

That was the most fun bit, getting ready. I could hear Emma and Fiona and Aunty Ange talking and laughing around the dining room table. Cherry and I sat on Mum's bed and did our make-up. With my new eyebrows, I looked so much older, I thought, and done. Finished properly.

Cherry lent me her denim jacket and a t-shirt, I wore my black jeans. I looked cool. Listening to my aunties, because they were definitely my aunties, all laughing at the dining room table, I could pretend that my Mum was there too. Even though I couldn't hear her voice and she would've been laughing the loudest and leading the singing, so I would have heard her. She would have had a loud argument with Fiona and they would have made up before they even got to the Emu. The fact that the rest of them were laughing made me think that maybe there wasn't anything to worry about. We were still cruising with John Dean, 1323 and we weren't going to crash.

Aunty Ange drove home from the Emu! Fiona was asleep, fell immediately and squashed against me in the back seat. Then Cherry on the other side. Emma was in the front seat calling Aunty Ange a fucking idiot. Ange kept swerving towards the stobie poles and pulling back at the last minute. I'm gonna make all of you stobie smear she was saying. I'd squeeze my eyes closed as we headed towards the circle of light, but then the car would spin and I thought I was gonna spew and I'd have to open them again. We were all screaming, including Aunty Ange, but hers would dissolve into a maniacal laugh. Fiona yelled out in her sleep, something that sounded like television and I said 'the adult's table is crazy' and then everyone was screaming adult's table, adult's table, adult's table and then, thank fuck, we were home.

I did spew. In the front yard, calling out, like Ben Crow's Mum. They all brought me in, Cherry under one arm, Emma under the other, Ange holding the door open. Then they dragged Fiona from the car inside and onto the couch, the one that Dizzy used to sleep on. Emma threw a quilt

over her, one without a cover that she'd found in the social security cupboard. Aunty Ange was walking through the house pretending to find Mum, oh here she isn't, oh hang on here she isn't. I was sitting at the dining room table drinking something. We put on the radio, Cruise late night juke box. Ange went crazy again, I can't listen to this shit for another second, she said and she got into her car and left. You could hear the bass from her car radio go off into the night. Last night.

Last night. Wow. I'm on the adult's table now, that's for sure. Emma sat having one last drink with me and Cherry. One last cone. Emma isn't her real name. Maybe she doesn't want you to know that she smokes hooch. She has a responsible job. Occupational Health and Safety something. Her partner is a teacher. Maybe I've told you too much already; you can easily work out who Mum's friends are. Why would you bother though, what difference would it make? Maybe I'll just leave out the smoking thing. Also the drink driving thing. Well, that was Aunty Ange and she's never really drunk.

I can't think. I keep losing my point. The point is: Emma told us how Ange was really upset when she found out that she had a different Dad to the rest of her brothers and sisters. It didn't mean anything, hadn't changed anything and Gen had been the only one to cry. Papa was already dead, it didn't make any difference. She'd always looked different. Ange got angry quicker now, it was her tough act. Every new hurt opened that one. You'll understand more when you get older Emma said, but I hope you don't really understand. I hope that you don't have to have the kinds of hurt that stay open forever and never really heal. I hope you don't have that.

When I get up and I go and hop into bed with Cherry, who had slept through, she remembers it differently. It was painful, she said, Emma kept repeating herself over and over. Aunty Ange was a straight up fuckwit; Fiona a regular pisspot, but the worst bit was at the end. She'd had to green out, on purpose, she said. Poor Aunty Ange, I said. Poor Aunty Ange! she said, you must be a fucking saint. She's just like my Mum, Cherry says, what about what she did to your bedroom? The manuscript. She's just like the rest of them. She's not, I say. We were all drunk, I say. We survived. I can pick up the paper in my room. I snuggled up to Captain who lay between us.

She's not.

They're all liars. All of them. The whole family. Nanna. Cherry's Mum and Aunty Jeannie. My Mum's a liar, yeah, but at least she's straight up about it. Not Aunty Ange though. She's the one that went and got the blood test. She asked the question and when it wasn't answered, she kept asking. She kept going. She pushed it to the very end, until she got the truth. Did she get that from her real Dad? What did she care about the truth? My Papa, the one she thought was her Dad, was already dead. She wanted the truth though, even if the truth was bad. It was the worst outcome. Her real Dad, if Nanna is to be believed, which as I said at the start, she isn't, they are all liars, is some other bloke. That's what she said, that's all she said. Mum's put that into her novel. That's what it'll be now.

Aunty Ange and my Mum were always quoting Nanna, I'm counting, she'd say whenever Ange tried to talk to her. She'd be knitting. I'm counting, I'm counting, Mum and Aunty Ange would say to each other. Mum said that Nanna was trying to ignore Aunty Ange and the truth and it worked for years. For years.

I remember my Mum telling me that her father was always pointing out traits in her and saying 'see that, you're definitely a Smart'. My Mum didn't know her grandparents, was never told about her great or great-great grandparents. Mum looks like Aunty Jeannie and Uncle Petey, it's true, but what else made her a Smart? The family history seemed to start with her Dad. She realised that her Dad was talking about Aunty Ange all along, he knew all along. When the truth came out, Mum told me that she understood that it hadn't been about being a Smart but that Papa had been trying to convince himself about her. That my Mum was his child. That she was a Smart. For years he'd done it, for almost her whole life.

Chapter One

Adelaide, Monday, November 7th 1938

Mondays were the worse and this was the worse yet. After a weekend where everyone was the same, watching the workers leave on a Monday morning was an exquisite torture which Margery would inflict upon herself. It was a kind of penance. A cuppa on her lap, a chair from the dining room pulled across to the lounge room for her to sit on, quiet, watching. The room's large window was hidden from the street by an ancient walnut tree. The low branches, covered in nuts at this time of the year, cast the front yard in shadow all day; long grass grew at the edges of sunlight in the small yard.

Margery watched the men walking; it was all men these days, shiny pants and frayed collars she could see from here. Many sported mending; she could recognise the stitches on a sleeve or the patch on an elbow. She couldn't see their eyes, the whites of their eyes Jack would say, but she could see that they were squinting against the morning sun. There were some working men too, overalls never cleaned, never mended and heavy boots. The suits always had the daintiest shoes, she felt like she could wear them herself. All of them, every last man, needed a haircut; hair curled over collars and the dirty undershirt of the working man just the same.

This was the first Monday her husband Jack hadn't been in the house when she sat down to watch the passing crowd. Last Monday, he'd still been in the house, he had been asleep as

usual, she'd thought. She had watched the parade, the march they called it, by herself.

Last Sunday. Jack had run out of booze. In the past they would have had a huge fight. So many fights. She'd tried stashing bottles all around the house, once in the cistern of the toilet, to tide him over on a Sunday but the flat was too small. It never seemed to work. Once she got Morag Winters from next door to keep a bottle at her place. He'd got sick and she'd gone over to get the flagon and Morag had already scooped half of it. Worse, every time after that, when he was drunk enough, Jack would bang on Morag's door asking for the other half a flagon. He'd done it again last week; he'd been up all night. Morag had called the police. They came but he was asleep by the time they got there; Margery said it must have been someone else, my husband works at the docks. Morag looked wild; she could see her spying on them through the crack of her door. Margery spoke low and used the manners the nun's had given her while Morag cussed and spat and tried to hold her shirt closed, it was missing a button and her bosoms were falling out. The police apologised to her; to Margery.

Afterwards, after the police had left, Margery went over to Morag's door. She knocked. Morag opened it, standing with her legs apart and her hands on her hips and her shirt hanging open, defiantly now. Margery slapped her across the face. She got Morag's lipstick smeared across the tips of her fingers.

"Don't bring them here," she said to Morag, "or I may kill you. In for a penny, in for a pound."

It was another of the nun's favourite sayings. They would use it to explain the punishment they gave you for the slightest mistake. Margery leant close, remembering another of the nun's lessons; she stared into Morag's eyes. In for a penny, in for a pound she said.

After Jack had slept it off, Margery reminded him about the card, about the dog licence, that he'd worked so hard to get, and how easily it could be lost. Their oldest boy was still on the mission. He had been so sorry and very scared. How easily it could have all been lost and what sacrifices they'd made and for what? For what? For the likes of Morag Winter to be able to bring it all down with one phone call. Her voice was angry, his contrite, but they both spoke quietly.

"You know, it was for us Margery and the kids. But us, really. You. It wasn't just so I could have a drink. I know you've said that but a man has to be treated equal. And his wife. I went off with the rest of them; I did my bit, ruined my lungs. You did yours too. You deserve everything those other wives get. I'm sick now, it's true. I can't work anymore".

He didn't talk about his legs. Never. Maybe he had never said so before, maybe he had and she had never heard him. Since his leg got busted.

"Don't worry," she'd said. "Nobody's working now".

Last Sunday. Later, after she'd gone out and come back, he took what she gave him, quietly. All the anger seemed to have left him, to have left both of them. His walking stick, which he would usually bang against the floor or the table to make a point, hung on the kitchen cupboard, the handle weighing down a stack of papers. A quiet day, she'd thought.

This week she was a widow. She tried to remember last Monday, when she had sat just like this, one hand holding up her chin and the other holding a cold cup of tea with worries that seemed to stack up on each other, every Monday. They could only get so much credit from the public house; they'd used it all up at the place on Leigh Street and Mrs Ware's, even if they were open on a Sunday, which they weren't. Jack knew their back doors. Margery would have gone out into the empty streets to get him what he needed; she would have knocked on those doors. In the last little while, at least. In time. Finally, in what turned out to be the final weeks of his life, when Jack asked, she had just got her hat and put her shoes on and headed out the door.

Walking into the city in comfortable shoes took about twenty minutes so she gave herself half an hour. The shoes were too big, always too big, so she stuffed wet newspaper into the toes; still the heels clapped against the footpath. Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap. There was never anyone on the streets in the city on a Sunday. She took her shoes off, carried them in one hand, slowed down. Tried to imagine a story for herself. She could walk just like this all day if she wanted to, that was the first story that was just for her. She was taking in the air, it was good for

her. She was from the country where they always went barefoot like the blackfellas. That's the story she'd say to anyone else.

She remembered a single day so long ago when she walked just like that. When she really had just come from the country. She would never have taken her shoes off then, not walking up the street, not in the city, not in a million years. She was imagining a story for herself then too, but back then it was going to be her life, the way she saw it. On that day, so long ago yet only ten years, on that day she saw a pelican. It had flown right under the King William Street Bridge; it was coming from the Port and landed in the water near her. It held her with one eye as it moved slowly across the water. It was a good sign, she thought. A sign her dreams would come true.

She thought about putting her shoes back on and looked around her but there was still nobody about. Taking her shoes off, walking barefoot on the warm footpath was helping her think. The old man back at home waiting for her to bring him something to ease the pain. There was nothing in the house, even the Metho was gone. She would get some medicine. She would put her shoes on in a little while, before she got to the chemist. In time. She did.

The shoes clopped and clapped across the shiny floor of the chemist's; the big one, on Hindley Street. She tried to shuffle, slide forward a little with each step, her toes clutching at the newspapers. It was *The Abo Call*, and she nearly laughed out loud, in the middle of the chemist.

Thinking about it now, looking out the window at the men walking to work, walking past her completely unaware, she laughed again. It sounded hollow though, in the empty house. In the chemist, it gave her a carefree look, she thought, it was authentic; the sigh of a busy wife and mother who was using this chore as a moment to herself.

We've got each other, he'd said and then the kids came along and she was no good at being a mother but he was ok but then came the poverty and the kids were lost, just as much as they themselves had been. They just slept in a different part of the girls' home. Poverty had made them all the same in so many ways but in important ways, he said, it's better if we're not black. It's better if the girls aren't in the black section of the girls' home. Better that they're not at Colebrook or back on the mission. It's better for the boys too, they've got apprenticeships.

When it came to him though, to getting picked for labour because that's all he could do, he couldn't catch a break; he was always at the end of the line. He was one of the old men now. Then the one time he did get to the front of the line, it was the day not to be.

"Hello, how can we help you?"

They stood higher than her, their hands rested on the counter while she used her elbows. She could see the pharmacist higher again, mixing potions behind them. She looked at the woman who asked the question and then at the other woman; were they both serving her? One woman, the one furthest from her turned away and started straightening boxes of ointment,

bringing them into a straight line to the front of the shelf.

"I need some cough medicine please," she said. "Your largest bottle".

The woman straightening the ointment looked back at her co-worker, their eyes met, one hard stare and then back to work.

"A large bottle?" She asked, "May I ask why? Why a large bottle?"

"I have four children and a husband at home with coughs and fevers."

"Mmm, well, I'll just have to....."

The women exchanged glances again and there were nods and small gestures towards the chemist above them.

"May I ask what the problem might be?"

A direct approach, that's what Margery had always practiced, it was what white women did; rich white women, at least.

"No, of course not, Mrs. It's just um, procedure."

"Procedure. Mmm."

She remembered how the nuns and the other ladies would repeat what you said as a kind of insult. They would do it to each other.

"It's just because there's no Sunday trading. You know, drinkers, looking for something."

"Drinkers? Sunday trading? What is this to do with me? I've got to get back to my family."

She looked at her wrist where a watch would be if she owned one. It was like a dance.

The pharmacist looked over his ledge at the three women. The two assistants started moving at once and in the wrong direction; they bounced against each other once and then again.

“Stop,” yelled the man from above them. “Both of you, just stop.”

“It’s just that you told us, sir, not to sell the cough medicine on a Sunday.”

“I never said that. I said don’t sell it to Old Gary the abo that comes in every Sunday. I didn’t say anything about not selling it to mothers.

“Sorry Mrs,” he said.

Margery nodded to the chemist from beneath her hat. She twisted her face up to him keeping the brim of the hat over one cheek.

“Well, that’s fine. I suppose,” she said. She had heard the phrase used many times. It was begrudging. Perfect for this dance.

She looked at her wrist, pulling her sleeve up a little and then again when they passed her the bottle in the brown paper.

“It’s just that I’ve been away for some time and the girls are sick as well and won’t appreciate having to look after their brothers but you know, the boys can’t afford to have a day off, who of

us can, these days?"

All of them stared at her. Had she said too much? They seemed transfixed. She tucked her hair under her hat and pulled the front rim down until it was almost covering her nose. She took the bottle squeezing the brown paper around its neck, around and around as if she was trying to open the bottle already. They stared. She looked down at the front of herself. She paused, should she put the bottle into her handbag while she was still in the chemist? They might see that it was empty; what do ladies have in their handbags? Perfume? She only had one perfume and it was in an enormous bottle that she would never lug around and besides it smelled horrible. They continued to stare.

"Well, what have we got here?"

It was the chemist's voice booming from above like a priest. Margery was frozen on the spot. She was only aware of the brown paper in her hands, the weight of the bottle inside the paper, the weight on her shoulder of the strap of her empty handbag. She clutched her toes into the wet newspaper and, without looking at any of them, turned away.

It was then that she saw that Gary was entering the shop. Gary Stuart, from the Stuart mob down at Point Pearce. It was him that the chemist and the two women were looking at, not her. Her hat felt itchy again, she longed to tuck her finger under the band and scratch. She took a

“What,” Gary said.

Margery slipped by him and out the door, clipping on the street pavers around the corner and onto North Terrace. She put the bottle of syrup into her handbag then. She could see a group of men, leaning against some wire fencing outside of a closed building site. They were waiting for Gary. None of them looked worse than Gary but she understood why they'd sent him. One man sat quietly near them, with them, a traditional man, his dark skin shone beside those of the others. A visitor. She had never seen such dark skin in the city; it drew all the light from the sand piled on the site behind him. Her eyes were drawn to him. Her shoe caught on the pavement and she stepped out of it. Her toenails were blue from the ink. She clutched her handbag to her and walked around and put her foot back into her shoe. None of them said a word to her and she kept her head down. Then she heard Gary's voice,

“Are you ok? Mrs?”

She walked home in fifteen minutes.

She thought about that traditional man now as the pale faces squinting in the sun walked past on the other side of the low brick wall with grass growing up against it. She thought about Gary not recognising her. It was like she had gone as far as she could. She had heard stories about Aboriginal people receiving a visit from an ancestor just before they died. Where had she heard

that? Was it the nuns? They didn't know and neither did she. She told them that her Dad was a ghost, visiting her at odd times, once at the base of Mount Remarkable when they were on a picnic, once near the creek near the bridge, a few times right at the gate of Coleman House. The nuns believed her that time.

Her husband was dead now, though, that was true.

For the whole hour of the morning, from seven until eight, sometimes longer, the stream of men moves towards the city. After nine, they start coming the other way, carrying the post, or milk or just heading home after failing to get work. Sometimes she would sit there until ten before she would get up, stiff, her feet dead, and her leg would have red spot from her elbow leaning.

He'd still be sleeping. He never seemed to wake until she went in to their room to wake him.

None of it seemed significant then. When she got home, he asked about the paper left on the counter, held the remaining shreds of *The Abo Call* up for her to see. She told him she had used it to keep her shoes on and he gave a sad laugh.

"I don't remember going to bed," he said.

"You were all right," she said.

He swigged the cough medicine, head tipped back for the first gulp, quick breaths through his nose, licking his lips over and over and then another long slug. She took her shoes off and hid her blackened toes beneath her skirt, sat on the couch. He made her a cuppa and poured some more of the syrup for himself into another teacup. He sipped sitting beside her. She noticed was that his hair was thinning, he was thinning; it was another day. Another Sunday.

"Sometimes it gets away from me love, that's all. I don't know why.

"It's Sunday anyway, nobody's working today. No-one, no matter what colour."

"We've got exemption," he said. "It doesn't matter what colour we are."

"That's just what I'm saying love, no-one's got work. Not us, not anyone."

"Not us? What does that mean? Who is us?"

"You know love, us."

"Your grandfather was German, my great-grandfather was white, and his family were English. Our mothers..." He stopped.

"And my father..."

"Your father? That old Abo that used to come around to see you. He wasn't your father. Your father was a white man, look at your hair. Look at your eyes. Green eyes."

“I called him father. He told me about my mother.”

Mother. It was the word they tried not to say. Not even about Margery, she was Mum, always Mum or ya Mum. But she'd said it. Mother. She had watched his Adam's apple move up his throat, up and up; she didn't think it was going to stop. He had been taken too. Who was his father? Perhaps he was a white fella; he didn't care as much because he could remember his mother. He had been eight years old when he had been taken, supposed to be for school, and he had clear memories of his mother. Margery had been brought to Coleman House as a baby; she couldn't remember any other life.

“He gave me you, didn't he?”

“Because I had exemption. My dog's as he called 'em. I knew he wasn't talking about my old girl Dizzy. It was because I was allowed to leave the mission. That's why. That's why he brought me to meet you. Because I could jump through hoops. I can't jump anymore. I can hardly walk.”

Neither of them knew about the strike or what they were fighting for on the docks at Port Adelaide. The two of them were poor but they had the kids with them back then and there was enough for them all. They kept their heads down. It's what you did; you could lose your exemption card and then you were back on the mission or worse, in the city slums. The worst of everything seemed to be saved for the Aboriginal. It really was their only concern, avoiding the protection of the Aboriginal protection board. They weren't scared of the unions; they were just

poor working people like them they figured, after all.

Afterwards, while he was still in hospital and it was all across the newspapers, Margery found out more. Port Adelaide was the centre of it, on the docks mainly but sometimes spilling into the streets, men looking for safer working conditions, better pay, standing at the gate, holding up trucks and stopping scab labour. Scab labour, that's what they were called, the poorest men in the city, the ones who would risk their lives for next to nothing. She read the newspaper to him, he was on a lot of pain killers, he called himself a scaborigine. She hushed him, from habit, but they laughed. Two months he was in hospital, she lost the flat; the girls went in to the Salvation Army home. She was in a hostel herself. The boys were staying at their boss's place, in a shed out the back.

Nearly two years ago and now he was dead. As dead as the other men who were killed on that day.

He had left so early that morning; he caught the tram down to the Port. They had relatives living there, not that they ever saw them, of course, against exemption rules, but he thought he might see an aunt or an uncle a cousin from the mission or further afield. Maybe say hello, get some news real quick. Maybe they'd heard from his brother. He wouldn't ask but they'd tell him, in their way, how he was. His brother; the only one left now.

But there were none of the Port mob to be seen. There were places he'd been to, when he first came to the city, places for Aboriginal people to check in, official and non-official. All the doors were closed and the curtains drawn. Were there eyes on him, watching him as he walked past? Had the curtains just closed? On one corner, he smelt a cigarette but when he looked up the street all he could see were a wind bent Lilly Pilly. All the trees in the area were leaning away from water and the noise coming from the grey sheds on the docks. There had been rain and the puddles on the sidewalk reflected the clouds and the grey that seemed to be everywhere.

As he got nearer to the docks, he could see some other men, walking in the same direction as him, white faces mostly, some darker. Dirty, they looked. As grey as the sheds. The noise got louder as they got closer, it was machinery, something was grinding. Or it could be the ocean. Underneath the grinding of the machinery or the water was another noise, men's voices, angry, yelling arguing or agreeing. At once he could smell the ocean, the brine mixing with the oil, the smoke in the air, the seaweed drying on the shore.

There were other men ahead, men who weren't walking. He could smell himself, sweat coming through sweet soap. They all kept walking, him, the other greys, even when he could see that the men that weren't moving were waiting for them. He could see it in their eyes. They looked him up and down and not to see if he could work, to see if how much his back could take, like the other bosses would do. They sized him up.

He'd never been a fighter, even with his brother. They would play chasey all hours of the night and day. Tag, you're it. You're it. No, you're it. He was master of the quick return and the long run but his brother was the fast one. You had to be strategic to catch him, none of the other kids on the mission could, none of the adults either; sometimes they'd come outside with the kids and have a go. His brother could dodge and weave like a kangaroo; he seemed to bounce. I am a kangaroo he'd say and the other kids would laugh because he was so serious. You had to get him into a corner or around a tree to have any hope. He knew how to do that but they didn't fight. They were terrified of being separated and they weren't made that way anyway, all arms and legs the both of them. They ended up being separated anyway.

He was a clever boy, they said.

Not clever enough, not that day at the Port. Didn't know to avoid a fight with men who held ideals that gave strength and purpose to their kicks and to the iron poles they held that they had taken from the machinery they protected. They went for his legs. He hadn't even got the job yet, he wasn't ready. One held him under his arms and two others went for his legs, then they dropped him and he saw them move onto another man. His legs. He wished that he had been kicked in the head. He used his hands, his long arms, to drag his shattered legs away from the fighting. He must have looked pathetic because when the union thugs, as the newspaper called them, ran out of able bodied men to beat on, they returned to beat the already beaten men, but they ignored him.

He was a clever boy, they said but what they really meant was clever for an Abo. His brother was smarter than him, even though he was younger, everyone knew that; he knew everyone, where everyone was from. Sometimes, even when they didn't know where they were from, he could put it all together. He knew all about bush tucker, could catch a goanna and was always finding the rock that hid the lizard. He could hide. When they came to take Jack to Colebrook, his brother had hidden him, in the tiny yard behind the Big Boss's house, where his dog was tied up, in there up on top of the shed behind some boxes.

They found him.

He could read; they found him reading to the other kids. He was the oldest of that lot, that's why he read. They could all read, more or less. There weren't that many books. They convinced Jack's mother, they said he'd be back and that rich white fellas sent their kids off to school too but he never got to come back and they did. It was different. Then his mother was gone and his brother was angry with him. His brother had been on the country and had grown darker and harder. His brother tapped him and made to run off, a game of chasey but he stopped just as quickly before he'd even had a chance to react, to try and chase him, he didn't think he would. They seemed too different, not brothers anymore. It wasn't like that for the white kids. The white kids didn't lose their mother and their brother.

Still, they hung together as best they could, no longer arms around each other's shoulders. He spotted Margery in town before she ever saw him, he asked after her and his brother introduced him to Margery's Uncle, stood up for him and helped him win his future wife and then he was off, north. He was never to see him again as it turned out even though they were both fighting in France at the same time; his brother had stayed away. Maybe he had an exemption card too; rules were pretty strict about congregating.

He'd survived all that just to lose his legs in Port Adelaide, on what would have been his Great Grandmother's land, his own land, at the hands of white men. As he dragged himself from the scene of the fight, he could smell his own blood on him and he could hear the shrieks of men in pain and men grunting and thuds of fists and bodies falling; his Grandfather's stories come to life.

They'd moved into this flat after he got out of hospital; ground floor. He'd never worked again. Margery would never see her husband walking into the city with the other men, ducking his head under the low branches of the walnut tree and giving her a whistle goodbye. That was only in her imagination.

The children had come back to the flat after the funeral but no one else. Who else was there? His army mates came together to the church and then left, shyly nodding to her and shaking hands with the boys. They'd gone to the Returned Servicemen's' Club out on Prospect Road and

invited her but her husband had never gone there even after he got exemption; it was his one rebellious act back then, after he'd first got back from the war. He was good enough to fight but not good enough to drink alongside his fellow soldiers?

After the strike though, the unfairness of it all ate away at him; it wasn't just the drink. His dodgy mates from the pub, who wouldn't even know he'd died for weeks, were always making references to him being tarred, why you're as brown as a boong they'd say. He'd wear it too, laugh, and make a joke about Abos himself. After the strike though, he wouldn't hear it. He'd walk away at first but then he started on them, you're a no good drunk/slacker/wife basher yourself, he'd say. Hey, hey, hey there, they'd call but he'd be dark from then on and he'd have to leave; go home. He was tarred, he thought, not the way they meant it, that he had black in him, which, after all, was true but that he had made the wrong choice to deny it in the first place and that had made him weak and that was what had put him in the way of those men, all those men, and their ideas.

He believed them that colour made a difference. He was lighter, he could get on, he thought, maybe he was better too. He was a half-caste. The virtues of both races, he had heard someone say, somewhere, once. Back when he was boy. It was said as a kind of joke. One of those jokes he was always hearing that weren't funny at all, were just plain truth and yet everyone, everyone except him, laughed. He was both but it seemed to him that he was destined to not be either.

One of unionists, not any of the ones that went to jail, one of the others who had been there on the day of the strike and had only hit one man with a brick and then stopped, a man named Robert, Rob he called himself, had brought *The Abo Call* to the house for him to read.

Margery had opened the door and the man was standing outside the door. He held his hat in his hands, he was wringing it and he had his head bent so far forward she couldn't see his mouth. She could see the shine of his scalp underneath his thin hair. He mumbled something about her husband which she couldn't hear and she bent her back to try and look up at his face. He looked away. He looked up when her husband came to the door and she saw him wince at the stick and the thin leg next to it and look down again.

"I've come to apologise, I know you were there, you left the hospital." Robert started before Jack held his hand up.

"Please stop," he said. His knuckles on the hand that held the walking stick were white and his arm had started to shake.

"I know you are in need too."

"You don't know anything."

"But I do," Robert said and tried to give Jack a copy of *The Abo Call*, right there on the doorstep.

It was winter and the walnut tree had no leaves on it; Jack had been out of work for over a year, nearly a year and a half. He saw the word Abo on at the top of the paper and the idea of moving again, further out, again, Jack pulled up his stick, moved it one pace backwards, lifted his bung leg back and then he slammed the door. Robert started pushing the paper underneath the door. Margery who could see her husband struggling called out, half scream,

“Haven’t you got enough?”

At that, Jack, keen to keep quiet, held onto his wife and opened the door, pulled Robert inside and closed it. They all stood looking at each other in the small room. Jack was sweating.

He sat down and Robert kept standing for a moment, looking at Margery and Jack. He introduced himself again,

“Robert, Robert Chapman, but call me Rob,” and then sat on the chair nearest to Jack.

Margery stood with her hands held tight in front of her. Jack lifted his chin and then tilted towards the kitchen, meaning make us a cuppa woman, but she stood still, holding her hands. He gave her another look, more of a tilt this time and she flew into the kitchen and banged the old kettle onto the stove.

"Before you say anything more, Robert."

"It's Rob, remember," Margery called from the kitchen.

"I mean Rob," Jack coughed, he liked Margery's way but he was too scared to laugh. He tried not to look at the papers that Rob held on his knees, at the word Abo.

"Before you say anything Rob, I talked to the fellas the Union sent and I took the money they offered and now we've got this place and we can pay our rent and we don't want anything more. My wife and I, we prefer to stay out of politics, to stay out of it. We are very quiet people."

Jack raised his eyebrows and tightened his lips in a way that only Margery could understand meant the end of the conversation; it had been just the two of them for a long time.

"I'm not here purely as a union representative but rather as an Australian who is appalled at the awful plight of dark people in Australia."

"Ok, ok Rob. I think you might be mistaken."

"I am looking at you right now and you are clearly an Aboriginal man."

"My skin is hardly darker than yours."

"And your wife, too, is clearly an Aboriginal. You were in the Aboriginal section of the hospital.

"Only at first, when I was unconscious. When my wife got there, she was able to show them the documentation required and I was subsequently moved to another ward where I was..."

"I think I understand. You have exemption, is that right?"

Nobody said anything.

"We have tea," said Margery. "My husband fought in the war, you know."

Margery poured their tea; she put milk and sugar in the three tea cups on the tray and passed one each to Jack and Robert. Robert had to put his papers on the floor to hold his cup and his saucer. For a while it was just the three of them sitting enjoying their tea, like anyone, like they were friends. Like they could understand each other. It was quiet, but not uncomfortable. Someone would say something and nothing would be said for a while and then someone else would say something.

"Both my uncles fought in the war. My Dad was too young."

"I remember enlisting. Wasn't old enough. Didn't care."

"Hard work it was, for us women too. But that never killed no-one, I suppose."

"They say there might be another war."

"It won't be ours. Too old now for that now."

"Our boys though."

Margery and Jack looked at each other, sharing an imagining worse than what they had endured, had suffered, the indignities, only for their sons to be taken off to war again.

“Send ‘em back. Up to Flinders. Hide ‘em. You know where Jack. Where we said we were gonna hide that time ...” Margery stopped. Jack and Margery looked at Robert, who had stopped drinking his tea.

“I’m imposing,” Robert said, at last.

He put his half empty tea cup down on the table and picked up the papers that had been at his feet. He pushed the papers into Jack’s free hand. Jack looked at them without saying a word, his mouth tight.

“A comrade, in New South Wales, is responsible for distributing it. I get a copy every month. I’d be happy to bring it over for you and...” he looked at Margery, “...your wife. You can read, right?”

“I told you, I’m not an Abo. Now, if you must be on your way ah, Rob, you’ll excuse me if I don’t get up.”

Jack waved the papers which he held in his hand towards his bung leg forcing Robert to look again. There was a register of pain on the union man’s face; he was the one sweating now. He

let himself out the door. They heard him greeting Morag, Jack got up then and went to the bedroom and Margery watched Robert walk under the lowest branch of the walnut tree and out into the street where he became just another face pointed towards the city.

“The awful plight of the dark people of Australia,” Jack read aloud to Margery.

“That’s where Rob got it from,” she said.

They were laughing at the start, especially at the ever earnest Robert who Margery insisted on calling Rob, as if he was her best friend. It was nervous laughter though, even when they first read *The Abo Call*, Jack kept his voice low and afterwards always made sure to hide the rag at the bottom of the cupboard with the shoes. It could have been them. One woman, he read, a Mrs Hills, argued that Aboriginal people would be so much better off with citizenship. Citizenship? It was another word like Exemption. How much did any of these words mean? How could they mean so much? Jack would read until they struck an article which stopped them laughing and then Margery would pluck the paper from his hands and it would quickly be put as far away from them as the world it represented.

One of the first stories that stopped them was an outline of the worst of the threats to Aboriginal people, they called it that in writing; the Aboriginal Protection Board, the white missionaries and liquor.

“In that order,” Jack said. It was in that order for him: the Aboriginal Protection Board took him

away from his mother and the white missionaries took him even further away than that; the drink was taking away what was left of him.

He got up, unsteady and leaning heavily on his stick and poured himself a drink from the bottom of the flagon. Margery whisked the paper away that time.

Another time it was Margery reading to Jack.

“Here’s one; a ripper. I wish my mother had strangled me at birth, it reads. She says she was brought up refined only to find that no civilised people wanted her except in a way that was intolerable.”

“The sisters were big on refinement, that’s for sure,” she said before going quiet. Jack, who had his own memories of the sisters and the way they enforced their rules, took the newspaper and folded it as many times as he could and shoved it as far back in the cupboard as it would go.

For half the year, half of the last year of his life as it turned out, every month of it, the letter box would be filled with *The Abo Call*. The return address was Union House on Pirie Street in the city. Jack thought of Robert as another white missionary and told Margery as much, wished he could tell Robert, but that would be an admission. The last copy came the week before he died. Did it kill him?

Every month, around the third Monday, Jack would start looking over Margery's shoulder in the morning, looking out the window with her, disturbing her thoughts, leaning over her and knocking her and spilling her tea. He was waiting for the post. He was terrified that someone would see *The Abo Call* in his letterbox. Jack wasn't even sure that he was allowed to read it, if it contravened the rules of his exemption. He would pounce as soon as the postie's back tyre was out of sight. He would walk through the house, the fast walk he did, a little hop on his good leg at each step, carrying the paper in front of him and hide it straight away. He would only read it late at night, when he was sure they would be alone. They were both deathly afraid that the children would find it.

"We are called a dying race," he read to Margery, "but we do not intend to die."

Reading *The Abo Call* broke Jack's heart, pulled it two ways until it broke. He could walk with his broken legs but he couldn't live with a broken heart. That was how it seemed to Margery.

His Grandfather had told him a story once that his own Grandfather had told him of how they had survived the white man's coming to their land, they had stayed hidden. They knew how to walk on their land, to stay down among the blue grasses and look out from the sedges, to stand tall and move swiftly between the Mallee and hop among the rockiest parts of their land like the yellow-footed wallaby. The white man never saw them. Maybe that's how Jack felt he had lived with the white man, he'd used his exemption card, and he had stayed hidden.

That's what he'd done and that's how he'd survived but he only had that one story now, his childhood was so woolly and he'd filled it with his mother's touch. That one link with the past, so much lost, his mother, his brother, he had to hide, that one link, the story of the yellow-footed wallaby, one small story that he had from his Grandfather; it would never be told again.

The girls, his daughters, wrote to him, even though the flat was only on the other side of town. It was tricky for them to get spare time from the sisters at the girl's home and they had their own lives now, it was natural and with his drinking. He knew it was his drinking; Margery would dissuade them from visiting. He knew. They wrote to him about their friends, places in the city they would visit, the swimming pool, the beach. He imagined them, looking out through their dark eyes, their mother's eyes, at all of the sights. He could see so much of their mother in them.

He knew Margery's people were from the south, the coast. He told her she was like a pelican, gliding above them all. She would scoff at him; she didn't have a story, not even one. Her father, who was an uncle, would visit her but he never got to tell her any stories. He would mostly watch her from a distance when he came up for other business. Every few years. One time he spoke to her he told her that her mother had died and she cried that night even though she couldn't remember her mother, because she didn't remember her mother. Because she didn't have a story.

Jack knew she needed a story, he gave her a story, the story of the pelican. When he first came to the city, before he brought her here, he'd sit on the jetty at Semaphore on his day off, watch the pelicans, he'd think of her. You'd see them, watching the fishermen then getting all the fish. They would walk right up to the fisherman while they were still swallowing their catch and wait. They seemed to be one of the fishermen. In a way they hid as well. They'd watch and learn and they were braver than him, these birds. You could see that they considered themselves the equals of the fishermen whatever nature, or whatever it is that sets the order of things, had deemed them.

Margery was like the pelican; he told her and described it to her in the way that his grandfather had described it to him. They had their stories and they had each other.

The girls were like their mother but they weren't acting like they were as good as white people, they were white people. They didn't have to act. They still had to watch and learn, because they were poor and because everyone does. The boys didn't have to hide, they were comfortable amongst the other men on the building sites, and the young one had a bit of a mouth on him even. Both the boys worked hard at the hardest sites. He knew they would join up if they were old enough and a war started. They would join up as white men. Not even an exemption card for them.

He couldn't save them.

The children came back to the flat after Jack's funeral. It was the first time they had all been together there. They were too big. The older girl had moved out of the home and had dyed her hair blonde and was wearing it short in the latest style. Margery thought she looked like a young version of Morag; it was what Morag was trying on. She wouldn't sit down but stood holding her tea cup and saucer near the front door with her handbag at her feet, ready to leave. Her face was streaked; both the girls had swollen red eyes. The younger girl wore a blue dress in the latest style, she was thin; she looked pretty. She had a boyfriend but she hadn't brought him. Margery wondered if she was pregnant yet.

"Ignorant," she could hear the youngest brother saying.

The older sister's voice came up over the others.

"Think of our mum please."

Margery didn't say anything or give any sign of hearing any of it. She was in the kitchen, filling the kettle up with cold water and waiting and watching it while it came to the boil. She could hear her children's voices in the next room. Their conversation sounded so loud after months of her and Jack; they had been getting quieter and quieter. She was thinking about her son Jo.

When she had all the kids together, that was when she thought most of Jo. If one or another came by, which they rarely did now, she could imagine that Jo was somewhere with the one of the others. When they were all with her, together like they were today, like they were mostly when they were young, she could only think of Jo, still on the mission. What was he doing? Was he missing her? Was he being treated badly by the white fellas up there? Was he being worked too hard?

She couldn't enjoy food, when they were all together; was Jo hungry? She never ate with the children when they still lived at home. She drank tea after the funeral; she drank it all that day, even when her head was falling forward from the weight of a head ache. The sandwiches she'd made were going dry. She brought the pot to the small table in the lounge room and poured them all another cup.

"I watch the clock at the office," said the older girl, quickly. "I can't wait to leave."

"Yeah, well, we know what he likes," said the older brother, nodding towards his brother in a way that reminded Margery of Jack. "He likes the beers the boss puts on, doesn't he?"

"And what, you are gonna try and tell me an Abo doesn't like beers?"

Margery noticed the older boy and girl exchange a look. The older girl shook her head, ever so slightly and then looked down at the floor. When her older brother spoke, she looked up, surprised that he had disobeyed her. The two of them reminded her of her and Jack. Margery

wondered if her children somehow knew the truth after all and for a moment she was glad Jack wasn't around.

"Well, why would someone stay when the work was finished?" Margery asked. "I never understood that about other people."

"He's talking about Sam, Mum, a bloke at work" the older boy said. "He's Afghan. Been here longer than us, probably." There was another look between older two.

"I have to stay at the Millers' until they're good and ready for me to leave," said the younger girl, truly innocent. "No good me watching the clock, I am just like an Abo; I'm at Mrs Millers' whim"

The children continued to complain about their deprivations. Margery tutted almost along with them; she would tut at an odd pause and the four of them would look at her and then at each other.

"Are you all right Mum?" the youngest girl asked.

"Yes it's terrible isn't it?" Margery answered.

"Pardon, Mum. Are you ok?" the oldest boy asked, but Margery was thinking of her eldest, Jo.

“Yes, yes. Don’t make a fuss,” she said. “My husband just got buried. I’m likely to be a bit absent minded, aren’t I?”

“Ok, Mum. I’m just saying because we are leaving now. Mary has to be back before it gets dark.”

“Your father was always scared of the dark, no matter how old he got. Can you inherit a trait like that?”

The children exchanged looks again, above their mother’s head, but she still saw it. Margery was thinking of Jo and the dark nights in the ranges and the way the trees would come alive in the night time, the stars always so clear, the nights filled with shadows. Was Jo scared of the dark?

“Good bye then, all of you.”

The boys, men now really, stood up and moved out as directed.

“You sure you don’t need us to do anything for you Mum?”

“No, no. I’ll be fine. I’ll be fine. I just want to be... left alone. No fussing.”

Margery spotted Morag in the window and pointed her chin at her. Morag hung her head, closed her curtains.

They moved out of the house, jostling as each leaned down to kiss their mother who seemed to them to be disappearing. Like visiting their old school ground, they were surprised to see how

small she had grown. Their mother was already looking past them. Her hands herded them under the walnut tree; a low branch caught the shoulder of his jumper and the youngest boy screamed. His sisters both ducked and started to run, pushing into the back of their oldest brother. It was only moments before they were all laughing.

Still, when they looked back, their mother had already gone inside.

It was all over and done with, all in one week. As she sat at the window, watching the eyeless crowds pass on the other side of the walnut tree, the rhythm of their gaits, she thought about how time passed, always walking, walking, walking and then suddenly, you're running. You're ahead. Or you can't walk anymore. Then what happens to time? The thought made Margery shiver and she looked behind her into the empty sitting room and beyond that to the empty kitchen. There was nothing, not even an echo.

All the time, she thought, she had always thought, nothing changed. Jack, he was the one for change. He thought just by imagining it, you could make it so. Don't want to live on the mission? Don't want to answer to no man? Don't want to be a blackfella? She couldn't imagine, but he made it happen. As the widow of a man with an exemption card, she was exempted now, forever. She never had to think about being a blackfella ever again. She was safe. Her name at the top of the new Housing Trust list. In for a penny, in for a pound she'd told Morag once and it was how they had done it. It was how it was. She had a small war widow's pension that was

plenty for her; Jack's last wish.

It wasn't the war though that had killed him, after all, it was *The Abo Call*. Reading it, he still had the shame of not working, of his drinking, but now he had regret. It was the gnawing of that that finished his belly, thinking that perhaps he could have been an Aboriginal man, lived as an Aboriginal man and still been a man after all; if only he had waited. Here it was! He was reading it in black and white, on paper, arguments that white men and women could read, that couldn't be mucked around with, that given the same opportunities as a white man, a black man would achieve the same as him. Words that couldn't be twisted to hide that in Australia, a man was still judged by the colour of his skin. That's why Jack had got away with it. He knew though, he knew that even if his skin was pale, even if his hair was straight or his eyes blue, even if he wore the same clothes as them, if he wore clothes, he was Aboriginal. He was Adnyamanthya. Perhaps he could have been that, if he had waited.

Margery couldn't imagine it. What difference were words on a page? 'We have been forgotten in their march to nationhood' she read to him from *The Abo Call*. What a march it was, look at them marching past her front door now. All they did, they went around in circles. It was going to be a long time before anything changed in this country. She didn't say this to him, to Jack, because he had imagined unlikely things in the past and had been proved right. She wanted to believe him that it could be different, at least while he was alive. Even though the thought that he had made the wrong choice was eating his insides, she never said to him that it couldn't have been any other way. She never said that.

We survived didn't we? She'd said it often enough. But he hadn't.

The day after the funeral in the new Centennial Park was a Friday, the last day of the working week. In the middle of the day, Margery realised that it was *The Abo Call* that had killed her husband. She had lay across her bed all morning crying for her husband, crying for Jack.

The war, the unionists, it was one unionist, Robert, who had come here and forced his pity on them. They weren't playing, her and her husband, they had stepped off and one way or another, he had made them step back on. Margery stepped into her shoes, one last time. It was a Friday afternoon, the only day in Adelaide where there might be a range of people out and about and she could hide amongst them. She made the walk in twenty minutes, straight to John Martins, and bought herself a new pair of shoes.

Once she got outside John Martins and walked a little way down the next narrow lane, Margery took her old shoes off and put her new shoes on. She pushed her hands into the old shoes and like she was digging dirt, using her cupped fingers, she dragged the softened paper out of each toe. She took the new shoes out and put the mushy pieces of *The Abo Call* into the empty box. She faced the empty shoes towards the wall of the building she was leaning against. She wished the next owner longer feet.

Her walk from Rundle Street to Pirie Street was the smoothest and quickest of her life. Each step landed exactly where she expected it to land. When she lifted her foot, it sprang into the air, the shoe snug on the back and her toes stretched and relaxed up front. The sight of herself in a full length shop window at the end of the lane, her small shoes, her thin ankles, her long skirt, her face hidden by her hat tilted elegantly made her think she could be anyone. It made her think that anyone could be anyone. Her empty purse wouldn't hold her handbag straight on her narrow shoulder so she held her arm against her side to stop it flying around. She looked like a woman with a purpose.

The front door of Union House was made of dark wood with one handle above a small keyhole. Margery knocked but the wood seemed to absorb the sound. She tested the handle, it was open, shamelessly she pushed the door and walked on in. She was in a narrow hall with glassed offices, opaque, running along either side. She could hear typewriters and low voices rising into the open spaces above the offices; she could see cigarette smoke gathering under the high ceiling.

She stood firm in her shoes,

"Excuse me, I'm looking for Robert Chapman. He is connected with the Transport union I believe."

The typewriting and the voices seem to have stopped.

"Robert, you there?" came a voice behind one of the doors.

“Yes, yes, I’m here, I’m coming.”

A door set in opaque glass opened halfway down the hall and Robert leant the top half of his body out of the door. His feet didn’t leave his office until he saw that it was Margery but then he leapt into the hallway, walked to greet her. Up the hall, three long steps, he held out his hand to shake hers but she kept hold of her handbag.

“I trust you have received.....” Robert didn’t finish his sentence. He waited for Margery to talk. He seemed to have learnt something.

“My husband is dead Robert.”

“Jack? But I only just saw him. It wasn’t but a few months ago. Was it?”

“He’s dead Robert,” Margery interrupted. “It’s why I’m here.”

“Jack was compensated already, wasn’t he? I thought he said. Papers were signed.”

“It’s something else. Can we speak privately?”

They both looked to the space above the offices, the typewriters and murmuring had returned. Robert walked sideways, one arm held forward, one arm behind her back but not touching her, five or six small steps, to his cubicle. He pointed to the chair next to his desk and Margery sat down as he closed the door. She sat down and put the empty shoe box on her lap.

“Did you receive the packages I sent?”

“My husband and I were quite clear that we didn’t want to be part of your redemption. We are just ordinary...”

She stopped; swallowed.

“We were just ordinary people.”

Robert had sat at his desk, he had sat straight, straightened his desk, got ready to take notes but now he held his pen in mid-air. He suddenly thought of his Da, how much he had missed home no matter how well he’d done in Australia. How his Ma had followed him and never complained, that was her motto, and what good would it do? He had grown up to be the one complaining. He would change things. They didn’t understand but they would raise their glasses to him, celebrate his successes with him, but then they would keep drinking for other reasons. It killed them. But this? This was worse than being Irish.

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want that. I want a train ticket, north.”

“Um, I don’t have...”

“I don’t want your money Robert; I want you to organise a ticket for me. The Transport Union give one ticket per year to each man.”

“Your husband wasn’t a member of the union.”

“But my son is. Or at least he could be. You could sign him up, right now.”

“Aboriginal people aren’t allowed to join the union; it’s open to Australian citizens only.”

Robert’s face was going red with each word that came out of his own mouth.

“I already told you, Robert, Jack and I have exemption. Obviously our son would have exemption. Therefore he is white.”

“It wouldn’t be worth the paper it was written on.”

“The paper? It’s written on? Yes, it would Robert. It would. That’s it. Even a train ticket. As long as it’s written; it’s the truth. What is ever worth the paper it’s written on, Robert? What is ever worth it?”

This was the worst Monday yet. There’d been others, days when she felt that everything was lost, or soon would be, but she had Jack then. Margery felt like she would never be inside life again, she would always be watching life, like this, watching the squinting crowds pass by knowing that they saw nothing.

Jack’s wallabies. She would make sure she saw one. She could go anywhere now; she’d find their hiding places. She might have to go far to do it and she wasn’t rock footed, not like him.

She looked down at her shoes for the hundredth time; at least she had the means.

She was a pelican, Jack had said. It was a story that he'd given her when she'd lost her own. She would fly then. She would follow the rivers. Eventually she would reach the ocean.

First, though, she would go and visit Jo up north. She was ready, she had the train ticket. She had Jo's union card. Maybe it would make a difference; maybe nothing would make a difference. She would see her son though. That's all she wanted.

Margery left the tea cup on the window sill. As she pulled the door shut behind her birds lifted off from the walnut tree and landed again in the top branches; she crunched the empty walnut shells beneath her shoes. She stepped over the long grass and then she was in the sunlight marching along with the rest of them.

The Last Chapter

Port Noarlunga, Friday 12th October, 1999

Well, now you know. They put it on the news. Writer, Genevieve Smart reported missing five days ago. Malcolm and Uncle Peter and Uncle John were standing with the Detective in front of an SA Police banner.

We just want to know you're ok Gen, Uncle Peter said directly to the camera.

Her mother and sisters and daughter are all very worried, said Malcolm.

Bullshit, said Cherry. We were back in Mum's bed, watching the telly.

I am worried, I said.

Yeah, but they're not. I mean, Uncle Peter, where's he been? Where's my Mum and Auntie Jeannie? Why Malcolm? Since when did he become the head of this family?

Well, if Mum's watching a telly, maybe seeing Malcolm talking about her and about me! It would be enough to bring her out of hiding.

Or keep her in hiding. Do you think she is? Hiding? Hey, do you think she's hiding in the Flinders Ranges? Because of her book?

Maybe that's what you think. I'm trying to get used to not knowing. I'm only young I don't think I'm supposed to understand everything. I don't understand why my Mum would disappear and not tell me. Not take me with her. She knows me. She knows I wouldn't have cared if she had to go. I wouldn't have cared if she needed a break. But not to tell me? Not to leave a note? It does something to you, not to know, not to understand; you imagine the worst and then you don't want to think at all. Just be. But then time, I don't know, it hangs or it pushes you or something.

Even at the beach. I tried again today, to go down to the beach, forget everything, walk on the sand along the waters' edge, climb up along the bottom of the cliff if the tide's in, just walk as far as I could. Walk until my body was as exhausted as my mind. But the tide was in. In a cave just above the water line, the one I'd walked past and into the water last time I was here, I saw a shadow.

Was it possible that my Mum was in that cave? Has she been here since last week? How did I miss her? I'm near the bottom of the stairs, I've walked just around the first part of the cliff when I see the shadow. It looks like a head, like hair and wide shoulders. I start running. I jump over the stony beach, missing the soft clumps of seaweed and the softest sand. It's, I don't know, five hundred metres to the cave; about half way, I stop. I can't breathe. I bend over, put my hands on my knees. I can see my tears falling, plop, into the sand, like the prints of a tiny creature. I didn't even know I was crying. When I stand up straight again, look up the beach towards the cave, the shadow's gone. I keep walking towards it anyway. What else am I gonna do?

Mum's described all the beaches from here to Second Valley in her stories. I have more than stories though, I have memories. Memories of my Mum.

I can see her shoulders walking into the surf; her Keirens we'd call them, her shoulders. Her Keiren Perkins. She would bend one Keiren down as the biggest waves crashed on her, taking them on, she could hold her breath forever. Long Plunge champion in high school. She always wore goggles and she always knew where she was. She would jump and dive into the smaller waves before catching the next big one, body surfing it back to the shore. She was a perfect match for Southport Beach.

Port Noarlunga; she could swim to the reef from the shore but didn't swim on the other side of the reef. She didn't like to swim in the shadows under the jetty. We'd seen a whale inside the reef once, with her baby, in the winter of 1993. Mum had taken me down to the beach and we'd sat on the sand watching their backs in the dark water while the jetty filled with people. I don't know how she knew it was there. She didn't jump like to jump off the jetty, but she went with her friends when they went for their annual jump. She could free swim to the anchor when the tide was low. She didn't swim through the reef; she never tried, even though Emu had shown her where the tunnel was. She never swam on the deep side of the reef.

She didn't swim at Christies Beach, the sand was too pebbly. She only went to that beach to

people watch and to walk around the cliffs to Port Noarlunga, for a swim. She swam at Moana, held up her overdue rates notices and drove the car on, played the car stereo and hung sheets between the cars for shade. She liked the small, neat waves in sets of three. We would stay all day and into the night. Someone would make the long walk back to the kiosk for hot chips. You might even move the cars back towards the sand dunes and stay later.

We never went in the dunes at Moana. It's a sacred place. People go there if they want a baby and can't get pregnant. None of us went, thank you very much. I certainly didn't. Not that I'm even thinking about being pregnant, because I'm not. I'm not even due yet. Everyone in the south knows about this by the way. It's not secret business. Me knowing it doesn't mean we are Aboriginal. Look at me; I'm probably lighter than you.

Ok, ok. I mean, I get it; I know that colour is not the point.

We would head down to Aldinga and Port Willunga, sometimes Silver Sands, a couple of times each summer just like people from the city, set up for a proper visit, with a tent and a cricket set and our thongs holding down our towels when the wind came up in the afternoon. Second Valley was for holidays. Camping under the pine trees and among the pine needles. Kids riding their bikes. Me, when I was a kid. Mum and me, we'd slide down the grassy hills surrounding the camp site on pieces of cardboard. The water was too fucking cold Mum said, penguins swim in it.

Mum wouldn't swim at any of the suburban beaches, as if there was some kind of class system even in the ocean. Never went to Glenelg – 'everyone is either too young or too old' she said once and another time, referring the Patawalonga River, 'I don't want to swim in rich people's shit'. That cancelled out most of the beaches in Adelaide. She liked the Fleurieu, she had the rhythm of the surf, she knew shape of the sand under the waves. She liked working class people's shit?

There were places on the Fleurieu Mum wouldn't swim: Boomers, Petrel Cover, Waitpinga – around Encounter Bay. You couldn't get in or out of the water without getting smashed. Every wave was a Mr Melville wave, she said. Long story, forget that. Lots of surfers as well. Boards. Every wave a battle of wills. Their sense of entitlement; where do you get that? Who owns a fucking wave? The one with the biggest board? Not the body surfer, that's for sure.

Encounter Bay. Flinders and Baudin. Like about Moana, everyone knows the story, of the two of them divvying up someone else's back yard. You don't have to be Aboriginal. How else do you look at it?

This is what you get from smoking dope, I suppose you'd say. Seeing things, fucking thinking things. Saying fucken all the time. You're probably right. I'm gonna stick to the booze now I'm legal, nearly. Also, if the cops come around, which they might if they get any response to the

news this morning, I'll freak out. I'll have a heart attack like Cherry was when I got home the other day with Beardsy. I'm having one now just thinking about it. I don't know how Cherry does it. Or Mum...does it.

Also, I'm going back to Taf on Monday. Not that that's anything to do with you or that you'd care. I mean it though; no more days off.

Anyway, I got up to the cave, the one I thought Mum was in, and I climbed into it. It stank of fox's piss. There wasn't even a shadow when you got up close, nothing, no outline, no rocks or plants or a stream of darker earth in the shape of a person. It wasn't too far-fetched to think that someone could hide here though. I sat there, inside the cave, for a while. I thought about Mum's story. I tried to imagine that I was Aboriginal, just to try it. Sitting in the cave, like an Aboriginal girl my age could have done anytime, staring out over the same ocean. There was nothing else to see. Some of the sensations would have been the same, this rock, well not this rock, but stones, sticking into your arse. The sun would always be shining in just this way at this time of the day at this time of every year. The wind is the same, smells the same, without the fox piss. There's piss but I can turn my back on it. I imagine a girl like me, as lonely as me, sitting here, imagining other girls, other people, wondering how they do it. How can I do it? Everyone is wondering that, aren't they?

Aren't you?

A black beast jumps on me; it's Captain. She jumps into my lap, puts her paws up on my chest and licks my face and then she jumps off and goes and pisses on top of the fox piss. I see, way down the beach, the shapes of Cherry and Del and someone else. Was it Mum? Bloody hell. I jump out the cave, Captain follows me, then runs ahead to Cherry. The four of them are walking towards me in a line but before they reach me, they see me and they all stop, start milling about, waiting for me. I can see it's not my Mum, it's Noah. They are not in a rush. I can see they are talking.

They've taken Christies Beach in for questioning, Del says to me straight away, as soon as I'm within hearing.

Whaaaaaat? I call out to him.

Someone might have made a suggestion to the police, he said. It's usually the boyfriend and he's her boyfriend. I could tell by what he said about her; I could tell he still loved her.

You rang them? The cops?

I didn't expect them to follow up so quickly. I heard he was picked up even before your uncles were on the news.

There's a story, my Mum told me, about a time she went to sell one of her engagement rings at Cash Converters. She went with Christies Beach, the ring wasn't from him. She hadn't brought any identification so Christies Beach used his. They gave her one hundred dollars for the ring.

The police went around to Christies Beach's house to arrest him the very next day. Apparently there are two Christies Beaches, the other one was a known house breaker. They were suspicious because the ring was worth ten times as much as my mum got. Go and arrest Cash Converters then, my mum said, they're the ones who are thieves. It got cleared up. Mum sent a photo of herself wearing the engagement ring and it was dropped. I thought to myself though, that's probably what's happened again.

Didn't say anything though. I didn't say anything to Del. I didn't say anything to anyone. I'm not gonna.

I know nothing has happened to my Mum.

I notice that Noah and Cherry are sharing a joint. Do I want some? I don't but I have a puff. Maybe I do.

We all walk home together, in different conflagrations. Del is walking on the side, side stepping so he can keep talking but Cherry, Noah and I take it in turns leading and falling behind and taking a puff.

When we get home, Lynda Townsend is waiting at the front door.

I was coming over for a cuppa today anyway. I saw your uncles on the telly. What's she done? Hi Del.

Lynda looked Cherry up and down.

Is it Cherry? I haven't seen you since you were a kid.

She came inside. Del tried to update her but Lynda interrupted him.

Oh, Gen's fine. I'm sure of it. She's taken off, that's all. Didn't she have a new book ready?

Lynda has read every one of Mum's books before they were published. Usually Lynda reads Stephen King or Dean Kootz, writers Mum put her onto when they first met when they were teenagers. She just likes them, she says. The only exception she makes is for Mum's books.

They've got Christies Beach in for questioning. It was the climax and the finale of Del's update.

Really? I haven't seen him for years. Does Gen still see him? Lynda asked Del but she was looking at me.

I don't know, I answered but Del started a description of Christies Beach's car. In my mind I was

wondering if my Mum had been killed. It was the way Del was telling the story, it was convincing even though I knew it wasn't true.

Lynda said she'd seen his car here but not for ages.

Do you really think he'd do anything? He was an arsehole but, to be honest, I think he'd be too lazy.

We all kind of laughed. It was very strange.

There's no body, so it's not a murder investigation. They are just following leads at this stage. Del was using his transit cop voice.

A body? What are you talking about Del? Are you saying that the police think that Christies Beach has killed Gen, got rid of the body, created some kind of alibi. Doesn't he still live at his parents?

We laugh, I realise it is just the three of us. Del jumps up. Makes cuppas for us all.

While he's in the kitchen, Lynda introduced herself to Noah, by which I mean, she asked straight out 'who are you?' I'm a friend of Libby's he said, from TAFE Professional Music. He's says the full name of the course. I can't understand what he's doing here either. I hardly know the guy.

I'm still embarrassed for him though. With Del making the cuppas, I can sit back, watch. By the time he brings them out, Noah's taken his cap off and he's holding it in his hands in front of his dick.

This is a new thing I learnt from Henry. He told me that he's always scared someone's gonna see his dick, thinks people might be able to see it. He's a dick picker, me and Bridie already laugh about this, but we didn't know why. I didn't imagine why. I didn't ask, he just told me. He's scared people are looking at his dick. You really can't tell about people, why they do what they do. And maybe this is a new thing I've learnt from telling you, showing you, how to tell when people have secrets by showing you mine.

Lynda and Del and I sat down at the table with our tea. Del started explaining how Gen hadn't touched her bank account and how the police would be looking at that. I could see that Lynda was getting pissed off. She kept picking up her keys and putting them back down on the table. She got up and put some cold water in her tea so she could drink it faster. Noah sat with Cherry on the lounge - they weren't drinking tea. Cherry was rolling two more joints. They took them into the back yard, closed the screen door behind them. The screen flapped; it's still ripped from where Dizzy used to run through it.

Didn't she say something to you Libby? Leave you a note or something? It is like a story isn't it?

Oh, maybe one of her readers has kidnapped her and is making her write the end of Judy's Cure again. I'd believe that before...what are you even saying Del?

I've just been doing a bit of investigation, he said. I realise that Del hasn't read any of my mum's novels.

Let's think what would happen in a story? Lynda started in her no-nonsense way. You'd find a note. That's what would happen. Have you had a look Libby?

Well, not on purpose, I mean, I haven't looked for a note but I've been here, I've been in her room. I haven't seen anything.

I had a bit of a look around here on Wednesday, Del started but he was no longer in charge, when I was here, I mean, when was it?

Well, I don't know Del, do I? When was it? Lynda stood up. You're worrying the poor girl for nothing. Come on, let's have another look.

With her tea in hand she walked up to Mum's room. Del and I followed. As I passed Cherry, she motioned to me, waved her joint in the air and raised her eyebrows and bent her thumb down the hall after Del and Lynda. I shrugged, I figured she meant something about her dope, but Lynda wouldn't give a shit about that.

Oh my god, this is filthy Lib. What have you been doing in here? Well, we're not gonna find anything now are we. Bloody hell. Look at this. What's this?

It was a pig sty. I admit that. There were clothes everywhere because there's no room for Cherry's clothes and I've been getting dressed in here as well so there's my clothes and heaps of shoes out, mine and Mum's I was trying on and there's a few plates and glasses; it's such a long way up the hall to the kitchen sometimes. Some of it though, like Lynda ran her finger along the mantel piece, which she would never do when Mum was here by the way, and she held it up with dust on it. I mean, it's not all my mess. It's only been a week.

It's only been a week, Lynda said.

Still, I'll give it to her, she lifted up everything in that room. She piled all our stuff on the bed. She looked under every book on Mum's desk, flicked through pages of her notebooks and looked over the pages of her scribble pads. Her fingers dug between novels and books lined up and stacked, she pulled out scraps of paper and cards and photos, quick scan and then back where they came from. Nothing slowed her down. The words were only words unless they were a note about where Mum was now. I couldn't have done it. I wouldn't have been able to not read them. She gathered up our plates and put Mum's mouldy tea cups on top of them and sent them back up the hall with Del.

Cherry came down after a little while and sat on the bed and started folding our clothes. We could hear Del talking to Noah. What's Noah doing here? I mouthed more than asked Cherry. A

whisper, it was. Lynda stopped her search though; her hands actually stopped, and she waited for Cherry's reply. Who knows, she said. Weirdo.

Looks to me like you two like each other, Lynda said.

Nah, he's Libby's boyfriend.

Hos before bros.

He's not my boyfriend, I said, still whispering, urgently now, but everyone was back to work, folding, shifting, looking, reading. I stood in the greasy spot, Dizzy's grease, in front on the heater, doing fuck all.

Lynda was somehow able to look all over Mum's desk, look at all her notes, at the random words written, meaningless without her and not find a note explaining where she was.

What's this? She asked again, this time pointing to the papers spread over the end table. It's not your Mum's new novel is it? What's happened to it? Here's page 14, 15, 16 and then, what's this? This is page 150, 151, 152. Oh, what a mess.

She started putting the pages in order; licking her finger and turning pages over and around until they were uniform, tapping them on the table when she had enough gathered together and then adding more pages and more before tapping again.

As she tapped she thought out loud.

So if she went missing on Sunday was it? The waves were pretty big on Sunday; I remember because we went down in the afternoon and I didn't even go in. Do you think she might have gone for a swim and gotten herself into trouble? We didn't see her on Sunday but she might have gone earlier than us, or later, or to a different spot. We saw you down there on Saturday didn't we?

Yes, before we went to vote.

That's right, how's that eh? Can you believe it? Your mother must be so shitted off. Same as Dick. This guy he was doing a quote for yesterday, a plumbing job, he said that he'd voted no, and Dick gave him a quote which was twice as high as it should have been. He didn't want to do a job for that guy.

She stopped.

There's some pages missing.

They're in my room.

You've read it? Are we in this one?

Mum. She was walking in the light with Dizzy by her side. I could hear Del going on; honestly, the guy is nuts. Del had told Noah about dobbing in Christies Beach too and Noah's acting like my Mum's dead. Killed by her ex-boyfriend or something. I think Lynda mostly felt sorry for Noah. His face was white. He was greening out.

Oh my god, Del, you rang the cops? You know she did this last time she finished a book, do you remember Libby? She went to Yorkes with that guy from Melbourne. You don't know everything Del. I can't believe you did that. Maybe I shouldn't give you some weed, maybe you'll dob on me? Maybe I've said too much already? Ha, come on, I'm joking. I couldn't give a shit about Christies Beach.

Del came back about an hour later, he was greening out, serves him right. Mum reckons the Townie's weed is pretty strong. The whole time he was gone, Noah sat on the floor with his back against the wall and his head leaning on his arm. Del grabbed his keys, I gotta go. I'll go too, Noah said. They both beeped when they left. I don't know how they can drive. Stoners.

Cherry is like Mum, it doesn't matter how much she smokes she never seems stoned. Cherry told me that when she worked at Sanity Music, at Colonnades, she'd have a joint before she caught the bus in the morning. I don't think Mum would've done that, too paranoid. With Mum it was endless pipes smoked with her endless pots of tea sitting at her desk. She'd call me, Liiiiib, poooooh. She wouldn't pronounce all her letters. Pooooooh – was pot of tea, please dear

daughter Elizabeth. That probably makes her sound like a stoner, but when she was writing, all her words went onto the page. She kept herself at her desk as long as she could.

She'd talk to me about what she was learning, away from her desk, in the evening before the night shift. She'd be smoking then too. Sitting cross-legged on the couch. She told me she was learning about Aboriginal history, she told me about exemption cards and the Aboriginal protection board and *The Abo Call*. She told me about the Aboriginal people she'd met, who were helping her, teaching her, mostly how they took the piss out of her, like family. She told me that she looked up our family history up at the Museum, at the Aboriginal Link-Up service, and there was no record of us there.

I tell Cherry this.

That's just the point, she says. Stoner.

I remind her again that if I was Aboriginal, she would be too.

But you and your Mum, you're more Aboriginal than me and my Mum.

She means we are poor and she is rich.

That's not how it works, I'm afraid, I tell her.

And your Mum knows all that stuff.

Anyone can know that stuff. It doesn't make you an Aboriginal.

She talked about it all the time.

She was interested. That's all.

So you don't think she's gone walkabout?

Maybe she has. Just like you have.

Well it went on like that for a while. On Mum's bed. We put the clothes away; the room looks good, Cherry rolls joints and occasionally pushes Captain off her lap. The phone rings. I run to answer it. Is it my Mum? I don't know why that call? We'd stopped answering the phone but it's been a strange day. Before I can answer, the machine picks it up. It's Melbourne. I don't pick up. He says he meant to call before. He's seen the news. I see the light is flashing on the answering machine, I count it as Melbourne talks, 1,2,3,4,5,6. Could one of them be my Mum? He says he's ringing to see if there is anything he could do, even if it was just to say that Gen wasn't in Melbourne, with him. He hangs up and I play the rest of the messages.

First two of them were Aunty Ange.

I'm having a sickie. Let me know if you need anything. I have a terrible hangover, hope you don't. Anyway, ring me. I'm glad you're not stobie smear. Yeah, um, sorry about that. Beep, beep, beep.

Hi, me again. I'm going out to get a steak sandwich. Do you guys want anything? I can drop it off to you if you like. Well, ring me, I'm leaving in ten minutes.

One of them was Nanna.

Hello (cough, cough) hello, Libby? It's Nanna here. Give us a call will you love?

One was Aunty Vicki saying hi Cherry, it's your Mum and hoping that I was ok too. Assuring us both that everything would be ok.

One was a bill collector. Gas. Turned off if payment not made within __ days. I didn't catch it.

The last one was Aunty Ange again. It was the sound of tapping, of a pipe on the side of an ashtray. Tap, tap, tap, tap. Then her voice, did you hear that sound Cherry? I need to come and see you. I hope you guys aren't shitty about last night because I'm coming over anyway. I'll bring you some chips.

I rang Nanna but Aunty Ange walked in the door just as she answered. Aunty Ange had fish and chip shop paper wrapped in her arms, some fresh bread and butter too. And a bottle of Coke. And a bottle of tomato sauce. Her and Cherry unpacked the food onto the table.

Nanna, I gotta go.

What, what? Who is that? Is that you Libby.

Yes, it's me Nanna but I gotta go because Aunty Ange just walked in with hot chips. Sorry.

With what?

Hot chips.

Aunty Ange's there is she?

Yes Nanna. I'm starving. I gotta go.

Yes, darling. Go on then. I was just ringing to see how you are? And if you saw the news this morning?

I did Nanna and I'm OK.

I felt like crying. I know it's ridiculous, I can see that now, I've eaten, but Cherry was pouring the Coke into tall glasses and the paper had been folded back and the chips were piled unreasonably perfectly with steam coming off. They both sat down, Aunty Ange had a steak sandwich. She was popping chips into her mouth without a thought. My stomach, it's like it will never trust me again. It's emptiness feels like it's going to last forever. It is crying out, I can hear the groan. Feel it.

How are you Nanna? I asked.

Not so good, love. But I'll let you go.

Nanna, what is it? Is it Mum?

Yeah, well being on the news and all. It's made it real.

It'll work out. Somehow. She'll explain. They're looking for her now. I'm sure she'll turn up. I'm

sure. Lynda up the road reminded me that Mum often does this when she finishes a book.

Does she? Does she dear? I didn't know that. Well that's it, probably it then. Has she, has she um, finished um, the book?

I could hear the nervousness in Nanna's voice. I forgot about the chips.

Has she told you what it's about Nanna?

Noooo. She said it was something to do with Aboriginal people I think. We've been terrible to them. It's so sad.

She would say that, said Cherry afterwards.

Nanna would say what? asked Aunty Ange.

Mum's book, I said. I was stuffing my face at this point. A stacked chip butty with butter and tomato sauce dripping from the bottom. I pointed silently at my face.

What? She said again. Oh Yeah, I know, your Mum's book.

Aunty Angela will never read it. Maybe no one will if Mum doesn't come back. I can't imagine her not coming back. I imagine instead Nanna and Ange and everyone else reading the book and arguing which bit was true and which bit wasn't true. Lynda looking for herself in the pages.

We should go over, I said. See Nanna.

What? Hungover? Ange asked.

We went anyway, Aunty Ange took the Espy, swirling around the round-a-bouts, I held onto the door handle so I didn't fall across the back seat. I'm glad we went. Nanna was in bed, her hair sticking up and her dressing gown lying across the end of the bed. Cherry sat on it. I crawled in next to her under the quilt. Aunty Ange sat on Papa's old dressing stand. It was draped in Nanna's Adelaide Crows scarf now. The team of the decade.

Nanna looked tired. She held my hand under the quilt.

As soon as you told me what Lynda Townsend said, I fell straight to sleep. Oh, oh, a good hour, it was. I was dreaming of my own mother. It was so strange. I haven't thought about her for the longest time. Talking about your Mum's book, I reckon it was. Terrible racist, my Mum. Terrible. She said if she found out she had black blood in her veins, she'd open 'em up and let it bleed out.

That's a bit dramatic Nanna, said Cherry, raising her eyebrows to me.

I'm not like that, you know that Cherry, don't you?

Of course, Nanna. It's just that sometimes when people protest the most it's because they're

the most guilty.

Yes that's true and all. What's that Shakespeare said, what play is it, Methinks thou dost protest too much.

Shakespeare? Said Ange. That's it, I'm making the cuppas.

Your Mum would know, Nanna said.

She wouldn't. She's shit at that. Don't you remember how much she hated quiz nights?

All that education, it seems such a waste.

Oh, Nanna, I said and squeezed her hand under the quilt.

My Dad wouldn't let me get an education, Nanna said. He said I'd just end up looking after other people's kids. I did anyway, before I got married and had my own. Made no difference. He said it would be a waste. None of my kids were ever interested, all of 'em too eager to get to work. Except for your Mum, Libby. I don't know why. And look what good it did her.

Nanna, I think it was good that Mum got to study.

But fighting all the time with her brothers and sisters. Can't keep a job or a man. Some of her ideas are crazy. I mean she kept going on and on about the Aboriginals. Last time she was here, Adnyamanthya something. Port Augusta. Maybe that's where she's gone. And this, on the telly.

Aunty Ange came in with the tea. Nanna looked at the colour and screwed up her face but

didn't say anything. My tea was weak and didn't have enough sugar and too much milk. Nanna lit a cigarette, one of her home rolled, half smoked already, from an ashtray next to her bed. A big puff of smoke sat in the middle of the bed and I coughed.

All right, all right. Quit your complaining, she said.

This is life, not a story, so nothing happens at the end. Nothing changes. My Mum's not back. I don't know where she is. I miss her. I haven't cried as much as I thought I would. You can't yet. It's only been a week. Some of you have even sent me well wishes, apparently, according to Mum's agent. I've asked her not to send them to me. No offence. It's not me. Thanks anyway.

I could keep telling you the endless rounds of visits to Nanna's, Malcolm and Aunty Jean, Malcolm and Aunty Vicki? What will happen to Uncle Jim? Will Cherry stay here? Will it be endless stoner sessions with Aunty Ange and Cherry? I have cousins you haven't even heard about you know, my uncles' kids. Bridie? She still doesn't know about Henry, she'll never change. The Tafs? Captain? The beach? It'll be Summer soon, that's the best time. How would it work though? Would you come out with me this weekend? Stay home and wait for Henry's call? Would you come with me to Taf on Monday? Just until Mum comes back and then she can take over? Explain. Or if she's dead? Will you want me to describe that to you?

You want a death? Of course. And you know what, I can give you one. The end of Mum's story.

Well, I've ruined it for you now, Cherry ruined it for me too, but hopefully it will feel like some kind of ending. If not, honestly, fuck you.

He's here, Eve said quietly into the mouth piece. She laid the phone on the table.

He took five long strides into the room, picked up the phone and smashed it against the table five times, hit, hit, hit, hit, hit; pieces of it flew into the air.

Who-the-fuck-was-that? Rob yelled.

You'll wake the baby.

Who was that? He spat.

Judy. She's still... she was still.... on the phone. She looked at the phone, emptied out onto the table, drops of blood amongst the broken plastic.

Fucking liar.

Eve pulled back into the chair; her shoulders went up to her neck.

When were you going to tell me this, hey? How were you going to tell me more like. How? Put it in a fucking letter why-don't-you? The baby, the baby, don't wake the baby. Give a fuck about

the baby, you don't fucking care about her. I'm her Daaaad. It came out as a scream. He held his head back like a wolf, he was howling.

When he lowered his head and looked at her he had a new resolve. He snatched her face with his right hand. His right hand wasn't bleeding. It was as cold as ice. He squeezed her jaw.

Lost my job thanks to you. I was in hospital. Did you know that? Not that you'd care. Oh, what's that? You did you care. He moved her jaw up and down, his fingers digging into her cheeks. Why don't you put it in a fucking letter? You can tell me how much you care.

He pushed Eve's face as if to throw her head away. It stayed on her neck so he slapped her. The sound was worse than the sting, a burn over the deep pain in her jaw.

Stop iiiiiiitt.

It was her sister. Angelina was standing just outside the spare bedroom door, in her nightie, her arms held across her small chest.

Leave her alone, she screamed. Stop it.

Eve could hear her sister's voice. It was lower than usual. Angelina was trying to hide its squeak. She was walking towards them, towards this, with her elbows held in front of her. A memory of them wrestling when they were kids flashed into her mind. I'm just gonna do this and if you get

near me then it's your fault. Eve had one eye closed waiting for the next blow, with the other she watched Angelina moving closer, closer, like in a film, moving in and out of the light, a flash of his hand, an image of her sister, buttons at the top of her nightie catching the light, closing both eyes for a moment, darkness like a tunnel, then light, then her sister's elbows stretching against the cotton, then his hand. Then Angelina, she is right there: her face, her mouth, her little teeth bared, tears in her eyes.

Eve pushed Rob's hands off her, off her face. She was trying to tell her Angelina to go back. Back. Eve used her legs, just like when she was a kid; it was her signature move, lie on her back and kick. Her legs were strong. Rob fell back. His head hit the corner of the wall. He didn't get straight up, he half sat and half lay there, he touched the top of his head, noticed the blood on his wrist, touched the top of his head with his other hand, looked, saw nothing. In that same position, like halfway through a sit up, he punched the wall.

Rob looked up and saw Angelina looking down on him. As quick and as dispassionately as he had punched the wall, he reached up and punched her in the faint triangle between her legs. The young girl, arms still crossed but her left elbow hanging lower, to protect herself, bent forward like an old lady; like she'd seen everything now.

Eve screamed and kicked out her legs again. They hit nothing, but now it was a fight. He jumped up, she jumped up. Angelina was between them. Rob stared into her eyes as he brought his

knee up into her face. Angelina stood up straight. She put her fingers into her mouth, she brought out a tooth, she held it her bloody fingers and held it out to her. To Eve. Angelina was making a keening sound, almost crying, but not.

“You fucking asshole, Eve hissed. She was pulling at Rob, at his arms which had pushed Angelina down. She wasn’t yelling, she didn’t want to wake the baby. Angelina pulled herself away from them. She was still feeling at her face. There was blood on the front of her nighty, where her mouth was dripping and smears of it across her legs where she had wiped her hands. Eve put herself between Rob and Angelina. Rob pulled back, right back, and punched her in the side of her head. Eve fell to the ground.

Eve was unconscious. She pissed her pants. She had fallen on a sharp piece of broken phone and she was bleeding onto the carpet. Her hands were held in fists up near her head, not moving at the end of her arms. It was like she was still fighting.

Angelina was fighting; elbows and fists now, one still holding a tooth in it, flailing against him. She was trying to keep Rob away from her sister. He pushed her away, gently, regretful, Angelina was a good kid. He’d never knocked Eve out before and the sight of her lying, asleep or even dead she could be, had taken some of his anger towards her away. If she was asleep, she would wake and there would be a chance for them to talk. This didn’t have to be the end of it. He knelt down to look at her. Angelina jumped on him then, punching him, kneeing him in his

back, pulling at his hair, pulling his head back.

“Hey, quit it.” He wasn’t doing anything now. “I’m just checking her.”

“Fucking leave her alone,” she spat blood over the back of his footy shirt. You could see spots of it on his number. 9.

He stood up. He was going to explain. She was a kid, she didn’t know how it worked. He opened his mouth to speak and Angelina spat into his face. Into his mouth.

“You filthy cunt,” he spat out her blood. He punched her and picked her up and threw her across the room. She was so light. She hit the table. There was a crunch. She lay awkwardly with her legs up in the air, one foot above the table, one on a chair, neck twisted underneath, arms so thin, dead. Her eyes were open, they stared through the ceiling, it seemed, to the stars in the night sky above them.

He looked down at what he’d done; he’s fucked it all up. Angelina, a little kid still, just got her first car, dead. There was no doubt. He did it. He was stronger than her. He did it. He was finally out of breath. He had run hard for forty minutes to get here. He had smashed the door. He had smashed them. He was puffed. He got stitch. He held his fist to his side, pushed it in as hard as he could, like the trainers did at footy, like his Dad did, sometimes, when they had a kick in the backyard.

He kicked Eve, on the ground.

“Help me,” he screamed at her. He kicked her again. She rolled onto her side. He kicked her again, in the arse.

“Heeeeeellllllllp Meeeeeeee. Get up. Get up. You fuck. You fucking cunt. Fucken, just fucken get up.” He could see there was blood on the carpet, under Eve’s head. He knelt down, closer, touched the carpet. It was wet. He rolled her over, her arms didn’t follow, Rob saw some blood in her ear, more blood on her neck. The piece of phone. A hole. In Eve’s skin.

In the doorway, Eve’s Mum. One shriek. A hollowed out falling sound. A break being broken. An ending of something whole. Sharp and low and long.

Flashing lights in their front yard, the fuzzy sound of a voice spoken through a loudspeaker. A siren turned on, then off. A warning.

The sound, over it all, of a baby crying. He ran. He didn’t get very far.