FROM MOUNTAINS TO MOLEHILLS: EPISODES FROM THE LIFE OF A SURVIVOR

incorporating the exegetical essay,

A Mirror Cracked: women, writing, healing

Kathryn Hegarty, B.Ed, G.Dip.Arts (University of Melbourne)

June 1998

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of Communication, Language and Cultural Studies

Faculty of Arts

Victoria University of Technology

Volume One

Abstract

This thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Professional Writing), is presented in two parts: a novella and an exegetical essay. The novella, an autobiography structured episodically, comprises the major part of the work. It is followed by a long essay that critically comments on and contextualises the creative work. The exegesis seeks to explicate and weave theoretical and critical writings about autobiography, particularly those from a feminist perspective, with the life writings of women who have experienced intra-familial child sexual assault. Finally, the exegesis explores and examines my own incest autobiography in light of research on women's life writing.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS 3

DECLARATION 4

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 5

FROM MOUNTAINS TO MOLEHILLS: EPISODES FROM THE LIFE OF A SURVIVOR 6

DEDICATION 7

1. THE CITY 9

2. BUSH 57

FROM THE MOUNTAIN TO THE MOLEHILL 177

3. NOW 189

EXEGESIS ESSAY: A MIRROR CRACKED: WOMEN, WRITING, HEALING 221

TABLE OF CONTENTS 222

INTRODUCTION 223

i) From Mountains to Molehills: episodes from the life of a survivor 223
ii) A Mirror Cracked; women, writing, healing 224

METHODOLOGY 226

i) From Mountains to Molehills: episodes from the life of a survivor 226
ii) A Mirror Cracked: women, writing, healing 229

CHAPTER ONE: LITERARY THEORIES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY 233

CHAPTER TWO: THE SELF 241

CHAPTER THREE: MEMORY 248

CHAPTER FOUR: INCEST 253

(i) Seeking to Heal 253
(ii) Virginia Woolf: the other side of healing 259
(iii) incest: writing 263

APPENDIX A 268

Excerpts from the Writing Journal 268

BIBLIOGRAPHY 277

APPENDIX B 285

Examiner's Reports 285

Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgment has been made, this thesis is the work of the candidate alone. The work has not been submitted previously, in whole or part, to qualify for any other academic award. The content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the commencement date of the approved research program.

Kathryn Hegarty 5 June 1998.

Acknowledgments

A Masters dissertation which includes a novella is an enormous emotional and intellectual endeavour which would stifle and die in a vacuum. I was fortunate to have enormous help in all arenas of my life without which I could not have envisaged such a project.

I am indebted to my life partner, Geoff Robinson, for engaging with me in all areas of my study; for his warm and passionate belief in my abilities; for his humour; and for his incredible knowledge and wisdom, and willingness to share these with me. I thank him for all he has taught me of the life of the mind and the many gifts those lessons have brought me.

I thank my mother and the Yeppoon Belot Crew for their excitement in my work; and consistently warm reception of it. I thank the Belots and the Serles for providing a lifetime of grist for the writer's mill.

I owe so much to Kris Reichl and Faye Wilson for extraordinary friendship and a million different ways of looking after me. I would be lost without them.

I have been sustained by wonderful, funny, caring friends: Michal, Benny, Liz, Karen, Cameron: not excluding the four legged variety: Mr Puffy, Squeak, Maddy, Normie.

At RMIT, I owe my supervisors Craig Paterson and Carol Boas for generous flexibility. The completion of my MA would have been a great deal harder without their understanding.

I thank James Whitelaw and Ray Schroeder for their wisdom, support and laughter.

I thank Simon Williams for his insight. I thank Becky Rogers and Marie Rowsell for great friendship and the laughter that oils our work environment.

I am grateful to the Department of Communication, Language & Cultural Studies at Victoria University, for a stimulating environment, outstanding supervision and the opportunities this degree has brought me. I enjoyed the opportunity to 'audit' subjects taught within the department and I am particularly grateful to Susan Hawthorne for her generosity.

I thank the Faculty of Arts, particularly Professor Ron Adams, for the terrific experience of the Thesis Preparation Seminar.

I am grateful to the wonderful administrative staff of the Faculty. I particularly thank Jane Trewin and Julie Keys for their cheerful assistance many times.

I thank my co-supervisor Michele Grossman for her generous, supportive engagement with the spirit of this project and for sharing her extraordinary knowledge base with me. The intellectual growth I experienced throughout the MA is due in no small part to Michele.

As a working-class kid, I owe two Labor governments, and the movements behind them, for the removal of real structural barriers to tertiary study. Thank you, Gough Whitlam and John Cain.

And the spectacular, inimitable, Supervisor Extraordinaire: Dr Rosaleen Love. Rosaleen, I owe you so much. I wonder if you know what you've done for me. Thank you.

From Mountains to Molehills: episodes from the life of a survivor

by

Kathryn Hegarty

Dedication

This novella is for 'my' English teachers, who helped me find my voice. I was so lucky to be taught by you:

Elizabeth Scott (Panton Hill Primary School)
Ms Dwyer (Gardiner Central School)
Kathleen Nolan (Hurstbridge High School)
Mark Petch (Hurstbridge High School)
Heidi Petch (Hurstbridge High School)
Terry Muller (Hurstbridge High School)
Brian Symes (University of Melbourne)
Ray Misson (University of Melbourne)
Kris Love (University of Melbourne)
Phillipa Moylan (University of Melbourne)
Chris Wallace-Crabbe (University of Melbourne)

but most of all, it's for Grandpa.

1. The City

The Beginning

Why does he hold me so tight? His breathing is heavy and smells of garlic and that gross cabana he eats like a pig. Why is he doing that? It doesn't hurt, in fact it feels quite pleasant. But. I am scared.. my chest is tight and I don't know.....where is Mum? of course she is at work... I think...he talks to me I don't listen or respond want to get away...I need to go to the loo ...I say *I'm going to the loo*.. I must not run or seem frightened I don't know why I don't but the heat and the tightness and the weirdness are heavy ...I can't breathe properly.

He knows. He knows I need to get away. He looks at me. This is when I hate him the most. He looks knowing.

I go to the toilet I take a long time I don't know what to do or say when I go back in there how can I seem normal how can I show I don't want to do it? but not show I didn't like it? because if he knows I didn't like it he'll...but if he thinks I did...?

* * * * * *

Sometimes I think back ...I could so easily have been asthmatic...but I wasn't. I could have had allergies or nervous bowel or stuttered...but I didn't. Nothing like that happened to me. I just lost my self-esteem and thought I was shit.

We lived in Park Street, St Kilda. I know this because my mother locates our lives in the places we *lived. That was when we lived in Park St, Howe Crescent,*

Wattletree Road...etc. I do not remember that it was called Park Street but I know it was where we lived at the time. I do remember the drab unhappy St Kilda street, with its eternal hangover and the huge once-mansions long since past their glory and their squalor, which seemed fiercely defensive.

I remember that there were no seasons; it was always hot and wet and windy and humid and cold. It was like many places that they lived in for a while and sometimes I lived there too. It happened there. It happened in all the places and now I go to St Kilda, and I love St Kilda, and even Park Street, and it is not the *there* it used to be. For it happened *there* but *there* is in me and I take it across time and experience and geography.

Looking In...

Mr. Cooper has one of the Private Rooms at St. Margaret's Private Hospital, where Mum is the Live-In Manageress. St. Meg's used to be flash and well-to-do. I know only Rich People get Private Rooms. There are only three of them and the people in them all have those sharp slanty voices which push you away when they speak to you. Like the Queen. They say *darnce* and *NewCARstle*. Mum is so impressed; she always admires *well-to-do* people.

Mr. Cooper must be very rich 'cos he's also got a Private Nurse. Poor man. He's rich and Mrs. Cooper is a smashing cook and they've got a great house and he has to stay here, at mad St. Meg's, with Crazy Sister Lupen. I would never let Mum hear me say that; a Private Nurse deserves respect. Mrs. Cooper is my friend; she never had any kids so she loves me. She doesn't like Sister Lupen

either, I can tell. I get to shopping with her to made-to-measure Malvern boutiques where the dresses look like Osti but cost a lot more. I spend a lot of time at her house. Her kitchen window looks over the Hedgley Dene gardens. You can see the cute little bridges and the lake with all sorts of water birds. On Saturdays, scores of brides, looking like crocheted toilet roll covers, stand on the bridges to have their pictures taken. Mrs. Cooper cooks baby sausage rolls and buys chocolate biscuits and gives me a drink called Fifty-Fifty. I think it's a shandy. Grandma told me I'd be making a pact with the Devil if I drank alcohol and all his Pestilences would come upon me, but nothing ever happens. We drive to Glenferrie Road in Mrs. Cooper's tiny car. She never asks the price of anything. She owns a lot of sheep somewhere and occasionally she goes to see them. On Saturdays and Sundays she spends all day at St. Meg's with Mr. Cooper. Those are Sister Lupen's days off. Sometimes, Sister Lupen comes in at lunch time on the weekends and Mum and Mrs. Cooper get cross and go out of the room. I know why; because Sister Lupen talks to Mr. Cooper in a funny voice.

There, there, Walter, have a little wee wee. Does that feel better, darling? Did the silly girls make Walter wait too long?

The other nurses make jokes I wish I understood and Mrs. Cooper gets grumpy, although never with me. She stamps around Mr. Cooper's room and crashes things which annoys Sister Lupen.

Oh, Dot, quietly dear. Wally needs his peace.

Vanessa, for goodness sake, it's Saturday, go HOME!

By dusk, Mrs. Cooper says goodbye to her husband in a vague distracted way, like she doesn't know him well. Of course, he can't talk. Sometimes, we go to her place and she cooks dinner while I watch anything I like on her colour TV. When she talks about Mr. Cooper it's like he's someone else entirely. She really liked this other guy. The only time she seems sad is when she talks about her husband. It's hard to realise that it's the same Mr. Cooper I know. I examine all her ornaments and she tells me the stories behind them. My favourite is a tiny pewter pig, as long as my thumb, with folds of fat worked into the metal. It has a little round chubby bottom, perfectly formed. I love that pig. It's very old, like all Mrs. Cooper's treasures. Many of them belonged to Mr. Cooper before they got married. He is much older than her. They had about fifteen years before his stroke. This is when she gets sad and I have to try to cheer her up. I am not very good at it but one tactic usually works.

Mrs. Cooper?

Yes, sweetie? this vaguely.

Would it be all right..., hesitate. She always says *yes* to anything, without hearing what it is.

Of course, honey. What'd you want to do?

Well, could we take Miss Burns' Pom. into Hedgley Dene for a walk?

Miss Burns has the Unit next door. She can't go for walks, so Mrs. Cooper walks her Pomeranian. I love to go too, and hold the lead, because Elsa is the only Pom. I know that doesn't bite. Mrs. Cooper lets me walk her and play with her. Aunty Olwyn has twenty pomeranians and I'm not allowed to play with any of them. Besides, they all bite. Elsa is friendly and laughs all the time. I like dogs that laugh.

Now there's a good idea. Let's go get some air. I'll bring some bread for the ducks.

Mrs. Cooper uses a whole loaf of human bread for the ducks. She is the least stingy person I ever met and she is the complete opposite of St. Meg's. At her place I can do whatever I like.

I never go into Mr. Cooper's room but I can see in sometimes from the reception desk, when Sister Lupen goes to empty Mr. Cooper's bottle and forgets to shut the door. She doesn't forget very often. Of course, it is important not to get caught looking. Sister Lupen thinks her precious patient might somehow be bothered by the glance of a fascinated little girl. It doesn't matter, because I know she's mad. Sister Lupen can't stand me. Mr. Cooper doesn't even know what's going on. Poor old fella. He's a huge man in that little bed and when Sister Lupen needs to move him she has to call in the outside nurses, and bark instructions at them at though they wouldn't know how to nurse such a special patient, not even his wife. All the nurses at St. Margaret's think she's got a crush on him. Yuck. They talk in language I don't understand, with an edge to their

tone which captures my complete attention and only underlines my lack of comprehension. Mum listens and giggles and tells them to *shoosh* and generally plays her role as straight girl. The nurses aides are not so straight. *Rough diamonds,* Mum calls them. *They are being coarse,* she tells me, half giggling and half reproving. Rough, coarse, cheap, hard. These were my mother's euphemisms for being sexual. Oh little girlhood. Too many scents, too many false trails. I wish I could go back and find them and follow them up. Too late.

Resistance

I am at St Margaret's one sunny afternoon. One of the nurses who works with Mum has brought her little girl to work. Mum is breathless with excitement - suddenly she is not the only mother With-Her-Child-At-Work.

Oh, you've brought Sally? that's terrific, she can play with Louise.

Later, Mum will tell me all the details of Sally's mother's domestic arrangements, in an attempt to illustrate that our difference is not that uncommon. Mum's innocent, friendly questions are impossible to resist. She will do this because she loves to find other women with unusual family lives. I am becoming aware that there are far more such mothers than the word unusual implies. But I deplore Mum's righteousness.

Today I am compelled to play with Sally. She is small, earnest child with a clean shiny face and freckles. She has long plaits which I seriously covet. We

play outside the nursing home for a while and then I sneak her into my room in the Manageress's flat at the back. Bob is watching TV and eating cabana. I open the fridge to see what I can feed my guest. I stand looking for a long time. Bob emerges.

Don't hold door open, Louey.

I ignore him. I concentrate on the meagre contents of the fridge.

Hurry up, Louey. What you look for? What you want?

Sally stands framed in the door of my room. I imagine she stares at his fat, naked belly, his thin hair carefully combed over his bald head and held there with men's hairspray. I know she recognises the tension between us.

Who this little girl? What your name, little girl?

I want to vomit. His voice is thick and silky but all I hear is slime. Sally must agree, for she squirms. We do not answer him. His attempt at playing firm father begins, as always, to falter.

You answer, Louey. Remember, I am Professor. You do if I say.

Contempt bubbles in me. It is frothing now and will boil over. Later the burn will hurt but I cannot prevent it. I close the fridge door and turn to Sally. I use a high controlled voice.

It's alright, you know, because he's not my real father.

I see vague comprehension on Sally's face but this may be wishful thinking. Bob is outraged but, consistent coward that he is, he will not take me on in broad daylight with a hospital full of visitors and staff a few feet away. He stamps back into the loungeroom and I hear him slamming things and muttering.

I smile to myself.

I hear the noises of escape in their bedroom. Scooby. He has left via the window, as he always does now when the going gets hot. Go Scooby. Don't come back tonight. I must take him some food in the boiler room.

Sally and I leave the flat and play in the rhododendron garden for a while. We go into the nursing home and talk to some of the senile old ladies and I get them to tell Sally about the dogs in the bed who bite them and do poo and Sally is horrified and I laugh at her. I show her the old man with no legs and she squeals but she does not run away.

At dusk, Sally and her Mum knock off and we say goodbye. I like Sally. I wander into the office where Mum is writing her shift report. I sidle up to her and she puts her arm around me as I know she will.

Did you have fun playing with Sally?

I nod emphatically.

I hope you didn't frighten her. Did you tease old Mrs Lentil?

Of course not.

She called for a nurse to put the dog out.

She's crackers, Mum, she always says there's a dog.

Mmm. Well, you shouldn't make fun of them.

I didn't.

There is a silence. I thought Mum would take me with her on rounds and tell me all about Sally's mum while she changed the wet sheets, but instead she sits playing with her pen.

Did you play in the flat?

I hesitate. *Nah, just got somethin' to eat.*

Did you see Bob?

A longer pause. *Yeah. He was stupid to Sally.*

Mum swings around in her chair and looks directly at me. I lower my head.

I think you really hurt him, when you said he wasn't your real father.

I hurt him. **I** hurt **him**.

But it's true.

Well, I know that, darling but he is sort of your father now, isn't he? He'd very much like to be.

Sure. You know so much about that.

What about what I like?

Oh, Lou, please don't be difficult. Why do you keep this up? You never seem to get used to a firm hand. You must have discipline.

Yeah.

There is nothing else to say. The burn is stinging now as I knew it eventually would. Little resistances, tiny, weak. Anything more is too hard.

Ms Tudor & Gardiner Central School

The building is old and surrounded by houses and flats and busy roads. The route to my classroom is a bright, steel staircase which cleaves to the side of old red-brick schoolhouse and looks curiously out of place. There are many children of all colours, shapes and sizes. There are different languages. The school has a busy worried ambience, as do the teachers. I take my place; a new girl in the second term of Grade Five. I know no-one. The closest thing I have to a refuge is my mother and step-father and our flat. It is no refuge. But at least it is familiar. I find my teacher, Miss Tudor, fascinating and studying her occupies my mind for some time. She seems old although she is only 29. She is very strict and fierce. She likes the serious, studious girls who work hard and play hard and wear uniform dresses and long pigtails. I never have enough hair for pigtails because I am forever changing my appearance so others like me more. And so I do. I could be serious and studious but I've chosen not to be. I need a new identity. I've had it with that straight and suck-up-to-the-teacher stuff. I don't much like tomboyish either because it makes me feel like I do with him. When people said, *ooh, she's such a tomboy,* I felt that hot eyes-on-me feeling, looking at my body, yuk. OK, I'll play the game, I'll be a little lady and cover up my body. But at this point, sitting in my desk third from the front I don't know how I'm going to cope. I just know I am miserable and I have nowhere to turn.

As usual, I got it totally wrong. Ladylike was the worst thing I could have chosen because everyone thought ladylike was pathetic and disgusting. It was quite fitting really. I had hoped to be exotic and fascinating. Small chance. That

role was filled by tiny Gabrielle the Canadian with the long blonde hair and the pixie-like face. She loved to berate me for my ladylikeness. I pointed out that I had a horse. *So what?* said Teresa, *Lots of little ladies have ponies.* I tried to say it wasn't a pony but a horse and didn't she know the difference? No-one heard me. But it didn't matter in the end because I had embarked on the toughest, loneliest eighteen months of my life. I may as well have been unhappy around the clock. It became quickly apparent that school was not going to be an oasis. Back to the drawing board. What can't be cured must be endured.

Ms Tudor loved sport. She was our classroom teacher and she did not teach PE but it was her idea of heaven to take us out after afternoon recess for a quick game of rounders or softball. I loved rounders at Panton Hill Primary School but there I had an identity and people liked me and thought I was OK. At Gardiner, they thought I was soft and wet which, I was but I had a good reason. But understanding and empathy were thin on the ground in inner city primary schools in the seventies. You had to make your own. I grew very good at it. Unfortunately, everybody else called it self-pity.

Going Back

I hear the car coming up Church Road. I know all the turns of the road, all the changes in engine sound. If the gears go high it will keep going. If they drop, it will come up the steep, gravel drive. They drop. The car is coming up. It is them. It is over. I must go back.

I have known this all along but it does not help me now. Already the simple *safe* predictability of this fortnight has abated and the constant wariness which so tires me is tensing my back and shoulders.

Threshold

Abba sang *Mamma Mia* and the Bay City Rollers were *all the rage* as my mother likes to say. These songs strike a sour chord in the deep recess where I store feelings I rarely use these days. Even the date *1975* jars slightly in my psyche as I think of that year and what happened then. It is family folklore - or rather Mother-Daughter folklore - that 1975 was a Bad Time. Our football team won its first ever premiership but our Prime Minister got kicked out *(*and we waited for him for so long*)* and we both lived with the shadow of cruelty and fear which it was apparently our womanly responsibility to hide.

Such was the transient life my mother and stepfather lived that we would move a block or a street away every six to twelve months. Each time my stepfather fell out with his mate next door or the fellow upstairs spoke civilly to my mother, convincing my stepfather that she was *jumping fences*, we limped on to the next address. Fortunately for my sanity, my safety, my self, I spent weekends and holidays with Grandma and Grandpa.

Limping precariously through grades five and six involved living each moment, even second, as it came. I never knew what set my stepfather off but I remember screaming at Mum not to provoke him, buying the bill of goods that we could somehow affect his behaviour.

I never knew details about my stepfather's life before he left what was then Yugoslavia, save that his family had been large and unhappy and he hated his father. He spent varying amounts of time at the Croatian Club and he and Mum would have long fights over his catholicism and Mum's in-built antagonism to it. Mum had the fundamentalist terror of the crucifix and Bob wore one all the time. Mum called it a graven image; what he called her I never understood because at times of emotional crises-or violence-he always retreated into his native tongue. I can still perfectly phonetically reproduce the sounds of his swearing

abenti mica millia coste

although I have no idea what the words mean.

When we left Scott Grove we landed in Osborne Avenue-or was it the other way around? I can't remember. No matter. I do remember the morning walk to Gardiner Central School through the hole in the fence and the gradually increasing tangle of children joining the trek, like some invisible pied piper was beckoning us.

I made a few friends at Gardiner Central School but the only friends I felt safe with had to be like me and have something wrong with them. Karen and Pauline were my friends. All of us had mothers whose domestic arrangements were unusual and invited disapproval. Pauline was big and curly-haired and Greek. Her mother was great fun and affectionate and youthful. Karen's Mum was a

battler, who spoilt Karen rotten-I was dead familiar with how that worked-and overlooked Karen's mean streak. Both Karen and Pauline were brilliant slog-'em hitters at softball, which gave them an advantage where Ms Dwyer was concerned. This was where our common ground parted company. While they were slogging to the screams of our classmates I was usually in the sick bay because of my 'heavy head' or 'vertigo' or whatever new ailment I had dredged up through creative eavesdropping. And although none of them judged Mum, there was still always that lonely ache that very rarely, if ever, left me. I always *knew* what it was but didn't have the words. Perhaps they were just too painful to utter. Karen and Pauline didn't have Dads or their Dads weren't married to their Mums or maybe even their Dads had bashed their Mums and shot through. But the difference for me was, they mattered a lot to their Mums.

* * * * * *

It is Grand Final Day today. North Melbourne has just won their first ever Premiership, so Mum is dancing around the lounge room like an eager child. I am pleased, excited, hopeful but ever on alert for the sound of engine, footsteps, key in the door. Our conversation is gay and silly but it is talc over unwashed skin, an ineffective veneer. We both recognise and leave unspoken the clenching tension on which our family reposes, like a motif which links us all; different reasons, different causes, but sprung like springs every one of us. Never relaxed, always poised, ready.

But he has gone to the races and only comes home to shower for the Saturday Night trots-if he has won that is. If he has not, he will slam the door, pick a fight, rant and rave, demanding at first coyly but with increasingly ugliness that

my mother give him her money. If she refuses he will scream and belt her until she complies. It's an old familiar ritual punctuated very occasionally by the times when he wins enough that he doesn't need Mum's money. On my much compromised yardstick, these evenings are bliss for us, comparative bliss.

* * * * * *

God Save the Queen echoes scratchily over the asphalt school yard, as Karen, Pauline and I whisper urgently to each other. The class line is alphabetically arranged so I must move way down the other end to "H" and I do so resentfully, afraid of what they will say to each other when I no longer hear.

I have spent the last fortnight staying at Karen's house, a plan our mothers hatched together so I would not have to miss the last four weeks of school. I sleep in the second bed in Karen's room, put there for her to *have little friends* over to stay. I am desperately afraid that I have betrayed myself in my sleep and that she knows my shameful secret. I cannot say anything but must seek intelligence indirectly. Karen and Pauline are in intense conversation, Karen busily chattering, Pauline looking somewhat pained. Pauline is not so harsh, she does not make me feel afraid the way Karen does. The Principal gives his Monday Morning Motivational. The roar of Malvern Road reminds me of the last time Mum and I wandered down to our Chinese Restaurant. Bob went straight to the trots because he won at the gallops and some unknown horse and jockey bought us a few extra hours of peace and a pretense of happiness so concentrated that a need to savour it soured it in my mouth. Mum and I were alone, safe, at dinner in our little restaurant. I ordered my favourite short soup and special fried rice with the tiny prawns which for years after left me

believing that all prawns were that size. On the way home I took Mum up Nash Street and introduced her to the beautiful Keeshound who lived opposite the school and visited us kids each afternoon when the final bell rang. I had Mum all to myself and her attention was on me; she was examining my life. The unfamiliarity of it caused me to become heady with pleasure.

Movement around me signals the end of assembly. I watch Karen and Pauline move off, Karen talking to the brains in our class for whom she claims contempt, Pauline hovering, loathe to head in to comprehension and spelling. I gather all my might towards my need to be casual, and stroll near her

Did Karen tell you stuff we did on the weekend?

Yeah, sounds good.

No hint there. Does she know? Pauline is always nice, friendly, even when you are the girl ostracised on the playground as someone must be each recess and lunch. I think she understands.

What did she tell you about?

Oh, um, the tyre swing you put up. The cat. How you suck up to her Mum.

I don't. I just think I better help 'cos they're lettin' me stay there.

Yeah, fair enough.

What else?

There is a silence; a pause. She knows. I hesitate. I ask her if Karen said anything? What else can I ask? But she is speaking.

Karen says.....

Yeah? What?

...that you suck your thumb.

Oh God. The buzzing of fear and panic engulfs me. I cannot speak. Ms Tudor is shouting at us to line up and file inside. I must say something, deny, explain.

Oh, rubbish, I bite me nails. She must've thought I was sucking me thumb.

Sure.

Pauline is not judgemental. She does not seem to care. But the panic is overwhelming. Karen has such power now, such ammunition. I vow not to sleep again 'til Mum comes back.

Dark

From Mountains to Molehills. Grandma's saying, actually. Grandma used to say all the time at the top of her voice

You're making a mountain out of a molehill, Louise Daphne

If I cried because I had gravel rash, for example.

I don't know now whether going from the mountain to the molehill is the desired trip. I don't know if maybe the molehills aren't a worse place to be. For the purposes of this story the mountains are the bad places and the molehills are where I want to be heading. And I haven't mentioned too much about the mountains. They're hard to shift, my shoulders get sore. I prefer just to sit on the various molehills I have recently come to call home and turn my back on the mountains. But the world spins around. You can't turn your back on very much for long.

Some say we write for catharsis. You know, slay the demons, take their power away. They reckon that if you look your worst fear, your demons square in the face, they lose the power to frighten you. How many Stephen King novels end in the protagonist refusing to fear ....whatever **it** is? That refusal is usually what defeats the object of fear. It's a good theory. There are a lot of good theories in the world. They're not always so easy to pin down in practice.

The thing about demons is, if you don't stare them square in the face, stare them down, it doesn't make much difference. Either way, they're in your soul. Either way, they leak the fear they make you feel into you, like a silicone implant. JFK was quite right. We have nothing to fear but fear itself. We go on fearing long after the bogey man has gone away.

I think fear is worthy of our fright. The fear itself, not always the object of it, is what debilitates, holds you rigid, what keeps you on the spot, all your senses straining and you can't move forward. Even talking about fear can make it worse than whatever is causing it.

* * * * * *

I have set out to tell a story about the progression from mountains to molehills. I have told the stories that weave around and through the one I want to tell. I have briefly mentioned it, touched on it, let a hint trickle down to consciousness. But I veer sharply away, always. Why? I want to tell this story but I don't. I haven't. I say I must.

But will I?

I still don't know.

It is not in the story being told that my fear lies. It is in the telling. It is in the consciousness. Maybe it is not a big deal, in the great scheme of things…but that's cold comfort. Who exactly decided what qualifies for a great scheme?

Another canon. T S Eliot probably. But he liked cats, so I can almost forgive him.

Notice how I'm still not telling you? I know what I'm doing. I don't mean to take tangents but I'd better tell you right now, I'm a tangent sort of person.

* * * * * *

Satin died tonight. Saturday night. Trots night. A car hit her and her eyes are glazed. That's how I can tell she's dead. It's hot, just dusk in a daylight saving sort of way. I thought she was rolling on the concrete. Our cats always roll. I went out to tickle her tummy, as I always do.

She doesn't look up at me. She doesn't move..

Except for her stillness and the watery blur of her eyes she might be asleep. She's still soft and warm. I carry her silently into the flat and put her into her basket near the door.

Oh, look at Satin, Mum chants her happy-families mantra script as she sees me bending over the cat. She has few such opportunities to deny reality.

She's not sleeping. This quietly. Mum has never quite grasped the significance of a soft voice.

What? No subtlety. No clue. Poor Mum.

She's dead, Mum.

Don't be silly, Louise. Why, she's....

My mother the nurse sees the glaze and the stillness. Restraint. Briefly. Then the avalanche.

Oh, Satin, oh beautiful gorgeous pussikins, oh my darling, you didn't want to leave us...

The wail goes on. I switch off, sharply.

Satin didn't want to leave us? No but it's a miracle. Satin died as she lived, violently. My mother revises her immediate history every night, so she can sleep. So each new morning she can avoid facing what we are.

I can hear the pitch of her wailing as she hugs the dead cat to her breast.

Hatred overwhelms me. I must not move or I will knock her to the ground and do to her the violence that courses through me like adrenaline.

Satin saw none of this passionate concern during her life. Where was this deep and grieving love for Satin when he tied a rope around her neck and hung her over the lounge room door? Because she stole a steel wool pad from the kitchen sink. It was Satin's idea of a mouse. She used to carry it around in her mouth.

And I, like the fucking idiot I am, said, *Oh look, Satin's got the steel wool again.* Sent her to her doom that day, I did.

But that time, I would so rather much he did it to me. I could take it much easier that listening to my tiny terrified cat be tortured because she played with a piece of steel wool.

It is not pain I am afraid of. I never feel it 'til later anyway.

Then why?

I am too afraid to stop him. But it is not what will happen to me that I am afraid of. I will never know why I don't stop him. Long after thinking of him and his garlic grunting breath has ceased to stop me in my tracks I will not be able to think of that day I lay on my bed and tried to burrow as my little cat was hung and burnt with cigarette butts merely for playing with her steel wool mouse.

* * * * * *

Clearly, I am protesting too much. Memory is like that. I will try to tell you why I acted as I did but there is a new lens here; a filter woven through years of failed therapy and feminist analysis. I'm not knocking it, it saved my life, but in doing so it constructed a new me. Even the years alone do that. Louise is not eleven any more. Her eleven year old thoughts and fears are opaque to me now; I remember it.....like watching a video. How can that be me if I'm out here, watching?

I *must* have been afraid of what would happen to me. Otherwise I would have gone out there and stopped him. Now, if a kid said that to me today I would say *Listen. What about power*? Can an eleven year old girl in a patriarchy (sorry to be reductionist but it *is* a patriarchy) really stop a child abusing, wife bashing six foot one inch man from torturing a siamese cat? For me, the answer is maybe. It is not categoric. I will never know.

But another answer, one you're more likely to get from me is, *why the fuck should she have to?*

Not knowing is the point here, not the fear. I am known for rescuing animals in trouble. I will always be this way. Perhaps everything in life is transference: representation. I could not help my Satin so I help every other living thing I see in need, even slugs and snails and moths. A therapist once suggested that in the helpless, confused hurt creature I see.....me. I hate that idea. Which suggests I need to consider it more closely.

I remember saying to him *Oh Bob, please, if you love me* but he just told me to shut up. After all, a statement like that would put him between a rock and a hard place. He frequently pointed out the overwhelming evidence of his 'love'. And besides, in a powerless, tiny, fragile feline he found the victim who was defeated before he began. She couldn't speak and she learned fast not to howl. But while people might listen to the screamed protests of a child most will ignore an animal.

Just as I turned my back and tried to quell the fluttering panic in my stomach when Satin ran into my wardrobe and he followed her. I shut the doors and stood in front of them but I moved quickly out of his way as he reached to open them, grabbed Satin by the scruff and took my big skipping rope, that we used at school to play *Cinderella dressed in Yella*. I watched him carry the floppy, resigned body of my cat with the rope in his other hand and then I shut my bedroom door and curled tight on my bed and tried, as all my life I have tried, to think of other things.

But this great skill of averting one's mind is one I did not inherit from my mother.

The next day, my mother and Bob had one of those conversations where he tells her what he did and why and she explains to him, like she's his mother, why that's really not nice and he sort of listens and my mother thinks *oh wow that was easy* and forgets how many times she's thought this before.

I ask him what he did with the rope. I remember my voice. It was leaden. Through my own various voices as a child I learned what all these adverbs mean that writers use. Coldly. Woodenly. Archly. I knew 'em before I read 'em because I'd spoken that way.

I asked him what I did with the rope. Like a tongue repeatedly seeking a sore tooth, I asked. Of course, the question did not go up at the end like it should. It was really a statement. It would normally imply a great many things spoken like

that: contempt; wisdom; judgment. But there was no normality here. Or rather, no illusion that normality actually exists at all.

What did you do with the rope.

He was only too quick to explain.

Hung her up over there, indicating the lounge room door.

My mother winced. I averted my head from her wince as much as his answer. *Is a wince all we get, Mum? What would it take to get more?* But she has no answers so I do not ask these questions.

Satin regarded us from under the nest of tables. She seemed to recover quickly. Cats are adaptable. She never seemed to bear me any grudge for giving her up and letting her go. She only ran away once, when she leapt out of the open car window during one of his tirades. We were pulled up in a side street at the time so there was no traffic to speak of. Satin ran onto an empty building site. I had to beg Bob to let me go after her and as I picked my way through the brick foundations to where she crouched waiting for me, I thought *if she got away some nice Glen Iris person would look after her, she's a beautiful siamese cat*, but I scooped her up and carried her back. After all, what if no one did look after her? Life is a series of these dilemmas. Between two nightmares, which is worse?

The City

Me and Mum will catch a tram and go into the city together and we will go shopping and she'll buy me things. A new doll. A shoulder bag. We will have lunch in Coles' Cafeteria. And in the afternoon, as we come home, the sinking dread will emerge again in my stomach and a day of pleasure will end, sharply curtailed like a dovetailed frame around an old family photograph.

Like the harsh jerking corners of the Mad Mouse she takes me on at the Show.

* * * * *

There might be pretty ladies on the tram. In the carriages at each end of the tram, the long green vinyl benches set passengers face to face. There is only each other to look at. I love looking at the pretty ladies. The have beautiful handbags and big rings and bracelets. They look elegant and poised. They haughtily purchase Day Trippers and locate themselves in their books and magazines without a glance across at us.

Sometimes old ladies get on and Mum covers up her uniform because if they see she is a nurse they will tell her about their corns or gall bladder. Mum does not look at the pretty ladies. She doesn't notice the difference between big clogs and dainty wedge sandals with open toes. She does not have my eye. She has too many moving pictures inside her own head, grappling for her full attention.

Sometimes I try to talk to her on the tram. Sometimes she listens. Not often. Listening is hard for her when there are so many stronger voices all talking at once.

Mum, I watched the midday movie, about a girl, she was thirteen, and she ran away from her Mum's house 'cos they had a fight.

I wait but there is no reply except a faint *Mmmh?*

The kid got found by the cops and she'd been bein' a prostitute and her mum was real mad and blamed her for runnin' off and the mum had, um, a boyfriend, and she, the mum, called him this kid's father and the kid said, he's not my father, he's just the man you sleep with?

My voice went up. I made it a question, to flatten the sting.

But Mum just varied her usual response.

Mmmh.

I liked tram trips. I could think about the day that I would be one of those ladies with nice clothes and haughty smiles who came and went as they chose and did not look over their shoulders.

* * * * * *

As the tram passes the Gallery, anticipation builds. Bourke Street is only two more stops.

Where'll we go first? I ask Mum.

T & G, she says. *I've got bills to pay.*

My heart sinks. I must trot after her into boring tall buildings with only boring men in suits to look at. She will stand in a queue for ages. Why does that stuff always take so long?

And after that?

I've got to go to the Bank.

A necessary evil. No new bag without first the bank.

Where will we go for lunch?

What about Coles' Grill Room?

Yes! A real ladies' restaurant. We will look like a lady and her young daughter meeting in the city for lunch. I will hold my fork poised in the air and speak, gesturing with my other hand. I briefly regret my bitten nails. Other diners will look at us and wonder who I am and what I speak of. We will have my new

shoulder bag by then and I will be elegant. She will tease me when I order wine trifle and have to cut the top half off because it is all fake cream. We will giggle over a string of private jokes.

I love Coles' Grill Room, Mum.

No answer, but she smiles.

* * * * * *

I have learnt this useful lesson from my mother: do the boring, tedious, utterly mundane first in life then reward yourself with the pleasant and exciting. This will keep you aware that pleasure and tedium come as an irrevocable package deal.

It is an endless walk to the T&G Building, but Collins Street is full of beautifully dressed women. On the way back, I see a lady who takes my breath away. She wears head to toe steel grey; knee length leather boots, wool skirt and silky-knit top, elegant grey envelope slipped over one shoulder. At her throat is a smudge of yellow and grey silk. She is reed thin and moves sinuously. I tug Mum's elbow and indicate the lady. Mum wakes from her reverie.

Oh, darling, isn't she smart? We watch appreciatively. Mum says how the lady must be well to do. I think that means rich.

The Wales Corner is a huge bank all decorated in red. I hang over the aisle cords like monkey bars and practice signing my name on withdrawal slips. Mum

slides back into the world of her papers and passbooks. I remind her of the time we brought Grandma in here and she demanded to see the manager, only to tell him she thought his decor hideous.

The whole place is red! Red! It's improper, it's dreadful, do you understand? Gives me vertigo. Don't you care at all for propriety, let alone your elderly customers? Do you know how much money I have in fixed deposits with this bank?

The manager could do nothing to reason with Grandma. His every response made it worse. But we had a great day in Town **that** day, the three of us. Grandma was always in better form after venting her spleen.

Mum must remember that day fondly, too, because she gives me a real smile.

My gleeful anticipation of the shoulder bag to come causes me to hop, skip and jump out of the bank. It's hardly elegant but there's time for that once the bag is bought.

Now can we get my bag, Mum?

Mmmh.

Yes!

We go first to the children's bags in Coles. There is one that is OK but it is a child's bag: low on elegance. It does have heaps of compartments and a cute chain on the front. I hesitate. I really want a grown up bag.

I want one that will fit my bible, for church.

Oh, wicked, wicked liar. But it works!

We go to PB shoes. A lovely, haughty young woman serves us. Mum tells her we want a shoulder bag and I point to a gorgeous one which zips on top and curves like a banana. The young lady draws me toward another.

That's very expensive, she murmurs. I'm crestfallen. Then she shows me a square white envelope with a big silver buckle. It has a wide strap, navy lining and three compartments. It is lovely.

Do you like it, Louise? My mother is using the tone with which she reminds me that every pleasure has a price. *It is practical? Will you get sick of it?*

Hardly. *Yes, I like it, I love it.*

Mum buys it, while I empty my old bag into it. I trip over in the street three times while staring down at my bag, until I discover how elegant the bag and I look reflected in shop windows.

Mum, isn't it great?

Lou, you've asked me that six times. Yes, it's great. You make sure you look after it. Don't lose it.

Don't **lose** it? She really is crazy. I don't plan on taking my eyes off it.

Sometimes I think Mum wants to bring me down. But not much can bring me down today.

We buy Mum's pantyhose and a matching cup, saucer and plate for Grandma. I am always uncomfortable amongst the fragile crockery and the ladies are all too old to be interesting. But I know Grandma will love her cup set almost as much as I love my bag.

Lunch, Louise?

Yes, and then can I get my doll?

Mmmh.

I have my lovely bag. I think I'll get a baby doll. The kind with a huggable body.

The Bathroom Door

The bathroom door in our flat at St. Margaret's sticks shut. You have to drag it closed, and shove it to open it. You always know when someone is coming in and out of the bathroom. Handy. Besides, Mum uses the bathroom for a burrow and so she needs six locks on the doors. You can hear her flipping the various locks and then pushing the door. Gives you at least a couple of minutes' warning.

Those locks make a loud sound in a silent flat, particularly when the silence is forced and buzzing. The silence buzzes with the sounds of the unspoken. Most things are unspoken which doesn't mean they go away. When he would pull me on top of him and hold me down there the buzzing would sound like a chorus of crickets at dusk. Mostly Mum isn't there. She is on late shift or shopping or *paying her bills* which was Mum-speak for mooching around town doing fuck all. He rarely takes the risk when she's home. I'm not sure what I mean by *risk.* After all, she can revise most things instantly on the spot. The sight of her de facto husband getting off by rubbing himself up and down on her daughter would probably slot in somewhere.

This particular time Mum is in the bathroom. We are both dead familiar with her burrowing in there (except only I knew that's what she's doing). She stay's in there for half an hour sometimes. A nuisance when you need to wee. I guess he thinks he'll get away with it. I am sort of surprised but not really.

If Mum wasn't home, I'd go somewhere else in my head. Usually Cottlesbridge. I'd pretend I was hiking down Shay's steep hill, watching the dog chase rabbits. But this time, because Mum was home, I had to stay on guard.

I don't want her to see.

If she sees, I'll have to face that she doesn't see. She's my mother but that's where it stops. No point looking out for magic Mum because Freud invented her. Because he didn't have one either. Damn him, though, because he got all our hopes up.

Today, however, she's quicker than usual. Maybe her burrow isn't working so well (I know that feeling) or she can hear the buzzing too. Whatever, we hear the locks start to flip.

Suddenly, I feel his clutching hands squeeze and push me and a rush of air as I sail backwards across the room. He thrusts me so hard and fast away from him that I hit the bedroom wall and fall to the floor. I am completely winded. But fortunately this time he did not take my clothes off.

They always live in weird flats. In this one you must walk through their bedroom to get to the bathroom. Mum comes around the corner.

Louise, what are you doing on the floor.

She isn't asking a question. She is commenting in the way she thinks mothers do. She is not interested in the answer. This is a model that will last all our lives: she will state questions to which she does not really seek answers.

I have gasped a breath I notice she does not even look at Bob who is lying in bed. Since he doesn't read anything but the form guide, this is curious behaviour in the middle of the day.

I was, um, gulp, *dancing and I got, um, dizzy and fell down.*

She has walked right past and is clanking pans in the kitchen. She is not interested. She must have noticed the tension but of course she has never noticed anything as subtle as tension. Revision is hard enough without sensitivity to what goes on around you.

I stand up. Bob has his hands under the comforter. He looks at me and I remember what protecting my mother means. He thinks I do not want her to know. He is right. So I have to share yet another filthy secret with him. The price of protecting my mother is that I can be construed as willing. But I protect her to protect me from her utter disregard.

Having A Bet Each Way

The Kingswood sucks up the curves of Church Road. We are away. Back I go. Back. Our personal sound of the city, 3UZ's racing coverage, serenades us.

Louey?

I hear the insistent sing-song tone Bob thinks is sounding authoritative.

Yes.

Never a question, always a statement.

Why you tell Father we lose money?

Bob can't say "Dad" or "Grandpa" so he always calls them : "Mother" and "Father".

I spy a chance to use my carefully constructed superiority.

Oh, is it a secret?

Mum makes a small explosive noise of frustration. I know she is bound by a desire to encourage truthfulness that does not reduce her standing in her father's eyes or create dilemmas like this one, that require so much energy merely to endure.

Louise. Grandpa will worry. He worries. We don't want him to worry unnecessarily.

Worry **unnecessarily**?? You lie. There's no danger of that.

So when he asks, should I lie?

Mum hesitates, hung over a barrel. Bob may not understand this moral dilemma but he knows and hates any resistance on my part.

Louey, it not Father's Business.

Should I tell him Bob said that, Mum?

Too far, idiot.

Abenti, micah, stupida, stupida. You tell nothing, fucking nothing, nothing stupida? You hear what I say?

You spoke? *Yes.*

I see Mum's shoulders rise and tighten.

I know. I won't answer Grandpa, so he'll arrange to have my hearing tested.

Mum is silent, weighed in many directions by equal immobilizing forces. I know how that feels. Bob is in that place I can send him where he can't decide what I mean.

Mum clears her throat, her way of testing the ground, buying time.

You should tell Grandpa that we don't discuss it with you, Louise. Do you understand?

I consider this. *But Mum, he doesn't ask if you tell me. He asks if I know.*

She is so out of it she thinks it's the same thing.

I know, I know. I'll tell him he should ask youse.

They both catch their breath. This innocence-feigning response guarantees maximum irritation to both of them. Mum is holding her breath, trying to gather her incoherent feelings into a verbal response. This will take her a while. But Bob is angry, which takes no time at all.

Louey, it not Father's business. I not his business.

But it's not just you asshole. It's not your money.

So you've said. This is beyond him, so I press my advantage.

I think he considers the well being of his family very much his business. A pièce de resistance.

I have always used this tactic of out-languaging my stepfather. My love for words probably stems from the opportunities for thrust and parry they've always offered.

Mum hates that Bob can't understand me. Does she hate it because it irks and provokes him until he lashes out at someone smaller than him in everything but mind? Or does she hate that my verbal shields force her irrevocably to face what he is? What they are? He is incapable of conversation, discussion. But Mum could avoid facing this, mostly, if I didn't forcibly expose her.

I wait for her to respond to my 'well being' remark but she does not. She is embarrassed and ashamed about the gambling. She spent enough years with Grandma to know what a satanic act it is. She thinks because she never spends the rent money that she is more moral than he is. Liar, liar. Tightrope wire.

But I am a liar, too.

I did not tell Grandpa about the Big Loss on the Sure Thing because he asked, nor because I thought it would help. It is not the loss of money that I care about.

I told him for me. Purely for me. My mother might suffer-I hate that. I do.

But sometimes I let her go down for me. Just like she lets me go down for her.

Maybe, when I lie in bed after a Bad Day at the Races, and hear the periodic *thwack thwack* of him slapping her face while he raves at her for somehow preventing his horse from winning, even if it was her horse too, maybe I only cry for me. I only care for me not to have to hear it, always alone, and know that Mum, my Mum, is as weak and useless as me and little Satin. But worse. She stays.

Maybe I told Grandpa to punish her. It worked well.

I should try telling Grandma. Grandma would not take Mum aside, quietly, by the elbow and 'express concern'. She would shriek bombast at my mother so all Cottlesbridge could hear. She would shout at Bob, too. Grandpa would never say anything to Bob.

Hang On.

Then how does he know?

She told him. She **told** him. Why?

I know why.

Sometimes, conspiracy is a shield. Brief, fleeting fragments of control. I use it too. So, she must have done it to....

No, don't think about it.

So I achieved nothing really. Bob is pissed off, so I'll need to be on egg shells for days. Mum is angry at me in the cold passive martyred way she does so well. And every week I'll have to worry about what Grandpa says next.

I wanted to avoid the TAB life, with its masses of angry stiff men who live to get money and give it away, listen to races and punch windows and people they claim to love. I hate them, their faces like matching grey sculptures telling of something....I don't want to hear.

But I can't avoid it.

Cake -Making

Please don't let it be him; please don't let it be him don't let it be him.

Is it his car?

Oh shit, it is. Damn. What can I be doing? I'll be reading; a good book, studying hard, that's what I'll do. Characteristic bookworm, that's me. She's a good student, studies hard, don't they know I have to burrow? where else would I burrow? Here he comes.

Bang. The door. Scooby has gone out the bedroom window go Scooby save yourself.

Crash. The dishes. He's hungry. He's grabbing food. Any minute any minute any minute.

Louey, what you doing?

I'm reading.

What you reading?

A book.

Where your mother?

At this time of day I would normally presume she's at work.

You make me cake, Louey?

Not now.

Why not now? I want cake. You make cake, Louey.

And this time it is not a question.

I roll off the bed and put the book down. The hot jumping panic envelops me. His eyes are always on me, that's where the heat comes from.

Shaking, hot, I gather the dishes, the cake tin, where is the flour? use a cake mix, it's easier. I could put something in it, crush a hundred Mogadon, Mum has lots in her drawer, she gets them from work, they are her burrow, not a better burrow than mine, just different. She doesn't know I know she needs a burrow, but we all do don't we? Tip in the cake mix, get an egg, put the shell in the kitchen tidy.

Don't make mess, Louey

Why fucking not? you won't clean it.

His hands are on my shoulders as I mix the cake. I will be solid, make my mind a wall but there are no walls...I will it away. Soon I will be back at Cottlesbridge, down at Foxes, the sun will be shining. It is all green and gold, there are rabbits, there goes Sarah, catch a rabbit Sarah. It'd have to have myxo...why do I have to live like this?

One day, I will lie in bed trying to sleep and suddenly notice that my teeth and jaw are tightly clenched. I will not notice until I am 29 years old.

2. Bush

The Awful Time

I hate having to go places with my cousins: because they are children, I end up having to be one too. I am not usually a child and I find it demeaning. My aunt and uncle take a fiendish pleasure in forcing childlikeness on me when I am with them on my own. I notice they don't do it in front of Grandma and Grandpa or Mum. Maybe those Victorian child-rearing practices weren't so bad; you know, miniature adults. Aunty Shirley is so patronising. I can't understand it. What do people get out of putting down a seven year old? I mean, it's not as if you must be immensely powerful or anything. Anyway, I'm here stuck in the back of my Uncle Davey's car with my two hideous cousins and my uncle driving us to Sunday School which is a pathetic place where we must listen to endless stories of how nice Jesus was. Shirley and David don't acknowledge my existence, a slight for which I will long bear them a vicious grudge. Acknowledgment is very important to me. I wonder if they realise this? I doubt it. Children are completely expendable. I sit in the HR Holden and lean my chin on the top of the bench seat, closely contemplating the chrome ashtray nestled into the thick red vinyl. David drives as he talks, in huge, unsubstantiated gushes, and it is best not to watch or listen. My entire family drives like this. The upshot is that I will be too scared to drive at all. It's inculcated. David is distracted and grumpy; this is also par for the course with him, but I know today he is thinking of Aunty Gladys Stewart and Poor Cousin Freddy who is such a Problem.

We are forced each Sunday lately to sit in the car while Uncle David visits the Stewarts for their spiritual check-up and engages with Aunty Gladys in 'adult-speak' which of course we kids are assumed not to understand. I can translate for my cousins, having acquired the Ear when I threw off childhood shackles, but these happily infantile creatures lack the sophistication and the intellect (on which I pride myself) to appreciate adult-speak's many mysteries. The urchins show a preference for exploring the twists of Cottlesbridge Creek which borders the Stewart's farm. But not this day in September 1971. Sunday School demandingly beckons like a sadistic preacher and demands an alacrity not considered necessary for mere weekday, or non-spiritual, pursuits. Besides, Poor Cousin Freddy has been even Poorer and more of a Problem of late and the specific details are so salacious that even adult-speak must be uttered in lowered tones lest there be a precocious child nearby. Uncle Davey's always limited good humour is exhausted and what I come to know as worry lines his face above his huge, unruly beard.

I have no real idea of the dimensions of the Problem that afflicts Freddy save that it sends adults into crumpled face syndrome where they drink tea and congregate for hours and have even less patience than usual with child-length boredom factor. Cousin Freddy's Problem appears to get worse but really, did they never notice he was a bit odd? I certainly did. He is 28 years old and I have scarcely heard him speak in my life. He grunts and mutters, looks at the ground and drowns kittens. This I cannot forgive. He is not Poor Cousin Freddy in my eyes as long as he drowns kittens.

The Problem deepens and draws in the wider net of the families Prask, Pierre, Stewart and Kennedy. My mother's always laboured shoulders grown even more tense and she rails at them

What can I do?

and they say

Dell, you are a nurse you must do something.

Distant, stern male relatives fill the Stewart Lounge room. The doors of this house are closed like never before. We don't close doors in this family, we don't knock, we don't use keys.

The eyes and mouth of my world shut down with me outside, knowing only the sheer physical compulsion of wanting to know.

We drive off to Sunday School in Uncle Davey's Holden. It is a mild, sunny spring day. Wattle and eucalypt filter dapples of sunlight onto the bower of the Hurstbridge Road. My cousins and I sing and scream at each other but a cord of wary tension holds us in a certain check. Uncle David is preoccupied, fierce. We maintain the sulky confusion that childhood imposes: we know something but not IT. I continue to sing my favourite Sunday school chorus.

He owns the cattle on a thousand hills

The wealth in every mine

He owns the rivers and the rocks and mills

the sun and the stars that shine.

Wonderful riches more than tongue can tell

He is my Father so they're mine as we-el-ll

He owns the cattle on a thousand hills

so I know He cares for me.

Suddenly Uncle David snaps an epithet, a word usually forbidden to the Bible-based Pierre family. The car veers sharply across the winding road. Up ahead of us, at the driveway to the Stewart's place, Aunty Glad runs frantically, waving her arms above her head. At first I think she is doing star jumps. She and Grandma do them together all the time. They enjoy a particular form of muscular christianity.

We must do our exercises, Glady.

Yes Gerty.

Grandma star jumps ten times each night before getting into bed. But Aunty Gladys is not exercising. With her apron flapping and her forearms covered in the flour of Sunday scones, she is not out here to take the air. She is trying to get attention and she moves heavily, with a desperate, pathetic hope that I feel like a bee-sting at the back of my neck. This Problem, that makes my mother so sad and Uncle David so angry, threatens our world with such malevolence that for the briefest second I do not want to know.

We hear the faintest whine of words as Gladys speaks

Freddy, oh my poor boy, oh Jesus help him.

Invoking Jesus somewhat less sincerely, Uncle David flings the car down the driveway. He slams the Holden to a stop on the old plank bridge that covers the Stewart's strip of Cottlesbridge Creek. David is careless in his panic; the back end of the car is perilously close to the edge of the bridge, so that when I ignore his barked instructions *Stay in the car or I'll whip the bloody lot of ya's* and open my door, all I see is the wild, muddy flow of September rains some twenty feet below me. My only child dignity has always clashed with David's assumptions of Divine Parental rule. I rebel and distinguish myself from his children by defiance. I am well known for it. But today I watch in disbelief as he leaps the bolted gate and lopes, his mother's sister trotting forgotten behind him, towards that which will be referred to from today on as The Awful Time. A silence unnatural to childhood continues. I debate with myself possible sanctions for leaving the car (via some other door) versus the unbearable, pressing need to KNOW. But it is not the sanctions or the chasm beneath that holds me, uncharacteristically obedient, in that car.

Something has come to visit the Stewart and Prask families. I can feel Its newness here but I am not sure I wish to confront It. Suddenly, Davey is back. His chalky face looks younger than I have ever seen it but it is his terribly shaking hands that frighten us even further into rigid silence. I have no voice to ask him what he saw and anyway we have roared backwards out of the driveway and toward our homes so fast I fear even for us. We pass the car of the

local copper. Davey, a former Mountie himself, hangs on the horn and shrieks instructions.

Get down to the Stewarts'. Mrs Stewart needs you.

Davey spins the wheels as he slams the car up Church Road, dust whirling behind us. We sail up the steep driveway of my grandparents' home. Davey flings himself past my mother, into the house. Her face contorts as he passes her. I am told for the rest of my life what happens next; how Davey flies into the bathroom where his mother, my grandmother, is naked, taking her weekly immersion in water in preparation for Church. His behaviour and his words are part of the Great Legend:

Your sister needs you. Now.

Grandma and Mum said later that they knew Freddy was dead then. I sat still on the red vinyl bench seat until Mum came and drew me out, gently, to her soft perfumed body that was so unfamiliar and yet offered such abiding comfort. The day was passed with adults making repeated trips to the Stewart's farm and endless cups of tea that nobody ever finished.

Aunty Gladys was brought to sit on our sunny porch, where she gazed off, endlessly silent. Years later, when studying psychology, I understood perfectly the concept of 'catatonic'. I had seen it. As she sat on our porch immovable in grief for her only child, Aunty Glad was catatonic.

Pierre Family Legend peaks with the Death by Misadventure of Freddy Stewart and the endless tug of moral war to explain his grisly death beneath the tray of his tip truck that inexplicably lowered on him that crisp Spring morning. It was an accident of course, said the older generation. Maybe his dog knocked the switch while he lay working underneath. The many questions this explanation begs were left unasked, so obvious were they. Mercifully, the younger members of our family only whispered 'suicide' amongst themselves and Freddy's debt, depression, barbiturate addiction and agonised sexuality were pushed amongst the other bones in the deep Prask closet.

Years late I would know that Freddy was not Gladys' son; he was Olwyn's son and with Olwyn went a tendency to *melancholia*. Olwyn, the youngest Prask sister, had too many children too easily. Gladys, the oldest, most reliable, daughter had one suitor whom her possessive father refused. She married old Mr Stewart, a widower with seven children, shortly after her father's death. She did not have any children of her own so when Olwyn had yet another one in dubious circumstances (her husband had been deceased for some time) Gladys adopted him.

Through the maze of sexual and psychological fact and intrigue pushed the insights into Freddy's death as I grew older. Freddy drowned kittens and I rescue them. Freddy suffered bitter insecurity and had no idea who he was until one Sabbath he died underneath his tip-truck. Children are completely expendable, after all.

The Despicable Trick

Families. What do we do to each other? We harvest whatever is in the seed collection from the generation before. And inevitably, we reap what we sow.

The Beatles said *Love is all you need.* Don't get me wrong: I agree with them. But they should have been a tad more specific. What sort of love? Who can provide it? Who can't? Can you get it from Lifeline? American Express? Love isn't what it sounds like. It isn't what we think of when we hear the word. It isn't desire or greed or hunger or need or hope. It isn't selfishness or pride. But these often appear in lieu of love. The word love is used where one of these would better fit.

You don't love me.

I want to be loved by you.

If you loved me you would.

I love you but....

Often, they don't actually mean love. I don't mean to sound judgmental; I think a lot of people actually don't know what love is. They mean cuddles, romance, sex, servitude, comfort or protection. But we find it hard to ask for those things. We can legitimately ask to be loved, even when that isn't what we mean.

My grandmother, Gertrude Pierre, suffered from not being loved nearly enough. She was born merely because children kept being born after marriage at that

time. The family was poor, she was a nuisance and this fact was never hidden from her.

Needing affection, attention, affirmation (none of which is love), she met a young man and believing it was love, she got pregnant. But that isn't love either.

It was the 1920's. Her mother took the child, Jack, and raised him as Gertrude's younger brother. She didn't 'lose' him but she did lose a bit more of herself.

And then, gradually, both her sisters married and all she had were memories of something she built into love, not having a lot to compare it to. Then she met another young man and got pregnant, for much the same reasons, which by this time were even more urgent. Believing as she did that this must be love, she assumed he would marry her. After all, she let him believe, he had taken the honored gift of her virginity. And marry her he did. Herbert Pierre married Gertrude Prask, first breaking off his engagement to the love of his life, Eileen. Now **that** was love. Gerty believed Jack loved her, and he confirmed it by marrying her. He believed she loved him, after all she did give him her virginity. Different feelings, needs and motives, if called love long enough, may rise to the power of suggestion and shoot a little sprig of green which grows to be love. This is better than no love at all.

But need and fear and lust and deception and betrayal and guilt are not love. Gerty and Jack did not really love each other. And when, many years later, someone saw fit to acquaint Jack Pierre with the real parentage of young Jack Prask, Herb realised that the basis of his marriage to Gerty, the mother of his

son and daughter, was false. She had tricked him. The trick was despicable. She had long since lost her womanly value when she happened upon Herb Pierre at work in the Cottlesbridge fields one day. But he had believed he was responsible for her loss of innocence, so he felt he had to marry her. Of course, Gertrude had been losing her innocence since the time of her earliest memories. Herb was not responsible. He was just consistent.

The Despicable Trick became family folklore; common knowledge amongst the kids, the kids' kids and their cousins. It was a source of shame to Gerty. After all, Herb had married her - big of him, wasn't it? - because she would be shamed by giving birth to a child no man would claim. But she had already worn that shame. She lied to him. Out of desperation, she had tricked him.

Herb wreaked multiple vengeances on Gertrude for the loss of his pride. He flaunted his love affair with Eileen (now **that** was love) while Gerty buried her hurts and unfulfilled dreams in her garden, her religious zeal and the careful construction of her personal passion play. It was righteous to say that God loved her. The christians are often telling us God loves them. It doesn't seem to help them. It didn't help Grandma. But I don't mean to suggest that God doesn't love us. If he didn't surely he'd have crushed us all in a fit of frustration. I think God's love must have got stuck at entry to the earth's atmosphere. A terrible shame. We need all the love we can get.

But love doesn't often get a chance. If love is all we need, it would solve the very problems that prevent it from flourishing. Because we, the human race,

find it impossible to love until we are loved. Very few are loved, because very few have been loved.

I used to ask Grandma if she loved me.

Do you love me? I used to ask, in different tones and with various emphases.

In spots, was her answer. It was better than *No* but it sure wasn't *Yes*.

I never had to ask Grandpa. He told me half a dozen times a day.

How did you get to be so beautiful and brilliant? he'd ask me.

I offered him various answers, depending on my mood. Sometimes I'd try to guess the one he'd like best.

'Cos God made me that way? (I wasn't entirely certain).

It was a source of wonder. No one else in my family ever said I was brilliant or beautiful. A teacher once said I was a *very able girl*. The doctor told me I was *astonishingly poised* for a child of twelve. You learn to catch it where it lives.

Mum often said she loved me but she never listened to me so I took it with a fistful of salt. It didn't count. You can't really love someone you don't listen to, although many people try to do it that way.

Grandpa called me *Precious* all the time. It's a nice word. But I don't think he ever said *I love you* to Grandma. He didn't tell her she was brilliant and beautiful. He basically ignored her. Once I heard him tell her what a good dinner she had cooked. She beamed like a light had gone on inside her...

They were seventy something at the time.

It wouldn't have taken all that much for them both to get past The Despicable Trick. For fifty years this family has called it that. Poor Gertrude wanted to get married because she believed that then she would be loved. I don't know what Grandpa thought. Maybe he didn't think. If they'd loved themselves it wouldn't have happened and I wouldn't be here to tell you how much I learned from them.

That's right. I loved them both and I learned how to do it differently.

Aunty Gladys

It was a crackling hot day when Aunty Gladys shut her hand in our car door. Grandma and I had alighted and we were distracted by the heat glaze which shimmered at us. Aunty Gladys did not call out or scream, she stood still, she jerked a bit, I felt the vibrations, silently, until she folded into a few creases and started to slide toward the road, where she propped, sort of crumpled, like a piano accordion under her but her arm was held up in a nazi salute, buried to the wrist in the seam of the closed car door.

I turned in time to see her leave her own eyes and I tugged Grandma's skirt and said *Aunty Gladys* and Grandma moved and I felt the relief of her smooth, certain action. Then the Greengrocer, *A nice man*, they all said but I never knew why he was green, came running over and said *What's wrong with Mrs Stewart* and Grandma was tugging at the door and couldn't open it but still she said *It's all right Glady you'll be out in a jiffy* and the Greengrocer took the handle and the car door opened and Aunty Gladys' hand fell down a little and lay against the brown vinyl seat, her squashed fingers like a couple of fat sausages next to some pieces of chalk. She'd fainted.

So we took her home after the Greengrocer put her in the car for us, laying her flat on the back seat of the Valiant and we took her to the brick house she bought when Freddy died. Grandma and I helped her walk inside and lay her on her bed and Grandma put the fan on her and the faintest fleeting promise of cool touched our faces amidst the hot dark room and outside flies buzzed and the

brightness clawed at the corners of the blind. Grandma sat with her sister and gave her sweet black tea and read to her while the hand with the sausages floated in a china pudding bowl of rosewater. That pudding bowl had housed my favourite summer puddings and held the pure cream while it was whipped to chiffon peaks but now it held my Aunty Gladys' hand waiting for its fingers to return from their swollen state.

Life is flux. Change is graduated. For thirty five years Grandma had driven down to Stewart's farm to see her sister. Then one Sunday it stopped being the Farm and became the place where Freddy died. Aunty Gladys had to have all her stuff packed up by her family. She couldn't go in there for months.

So the farm was sold and Aunty Gladys bought a three bedroom brick house in Hurstbridge town. It had trees and a nice backyard. It was a big suburban house. That was a hard adjustment; from fifty acres to a quarter of one. Aunty Gladys had never lived alone. She didn't like it. So Beryl Kent moved in with her.

Although I called Beryl Kent *Mrs Kent* to her face, our family always called her Beryl Kent. Beryl Kent lived in a tiny cottage up the back of Flat Rock Road. Hurstbridge can be a bit contrary. Flat Rock Road was very steep. But there were lots of rocks. Beryl Kent had a property which ran down the side of a very steep hill. She kept chooks, although not for long as individuals. Foxes were the bane of her life and she delighted in telling me cruel methods she had thought up to get rid of them. Every Sunday, Grandma would buy two dozen eggs from Beryl Kent and I would get an installment on fox torture. I longed to ask her

when her methods might kick in and discourage remaining foxes. But I didn't dare.

Beryl Kent didn't drive and she was dependent on our Church Friends to take her places. I never knew about Mr Kent. He was Out of the Picture. I wasn't one to ask, because I knew about families who Didn't Have Fathers. But in the Hurstbridge Church of Clichés congregation, absent fathers were very noticeable. Unfortunately, Beryl Kent's children were absent too. It was never stated, though known by all, that they were In Gaol.

When Aunty Gladys bought her house, Beryl Kent decided to share it with her. Grandma was furious: it was her province to decide things on behalf of Aunty Gladys. Grandma and Beryl Kent were very similar. They disliked each other intensely.

Aunty Gladys didn't object to a housemate and so Beryl Kent divided her week between Flat Rock Road and Hurstbridge Town. She was always there on the weekend because it meant she could walk to Church.

I loved to go and stay with Aunty Gladys on Saturday nights. She made delectable roasts with fragrant gravy and pink meat and dessert every time! But Beryl Kent took some of the shine off these weekly expeditions. Beryl Kent disapproved of me and nothing distressed me more.

Beryl Kent disapproved of my mother for leaving me with Grandma and Grandpa. Lots of people did, actually, but Beryl Kent let it be known. When I

would clamber onto Grandma's lap (at the age of six or seven) she would glare at me.

What a sook! Big girl like you. Get down off poor Nana.

I hated it when people called Grandma *Nana*.

Grandma would defend me but such criticism always stung. I would dart glances at Beryl Kent before venturing along a path I felt might invite her judgement. But my whispered attempts at secrecy only drew her attention. She was always on to me!

What's she asking for now? Louise Kennedy, don't you think you're spoilt enough?

We Only-Children hate being called spoilt and I hated it extra. Probably because it was true. In more ways than one.

Beryl Kent had lots of wonderful opportunities to dog me in this way. She was the manager of the Church of Clichés' stalls. Stalls were a central part of the Church of Clichés' meagre fundraising. Every time there was an election, we had a stall outside the school. Aunty Gladys would bake cakes of all kinds, Grandma would knit jumpers and make relish and Beryl Kent would dress dolls.

Beryl Kent had a house full of dolls. She would rescue them and knit or sew outfits for them. Sometimes she even sold additional outfits, so you could take

home a change of clothes for dolly or teddy. While Grandma exclaimed over pot holders and covered coat hangers, I was speechless at the range of outfits available for dolls and teddies of every size. Dressing dolls was one of my favourite activities (eventually to be replaced by dressing myself).

I always wanted another doll. The minute I owned a doll (or a cap gun or a handbag) it ceased to bring the happiness and fulfillment it promised right up until it was mine. Yet I remained convinced (until quite recently) that the elusive Perfect One was out there somewhere. This foolish assumption applies to many things besides dolls.

Grandpa was the Church of Clichés' Treasurer. He knew each purchase off the Stall went straight to God. Under those circumstances, it was not difficult to prevail on him to purchase me the doll of my all too brief dreams.

Which one do you want, Precious?

The little blonde one with the blue outfit (or the tall one with the yellow dress. Or the teddy with trousers and a grandpa shirt).

Grandpa would select it and instantly those eyes would turn our way. You would think Beryl Kent would have appreciated a sale. But no

Oh, you're not buying that child another doll, Herbert? Where's the last one, young lady?

When one keeps needing just another one because the promise of the last one was false, this is the worst question to be asked. I didn't know. It really didn't matter. But I hated having attention brought to this weakness.

The doll was just adequate to soothe my humiliation but I had to make myself scarce. Once I had a doll, the others on the table immediately held more appeal. If I so much as glanced at them, Beryl Kent would be off.

Louise Kennedy, how many dolls does one spoilt little girl need? Your eyes are always bigger than your stomach!

I would stalk away and play a game about the day I would return to Hurstbridge as a Famous Success and I would bring about some great bounty to the town. I might be a fashion designer and I would mention my humble beginnings buying dressed dolls. That'd shut her up.

Beryl Kent probably fitted in with Aunty Gladys precisely because she was so bossy. Just like Grandma. I don't think Aunty Gladys really liked it but she was much too gentle to fight back. There were some things she just couldn't do. Usually, she would get Grandma to do them. Grandma was a Doer.

I am exactly the same.

One night, the phone rang, later than it normally would. It was Aunty Gladys, asking in a very faint voice for Grandma to come at once. Beryl Kent had been

doing lace crochet and had somehow put the tiny hook through her thumb. I could tell by Aunty Gladys' voice that there must have been blood.

Grandma and I drove to Hurstbridge. Grandma wondered aloud the whole way how Beryl Kent could be so clumsy. Secretly, Grandma was pleased as punch that she was needed.

There wasn't that much blood and Beryl Kent looked her usual tough self. She was slightly chagrined however.

Sorry to drag you out, Gert. Can't get the dang thing out meself and Glad is worse than useless.

Aunty Gladys was lying down. She was quite pale. The episode upset her vastly more than it did Beryl Kent. Beryl Kent's ego was hurt much more than her thumb.

Beryl Kent shared Aunty Gladys' home on and off for two years. On Saturday nights after the huge roast and sponge cake dinner, Beryl Kent would tuck me into bed. At the time, I couldn't work it out. Now I know she was making sure I couldn't get out of bed.

Aunty Gladys would turn on all the electric blankets at 6 o'clock. By 8 o'clock, my bedtime according to Beryl Kent, the bed was white hot. The hospital-linen sheets were too hot to touch. Beryl Kent would pull the covers tight across my chest and tuck them under an eight inch inner spring mattress. I was trapped.

Invariably, the big dinner and hot tight bed made me feel sick as a dog. To this day, a bed heated with an electric blanket brings a wave of nausea on me which transports me to Aunty Gladys' spare room.

Aunty Gladys must have seen Beryl Kent's down side at some point, because one day Beryl Kent stopped spending half her week in her friend's house. They were perfectly civil to each other but even Grandma wouldn't speculate as to what happened. Beryl Kent went permanently back to Flat Rock Road and Grandma resumed her place at Aunty Gladys' right hand.

When Aunty Gladys got sick, she was looked after by the War People. The Department of Repatriation provided the doctors and paid all the bills. This was because Uncle Angus Stewart had been to War. Aunty Gladys got sick suddenly and got much worse quickly. Everyone panicked. She was a kind of glue holding our family together. It was decided that when Aunty Gladys came home, Mum would be her Private Nurse and live there and look after her. Everyone was relieved. Second Cousin Dallas Timin would Help, they all said, because he and Rose lived close by and were Handy.

Grandma made plans for Aunty Gladys' recovery.

All the things we meant to do, she said.

But...Aunty Gladys died in the Repatriation General Hospital, known in my family as *Repat* because we were so dead familiar with it. Mum had worked there as a very young nurse, and again when she returned, humiliated, to

Melbourne as a *Deserted wife* with a little child. Repat did not acknowledge that marriages ended. You were either married (in which case you did not need a job) or you were single (in which case, you did not have a child). This was a bit too rigid for us, so Mum left me with Grandma and Grandpa and moved into the nurses home at Repat

When we went to visit Gladys, Mum knew all the little hooking corridors and old buildings. I could feel she didn't like Repat much.

Aunty Gladys Stewart was my real aunt, until I got to know Olwyn years later. Until Gladys died, we hardly ever went to see Olwyn or had her to Sunday lunch, even though she only lived in Diamond Creek. We saw Gladys all the time; she and Grandma were like best friends who do everything together for a while, only they never stopped. Gladys was plump and Grandma was skinny and they looked funny together but still right. *Gladys and Gerty*, people used to say. No one ever said *Gladys, Gerty and Olwyn.* Poor Olwyn. No wonder she got a complex about it. She and Grandma were like bickering teenage sisters.

So when we went to see Aunty Gladys in Repat she didn't look like my little plump aunty any more. She was grey from her hair down and she looked like someone had flattened her into the bed so that when you lifted her out, there would be a hollow where she had laid. Even her face was sagging, her cheeks lagged down to make a wide chin and drew her mouth sideways so she looked like she was making a funny face. There was spittle in the sides of her mouth, and her lips had gone that dull bluey red like long skinny bruises. She lay nestled flat in the bed and our family gathered round her and listened as she said

When Dallas comes back we'll go together and my adult-speak meter flared as they muttered in low tones about the significance of that remark and later when she was dead they all said, *I knew then, I knew then.*

We are hindsight sort of family.

But we didn't know then and although she said gibberish and looked like a person who had leaked out of herself we went away talking of how she would come home and my mother would be there and we would cook her delicacies and read to her from the Brontes and the Bible.

And then the next morning as I dressed for school the phone summoned me as my grandparents rarely heard it. One of Aunty Gladys' numerous step-daughters asked for Grandma and then she cried so when I told Grandma

Meg's on the phone and she's crying

I saw the red in Grandma's cheeks scuttle toward her hairline and her fleshy cheeks stretched before my eyes. She clambered to the phone; she moved like she had to climb across the kitchen. I listened but I did not hear the words, only the screaming. I remember the pink chenille of her dressing gown and her nut brown hair in its usual low bun as I pushed myself down the back stairs towards Grandpa. *Grandpa, you have to come,* and he dropped his mattock and he ran past me, he kept running like that day last Christmas when Labor finally won. When I dragged myself back into the house I saw them, Gertrude and Herb, as

he held her tight in his arms and her head was buried in his chest and she wept out loudly and her shoulders shook and I did not think she would ever stop.

And I went back to my room to dress for school and I stayed there dressed with my bag packed but no one came so I took my bag and went out to the hall and Grandma came out and saw me and she looked at me differently and she said the so often longed for words

You do not have to go to school today

and I waited to feel but all I felt was nothing and I wished so much for the feeling of getting out of school. It didn't come.

Grandma never got over the death of Gladys, her best friend and the only person alive who understood her. She saw more of Olwyn and they grew closer and Olwyn and I became firm friends in a way I could have never have been with the quiet, placid Aunty Gladys. Olwyn Timin was a kid too, even at sixty-seven, and we indulged ourselves together. Gladys was gentle and generous and gave beautiful affection and sponge cakes with cream and other luxuries our family was not used to. My mother wore an elegant black dress that Aunty Gladys had made for her to the funeral and it barely disguised that in the last eighteen months she had lost three stone. I listened to them all ask *Why* and I asked it too although I did not know what reason we were seeking. And Aunty Gladys who saw Grandma through everything that ever happened to her, became a legend and Grandma became lonelier and more self-loathing.

Aunty Gladys died when I was nine. Grandma died when I was nearly twenty three years old. I know now she lived another thirteen years without her only ever emotional support. I can't change it; I can only learn from it.

A Funny Turn

What was that? I am suddenly awake I do not know why, but something is wrong. It is dark and middle-of-the-night silent, so what woke me? The stillness interferes as I try to listen, a growing buzz of stillness which stops me hearing that which frightens me. Then the sound blasts through the hush, a moaning wail of shapelessness yet terrifying. It comes from the bed beside me. It is Grandma. I am paralysed, unable to move or to reach out and switch on the light. Why does she moan like that? I have no voice to ask her. The moan erupts again and this time I hear Grandpa stumble blindly from his bed, the sound enough to pierce even his aural fog. He pads down the hall and the light shatters through the room and flutters down onto my shoulders.

What on earth's the matter?

I don't know she's moaning she's not awake I don't know...

Gerty, wake up! What's the matter?

The moan starts again but this time it is short, staccato, jerking her whole body jerks in one long rigid line. The bed rocks. I clamber out and wrap myself in her pink chenille dressing gown. Grandpa sits on her side of the bed. He is scared, I can tell. He takes her white hand and speaks to her but there is no response.

It is three a.m. It is the ninth of April. I remember: I am ten years old today. My presents are at the top of the linen cupboard. I don't know what they are. I content myself with this fantasy as Grandma fits and foams at the mouth in the double bed I prefer to sleep in with her, rather than alone in my room across the hall.

She continues to jerk and moan. Grandpa has forgotten I am there. He stands up and sees me.

She's having a funny turn of some sort. I'll go and get your Aunty Shirl.

I remember she's a nurse or used to be. The [illegible] hill. It is just a few lifetimes' walk in the streaky charcoal dark. I would be terrified to go but it is a toss-up as to whether staying alone with the Grandma-Monster at three a.m. would be worse. Anyway, Grandpa doesn't give me a choice.

Come and sit here with her. Hold her hand and talk to her. Try and get her to acknowledge you. We need to bring her out of it.

I go and sit down. Her hand feels like clay at school after it's been wet down but no one has handled it for ages.

I flinch but I do not withdraw my hand. Grandpa has gone, to dress, pull on boots and scoot down to get my Aunty Shirl. What can she do? will Grandma have to go to Hospital? Or...?

They are so healthy. They are old but I take their health totally for granted. Suddenly she looks like a real old lady, like the women in Mum's nursing homes with paper skin and bed sores like little red windows with crusty windowsills.

Grandma speaks; in gibberish. Her body is less rigid, slowly it starts to relax. She tosses her head, like the wayward horse to which she is often compared. She opens her eyes and speaks to me but it is incomprehensible. I smile. I know just what bright patronising false voice to use. I have been around nursing homes all my life.

You're alright now, Grandma. You've had a bit of a funny turn. You'll be right. Sit up and I'll make a cup of tea.

But my industry balks at the reality that this would involve walking down the dark hall into the dark kitchen near the open back door, which was certainly not an option I'd consider in anything less than an emergency. Fortunately, Grandma was not interested in tea.

She continued to speak restlessly and intensely, searching my face for a glimmer of my understanding. I practiced my *of course I'm taking you seriously, darling* look and stroked her brow as I'd seen relatives do. She was her usual unsentimental self and furiously brushed my hand from her head. The gibberish became louder and more agitated but no less absurd. She was distressed.

She indicated that her throat was dry. I swallowed hard as I realised this would necessitate a trip halfway up the hall, to the bathroom. Not past any windows or doors however, so not too bad. I tiptoed, turned on all the lights, filled a tumbler with water.

When I returned, Grandma was divesting herself of the bedclothes. She seized the water and absorbed it. She was exhausted and fell back on the pillows. The April night was nippy but she was obviously hot. I heard the rise of an engine: a car burst up the drive through a tunnel of headlights. I ran to the front door; My aunt and uncle and Grandpa had arrived. I wished to remind them that I have had to manage alone.

She has come out of it but she is distressed.

Aunty Shirl bustled importantly down to Grandma's room. Aunty Shirl has always thought I was too old for my age, spoilt and precocious. Maybe she was right. But I loved annoying her with it.

Grandpa, don't you think we should get a doctor?

Herb, I think Louise should be in bed.

Oh Shirl, the poor little thing. She's had a terrible fright. She's hardly going to be able to sleep.

Children can sleep through most things Herb.

Of course, he ignored her. Yes. Home Run.

Shirl spoke patronisingly to Grandma. The difference was she had no idea she was doing it. Of course, Shirley always spoke patronisingly to people in our family. She thought she'd married beneath herself. Bizarre.

Grandma recognised David and Shirl. She smiled weakly. Her speech was closer to normal.

What happened? Why are you here its the middle of the night?

You had a funny turn.

I had vertigo all evening. My head was heavy all evening.

We'll have to get you to see the doctor tomorrow.

I had vertigo all day today.

Do you want a cup of tea Gerty?

Yes, please.

Grandpa put the billy on, as he always called it. Shirl and David conversed in low voices. They ignored me. They have always shared an ill-informed

assumption that children don't speak 'adult'. Hah! I'm fluent. I drank in all information happily.

I'll call the doctor first thing and then come up and meet him. It's time she went off and had proper X-Rays and was thoroughly checked out.

Shirl, she won't take any medication as religiously as she should. She'd hate to have to go to hospital.

I've told you a million times David, they can't manage here alone with the child.

What rubbish. We managed fine, thank you, not that we were interested in your point of view. Of course, there was never any point actually saying such things to Shirl.

She thought children were dumb and I was spoilt and smart-mouthed into the bargain. Grandma had more funny turns and we accepted it and looked after her because we loved her and wanted her to stay with us. Not Shirl. *She* wanted to get Grandma and Grandpa in a home and me in welfare because she would feel like such a good mother. Well, I have my views on that. Just because she and Mum did it in polar opposite ways does not make one of them an excellent parent by default. There are myriad ways to fuck your children over.

Of course, twenty years later I have realised that their parenting styles were not so very different.

Summers in Yeppoon

Going *Up North*. We did this regularly in my family- well, some of us. Those with an adventurous spirit and a need to escape. They flouted a genetic hatred of the heat and excessive famiality and the depression-mentality which forbade such extravagance as airline tickets. They broke with tradition and relocated to Yeppoon, Central Queensland. When the youngest Pierres joined various Timins in unfamiliar business ventures, a cord was stretched from Diamond Valley to the Capricorn Coast and it tensed and coiled with gossip, intrigue, envy, bitterness, confusion and hope but still, to this day, it has not snapped.

It was not long after the death of Cousin Freddy that Dave and Shirl took off to Yeppoon with my three small cousins. Close playmates we had become, a closeness which I remember profoundly in spite of its brevity. Childhood itself is brevity. But not to children. Adults know this, that one day we children will know it too. Brevity is like quicksilver. You can't bottle it or stretch it or capture its essence. By the time you realise this, it's gone. So my brief childhood mateship with my cousins ended abruptly.

As the progeny of Gertrude Pierre and Olwyn Timin gradually polarised between the remaining Victorians and the northern migrants, many of us still in Melbourne made the trek regularly. Gradually, various Timins landed around other parts of Queensland, giving me a living, breathing geography lesson which impressed my Hurstbridge peers. For Olwyn, this meant only her eldest child stayed in Melbourne. The other three were spread around rural

Queensland (no such luck that they might choose anywhere with shops!). So although her visits took her to north, central and southern Queensland, wherever she was bound she referred to her jaunt as going *up North*.

Dave and Shirl had only been gone a couple of years when Olwyn hatched the plan of taking Gertrude *up North* with her. Being a Plan Ahead sort of a clan, discussion of this idea took up a long period and in that time, the still-mourning for her son Aunty Gladys suddenly died. In spite of intrigues and bitternesses at the contents of Gladys' will, Olwyn and Gertrude both seemed to realise that they must cleave together in her absence. Gertrude had lost her best friend, constant companion and rock in life. Olwyn jumped at the chance to impose her own view of their relationship onto Gerty, not to mention the chance to shake off the tag of self-indulgent little sister. Olwyn, who still conducted herself in the ways which earned her that label had ventured on the first of many holidays to the sun, sand and surf of Yeppoon as soon as her children had unpacked their own bags. She absolutely itched to show her sister than it was not only Davey and Shirl who were doing all right *up North*

By 1974 Grandma had agreed to go. Curiosity was probably mostly responsible, along with a financial incentive provided by my mother in addition to my own fare. It came to pass that one day we all ventured, a mass of Prasks, Pierres and Kennedys, to Tullamarine, and stood outside the security check at the Gate Lounge entrance to the Boeing that was to fly us *up North*. As a first in my life it was pretty significant. I wore my dark green polyester flares and beautiful purple and mauve suede 'treads'; the most fashionable youth footwear ever to grace the seventies. My Grandmother, who taught me my everlasting passion

for handbags, had packed her latest particularly complex one with all the personal items and papers needed for the longest trip she would take in her life. Unfortunately she did not understand the processes of airport security; her concept of security was a constant close relationship with her handbag. When officially attired security personnel attempted to divest her of it Grandma took it rather personally and responded as though they were bag-snatchers; she put up a fight. Gertrude Pierre was known for her voice; a rich contralto, she had sung semi-professionally as a young woman and was still very much in full voice. The entire gate lounge turned to stare at us and I died the million deaths of adolescent embarrassment as Grandma went into full flight.

What on earth are you doing, young man? That is my ***handbag****. Give it back at once!*

Madam, I've got to run it through the security scanner.

Dell, Herb, this man is taking my bag. What exactly do you think I've got in it? Security, indeed. This bag is MY security, sir.

Lady, we have to check everyone for guns, it is standard airport policy.

I'll have you know that I am a Christian women. Guns! I tell you, I do not have a gun. I will swear on a stack of Holy Bibles that I do not possess a weapon of any kind. Olwyn, do you have your Bible on you?

Olwyn was also member of the Hurstbridge Church of Clichés but she was somewhat more sophisticated than her older sister and took a great deal of pride in her brand loyalty to Ansett Airlines. Olwyn was not so much embarrassed as perplexed. It had clearly not occurred to her to explain such manifestations of the late twentieth century. And she not want her sister to make them famous for swearing a vow to the Lord Jesus Christ in an airport departure lounge.

It's all right Gerty, they do it to everyone, they're checking for guns. They have to make sure no one tries to hijack the plan.

It did not seem to occur to anyone but Grandma that this would be best achieved by spending less time agitating elderly women. And, like me, Grandma could be mighty sarcastic.

Oh, well in that case, I'd better come clean. Young man, I will show you the entire contents of my bag and you may feel the lining. But I will not release it, nor let it out of my sight. Is that quite clear?

Not for the first time I thought what a good school librarian Grandma would have made. She and the security guard peered into her complicated handbag with the many pockets and examined the contents in detail. This seemed to satisfy one guard, but another clearly thought Grandma was still a security risk.

Oh my goodness gracious me, what are you doing with that thing?

At this point, airport security were frisking my Grandmother with a metal detector. The wand began to shriek as it encountered the huge number of chains, beads and brooches Grandma wore. But she was nothing if not a quick learner. I get that from her too.

This, young man, is a string of pearls. This is a coral brooch and this necklace is marquisite. Do you permit me to wear these onto your aeroplane?

Why, of course, Madam, I was just....

Oh, I know. You were checking for ***guns.*** *And have any of you found any yet? This debacle cost me three hundred dollars?*

An air hostess appeared out of nowhere, with a smooth expressionless face, and murmured soothing noises into Grandma's ear. I, to my everlasting relief, passed through without event. Aunty Olwyn was engaged with explaining Grandma's eccentricities to airline staff, who did not seem interested.

By this stage Grandpa was speechless with consternation and Mum was doubled up with laughter.

Sure, it had been funny. But it was pathetic that an elderly woman who had never been in a plane had been so afraid and had been laughed at and ridiculed. The burning, unendurable embarrassment that so preoccupied me blanketed my limited understanding of her feelings of fear and inadequacy.

I know now that every family has themes. One of our themes centred around Grandma Gertrude Pierre and her desperate need to Control, which she did. Or she tried. But she couldn't control the condemnation and ridicule which followed her because she was her flawed and fragile self. My heart divided between understanding for her and a need to conform to majority view every time.

It seems we always attack in others that which we like least about ourselves.

Thus began a summer ritual in my early teens of spending the long summer vacation in Yeppoon, or rather, a few miles out, in Cooee Bay. Immediately after Christmas I would pack a suitcase, assemble an outfit of drop dead glamour as judged by my meagre standards, and venture royally to Tullamarine to catch a plan to Rockhampton, via Brisbane, and ever ascending mercury levels. Those flights north were my interactive Girls' Own Adventure.

I travelled alone, I hoped to be the subject of intrigue. I hoped to be beautiful, young (but not *too* young) mysterious, impervious, reserved. I would be leaving some great tragedy or perhaps merely going to enact my glamorous occupation: private secretary, travel writer, doctor, lawyer.

The perfect, disinterested hostesses reflected what I was not, what I strived to be: poised, unrevealed. What a motif this is. When I write my life, I can see the motifs. I was not Mary Stewart or one of her heroines. I was a traumatised inadequate child who needed to present a perfect surface to a world in judgement on me.

My carefully assumed, fragile sophistication puckered and split when teased by a stronger force: youthful boredom on a three hour flight. I would fiddle in my stylish handbag, powder my puttied nose, examine my bejewelled hands, flick in a desultory manner through a glossy magazine, distracted by the centrality of being Me. Of course I was watched. Of course I was fascinating. The handsome young men wondered about me and assessed their chances if they were to approach me. I felt their wonder, their fascination. This constructed self fascinated me, too.

But fascination is hard to sustain through impatience, excitement, anxiety, fear. These are not the emotions of a sophisticate.

Less is more. This is the benchmark wisdom of sophistication. Such profundity had not reached Cottlesbridge yet and in the working class, dressed up means *as much as possible*. I know why less is more. Sophistication needs fluidity, freedom from constraint, freedom to move. Sophistication requires confidence.

Confidence! Forget it. It was never going to be an option on that basis.

But I so sought to gild the lily of my life that I tried, painfully, pathetically, hopelessly to be beautiful and happy. I was seeking a life unsordid, without grubby crevices. I was always so sure that people were looking.

When in fact, they were looking away.

The journey to Yeppoon was arduous, covering three quarters of the eastern seaboard. The young sophisticate I strived to be never looked much past the glamorous world of airports filled with people who controlled their own lives- or so I assumed. But even this long hike up the coast had to end and it did with the descent of a narrow staircase, attached like a sea creature to the side of the plane, onto the sizzling tarmac of tiny Rockhampton Airport. Even the planes were small at Rocky. Rocky Airport, including its carport, could fit into the Brunswick Shopping Centre. But this was Central Queensland. There was nothing to prove when it came to sheer size.

I may not have been born in Melbourne, but every cell of my skin was straining to get there and stay there from babyhood. Melbourne contains the heat; she sandwiches it between cool changes and sudden purple and gold thunderstorms, and when she lets it go on a bit longer, at least there are people around you who moan along with you and say

Isn't it shocking?

or

It's a scorcher out there.

Even the TV weather presenters admonish the heat for being so unfeeling. Melburnians mostly have the same look on their faces on hot days. Pleading. For the Melbourne promise of a change of seasons in a day. We love it. Queenslanders don't discuss the weather on a daily - or hourly - basis. It only changes every four months or so and skips winter altogether. Poor things. Queensland might as well be Kalahari for all its interest in the delicate weather

sensibilities of Victorians. I grew up amongst third generation Victorians, lovers of Melbourne. I watched as the fourth sent many of its number further and further *up North*. Maybe love of Melbourne skipped a generation. But it came back to me. I always returned from Central Queensland. I understand escape. I know it is often necessary. But what kind of escape is the endless, humid, flat heat of Yeppoon? Sure, there's the exquisite rolling surf and the few and far between sea breezes. But...those endless, all-summer-long sizzling days and heavy thick nights. No respite. Ugh.

Escape is often presented as a limited choice. Safety has a price: heat, pain, loneliness, cruelty, humiliation but you pay up because one evil is always better than another. I can endure many things. If I have no choice whatsoever, I can endure the heat. It's danger that wears me down. I can't breathe.

So I travelled, done up to the nines in synthetic fibres, to a glazy golden sweatbox full of foreign creatures known as boys. Heat and boys. Fortunately, there were no flies. They preferred Melbourne. But there were mozzies. Huge whopping juicy ones. When you slapped one, it looked like you'd squashed a strawberry on your arm.

Uncle Davey and Aunty Shirl were waiting, one or other of them but not both, to pick me up at the airport. This seemed far more momentous to me than it ever did to them. They indicated this by combining my arrival with some other hot, slow task such as shopping for groceries or sports gear or -horror of boring horrors- *boys clothes!*

Sometimes we even had to visit one of their Christian brethren whose mind had apparently been taken by Satan (or more likely the weather) and was sojourning in Rocky Psychiatric Hospital. We went there a lot and visited an amazing range of people. One of the brethren was a man who believed that Jews were coming to take over Central Queensland, so he went around blowing up their properties, except most of the properties were owned by Japanese people. The doctors put him in the psychiatric ward where he had to stay until he would recant but he wouldn't and he convinced half the other patients to join his anti-Semitic crusade. I still don't know if he was a loopy nazi or off his rocker but either way I was a stranger watching his humiliation. I hated it when people came to watch mine. I was just some kid staying with the people visiting him. I only came in because I hoped desperately that the hospital might be air conditioned. No such luck.

When we finally headed for Yeppoon, I at least earned the blessed relief of the moving air. It wasn't cool but it did move. Sophistication had long since melted off and run down my face, taking my makeup and mascara with it and leaving thick, heavy sweat over my entire face, neck and scalp. The curl fell out of my hair, my lipstick smudged. I looked like I felt- melted, swelted, swimming in my own hot, sticky fluid. The radiant waves of heat around my face and breasts would pump and throb like a giant infection. There would be a prickly sensation on my face as the little white dots of heat rash raised themselves along my forehead. And all this before we even passed the Big Brahman.

Yeppoon is not a place to go if you are in need of control. I was big on Control, not having had much at all. But I was an impulsive creature and I thought of the

escape rather than the actual destination. In Yeppoon, you were required to do things I never had to do at home. Aunty Shirl expected me to do chores! I was expected to account for my movements and when I rebelled, I saw the head shaking and long glances. They thought I was Odd.

Which I was.

I would tell Shirl I was heading off on my own. I'd wear my Beach Gear (sophisticated diluted by the need to be cool literally and figuratively). I'd take a book and some sunblock and my towel and toddle off to Lammermoor Beach to sit under a palm tree. There were no annoying little boys, no dogs to shake sand on me, no teasing uncles. I could lie on my towel, sunglasses masking my uncertainty and look like a Young Sophisticate. Elderly people taking their Constitutionals would envy me. Young women so wanted to be like me. Kids gave me a wide berth. I was alone, I had escaped and I could revel in my fantasies. I had Control out on solitary, stunning Lammermoor Beach. It was beautiful and I could relax and enjoy it.

Uncle Davey understood all this but that didn't mean he approved. Aunty Shirl didn't even understand. It was the Only Child thing kicking in. Only Children don't always realise what children are supposed to be and when faced with it, would rarely consider that they are children themselves. I was forced to realise that Davey and Shirl thought I was a kid and that I should act like one and be treated accordingly. But I wouldn't go down without a fight.

Besides, I didn't know how. I thought kids were contemptible things. They whined and shrieked and made unreasonable demands and behaved childishly. I found it very distasteful. Most of them couldn't handle the games I wanted to play. I liked to play *Days of Our Lives* and *The Young Doctors* and *Little Women*. But my cousins were all boys. What can you do with boys?

Lammermoor Beach was my first passionate love affair with a beach. We went there on Day One. It was the second thing we did after we arrived, Grandma and Aunty Olwyn and I. Davey and Shirl had a beautiful house which looked right over the rocks of Lammermoor. Olwyn had long wanted to show off this haven she had claimed as her own. We wandered straight down the rocky path to a shoreline which gently curved onward beyond our sight.

Lammermoor was perfectly peaceful. It was considered the Old People's Beach, so the kids stuck to Cooee Bay or went further north to catch the tubes. But Lammermoor was The Ocean. You could see the outline of Keppel Island. That was the Pacific Ocean out there. Such closeness to the world fascinated me. If I thought about it long enough I got the creeps. Sometimes, Davey and Shirl would take me to Lammermoor when there was a King Tide, when the Sun and the Moon fought over the sea. The water covered the sand to the very edge. You could not see sand. It was rough and grey, magnificent and scary. I thought I knew what a tidal wave was.

Beaches have so many looks. They can be light kissed shades of butter and blue or mere variations on grey. Calm, tumultuous, in your face, behind your mind. The first day I went to Lammermoor, it called me in. I just walked straight in.

April and the water was as warm as a tepid bath. But it spat me out. Unprepared for the strength of it, I was washed straight onto the rocks. I have two small round scars on my knee from my ten year old battle with those rocks. I clung to one and limped my way out, repeatedly stubbing my toes. I bled all over the beach and my Grandmother tried to chastise the water and ending up landing smack on her back under a fluffy breaker. In front of Aunty Shirl, it was a most unsophisticated start to our visit. But I was so irrevocably in love with Lammermoor that I forgot to notice. We were friends for ever after that and Lammermoor never bit me again.

That's Yeppoon for you. Lots of contrasts. It was a redneck place with no decent shops and an anti-southern attitude held by a lot of ex-Victorians. But it was also a beautiful little town, with its main avenue of shop fronts capped off by the strip of yellow and blue which was Yeppoon Beach. Its hotels had cool fresh beer gardens (not that I dared to enter one). In its cramped, humid milk bars I met the Queensland Ice-cream, Weis Bar. Its only supermarket offered brief access to air-conditioning. And Yeppoon had a second hand bookshop stocked with Agatha Christies and Mills and Boon. Typically, Aunty Shirl liked to call them Thrills and Swoon, so I could never buy any when she took me into town. Later, I found Forever Amber and Peyton Place in that shop and I was amazed when no comment was made about such purchases. I sat shocked on Cooee Bay Beach while I consumed Peyton Place and had a sunburned neck for a week.

Cooee Bay was diminutive and a mere one hundred metres from Dave and Shirl's home. It had surprisingly mean surf and more than once I got into serious difficulties there. My littlest cousin Andrew would always manage to rescue me.

I had a few advantages in Yeppoon. Mum would send me lots of money, so I could buy books, magazines and handbags; my favourite things. Aunty Shirl hated it but she couldn't do much. The only way she could prevail was to try to surround me with boys every where I went. She was quite clever at doing this.

Lou, we might go up to Stony Creek on Friday. Whaddya say? It's lovely and cool in the mountains.

This was a particularly low bribe.

Cool? Did you say cool? Great!

Shirl would list the food she'd buy and I would plan my outfit and look forward to a day with breezes, shade and green.

On Thursday night the phone would ring incessantly and Shirl would talk quietly for a long time. On Friday we would load up the car, me and my cousins, then another car would appear. And another. Numerous boys' mothers would alight and debate how many cars needed to be taken. Shirl would smile triumphantly at me and say

The boys all get to bring a friend, Lou.

Every single boy got to bring a friend. Shirl got to bring a friend, the friend got to bring a friend. Of course, no one had any friends who were girls. Shirl only consorted with those who had sons.

Then we would drive around Cooee Bay looking for any stray boys (and their friends) who wanted a day out. We would pack them in until we were all squashed and soaked with sweat. Sixteen boys would scream in my ear for two hours, 'til we arrived at the beautiful Upper Stony Creek. Then the cool quiet shade would be destroyed by two car loads of hyperactive boys.

Shirl enjoyed my discomfort. She thought she was breaking me in to Real Family Life. In fact, she was inoculating me. Aunty Shirl wanted me to act like a child. I have no idea why. I suspect my Old Adult teenager routine freaked her out somehow. If people really considered that some kids are like I was, they'd have to face up to the fact that their own kids were not. I always take that as a backhanded compliment.

My cousins had very short attention spans. Diving into the river from the tree tops soon bored them. They would locate me in my nook and drop toadfish on me or run off with my bag. This would entertain them briefly. Usually the afternoon deteriorated when they decided that, since I was the only girl, one of their number must want to kiss me. Aunty Shirl thought all this very amusing. My contempt for boys took root and flourished.

Food was another hotly contested area. I could not bear being expected to eat kid food when perfectly good adult food was available. I always asked for salad

with my barbecue and cups of tea rather than cordial. This evoked tremendous disapproval.

Lou, I'm not sure there is enough salad for this many grown ups.

Inherently superior creatures, apparently.

But without salad, it's not a balanced meal. We eat lots of salad at home. The *pièce de resistance*. I always got salad.

Strangely, I often found allies in other adults. Many of them though I was great. I was quiet, could answer a question sensibly and wanted to eat my vegies. So Aunty Shirl often found herself undermined.

Oh, Louise, I've brought two salads. Help yourself, darling. Have some of this pasta salad. Gosh, Shirl, she's such a good girl. Don't knock it!

Shirl would glower at me. We'd be quits for a while.

Aunty Shirl thought all kids should be like hers. I thought they were the last word in unsophisticated. It remains a conflict we have never resolved. Shirl didn't much approve of any of my expectations. When I went back to Yeppoon for my first adult visit, she suggested the most torturous activity she could find: a trip to Byfield.

Byfield was the 'town' where my eldest cousin Alexander bought his first block of land. He bought it with the money from his paper route. I'm not joking. It wasn't really a block; it was 19 acres. That's Queensland for you. Byfield was in the bush, inland west from Yeppoon. It might have been Mount Isa to me. There was lots of dry, greeny brown bush and heat. No wind, no breeze. Just heat.

Shirl was very proud of Alex's block. Alex got married when he was twenty and started building a house on his block. The house resembled a large car port; it had no walls. It was an alternative house that fitted its bushland setting. You hardly need walls in Byfield.

This particular day, Shirl collected a few innocent southern visitors to Yeppoon and we headed off, albeit with the recent concession of an air conditioned car. I was curious to see the place my young cousin lived. He was married, had a baby and lived in the bush in Queensland. I could barely conceive a life not just so opposite to my own, but so alien and hostile to every cell in my body. I was fascinated.

The journey to Byfield involved few roads as I knew them. These were thin dirt tracks with grass running up the middle and no possible room for two vehicles. Fortunately there was rarely two cars in Byfield at the same time. As we went further 'in' there were fewer signs of human settlement. The native flora and fauna were exquisite from within the air conditioned car. How they survived out there without oxygen is beyond me.

Alex and Felicity's block had a long driveway off a path off the dirt track. It was in tall, thick scrub and the busy noise of the many birds was constant. Only I couldn't breathe. Getting out of the car was a shock. The first time I ventured to Queensland, I got off the plane at Brisbane and I was shocked. Not by the heat, just by the difference in the air and the light. It was almost exciting. This place was so different to Melbourne. I was shocked again in Rockhampton. Sheer heat. Not even strings of days of 40°C plus had prepared me for Rocky heat. But Byfield. Fortunately my consciousness was slipping.

Shirl had been so anxious to take me to Byfield that she hadn't let her son know we were coming. They were out. Visiting friends, apparently. Other people live out here?

Oh yes, Shirl told me. *It's a thriving community.*

Right. This oxygen thing is so southern.

I was heading for the car three minutes after we alighted. It was not just the 45°C. I am a bush kid. I love the bush. But Queensland Bush is different. It moves. It seethes. All the time. And the two very unattractive and malodorous wild pigs in the rickety corral did not make me feel very welcome.

For once, I was not alone. The assorted southern visitors Shirl had collected were of one mind with me. Shirl looked hurt.

Lou, she called, *they've got a creek on the property. Their own creek. You've just got to see the creek.*

I do like creeks. I've always dreamed of owning my Aunty Glady's property: it has a creek right through it. I was tempted to see the creek Alex had bought himself. And in terms of being hot, I had long ago reached critical mass.

So I set off after Shirl, towards the creek. The bush was thick and throbbed with life and summer noises. The smell of eucalypt was quite breath-taking. It anaesthetised me. I prayed to the Goddess of the Taipan to keep her subjects occupied. If one bit us in Byfield, we'd be absolute goners. I amused my companions with my sarcastic statements about the degree to which God had forsaken this place. I expressed my heartfelt appreciation for everything to do with urban civilisation.

We hiked through the bush. We saw extraordinarily coloured birds. We saw a large lizard adorned with intricate flaps of skin. He half heartedly raised one foot and waved it at us. But eventually I could no longer endure the vacuum and I remonstrated

Shirl, this creek might be good but it's too bloody far from the .... house.

My aunt feigned innocence.

Oh, I'm sorry, Lou. We crossed the creek a while back. I thought you were enjoying the walk.

Smirk, smirk.

We left Byfield via its only nod to commerce, the General Store. It took quite a while for the saleslady to sell all us southerners drinks. Then I made the mistake of asking the time.

Why? she asked.

I didn't know. Why indeed?

Next time I go *up North*, I'll have control and air-conditioning and, I hope, more tolerance. After all, Yeppoon is one of my backyards.

Immersion

Can't they tell I don't want to be here? Elspeth thinks bringing souls to God is all there is - it is her Ministry. We all have a Ministry, apparently. Elspeth is not overly concerned with how she gets the souls to God, a wheelbarrow, a sledge hammer, will clearly do fine. She asks me the most awkward, uncomfortable questions.

Do you know you are a sinner, Louise?

I cannot be so rude as to say *nuh* as I would like.

Grandma says you can't fool God and you shouldn't take the Lord's Supper if he isn't your Lord today. This is a big problem. I am easily bored. I change my mind, my room, my favourite singer all the time. I have barracked for ...four different football teams in my life. Some days I feel very well inclined towards God but certainly not every Sunday at 11.30 am.

But if I say to Elspeth O'Neill who is earnest and intense with a cow-like face and thick legs, *No, I don't take Jesus for my personal Saviour*, what will she say then? I will be a dreadful, ungrateful, blasphemous sinner who rejected God. It makes no difference that I didn't seek the invitation.

Perhaps they must accrue a quota of souls. But does it count if I only say it to shut her up?

Elspeth has a tiny booklet with a cartoon strip in it. It shows a young woman claiming she doesn't need God because she has Secular Life. Suddenly, she feels empty and her Christian friend explains that only the Lord Jesus Christ can fill that inner hole.

So together, these two go down on their knees (to indicate humility) and the young woman accepts the Lord Jesus Christ as her personal Saviour. It is important to get this part right because it is one of the tiny subtleties which distinguishes the Church of Clichés from the other 'Scripture based' congregations, along with baptism by immersion and weekly nibbling and sipping on crackers and grape juice.

Elspeth talks a lot between pages of the booklet, and her friend, for Christians must Witness in pairs not unlike Mormons, sits with hands in lap and stares demurely down. She says nothing. At the end of each page Elspeth asks me if I understand. Her questions are merely perfunctory; it is clear that I must understand. Even with agreement I cannot make her go faster, but eventually, inevitably we reach the central purpose of her quest.

Louise, do you understand that God sent his Beloved Only Son to die for your sins?

Well, not really. Didn't he die before I got here? *Yes*.

Do you understand that a life of sin means eternal separation from God?

Um, what sort of sins and how does that last bit work? I don't see all that much of God. *Yes.*

Good. Then, Louise?

Yes?

Do you wish to repent your Carnal Life and accept Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour?

I don't think so....what's carnal? *Yes.*

So together, we went down on our knees, Elspeth to indicate humility and me because I knew that was how to pray. And I prayed the prayer in the booklet, opening my eyes every so often to read the prayer. I told Jesus that he was Lord and I was worthless and from now on I would do whatever he wanted me to do.

Of course, He would communicate this information through experts such as the Reverend Fred Nile.

Having declared my commitment to God in front of witnesses, I now had to formalise it in the customary Church of Clichés style. In the tradition of the Mission from which the Church of Clichés were born, I must 'Go Forward'.

This meant that at the conclusion of Sunday night Church, before the Benediction, when the Minister gave the Invitation, I would step out of my pew and walk up the aisle to the pulpit and 'give' myself publicly to God. I had not had this notion in mind when I prayed Elspeth's prayer. It was said that God moved into my heart at that moment but I felt no doors opening. And my 'sins' seemed to compound from that moment forward, especially that Church of Clichés' favourite, 'impure thoughts'. How I struggled with that one - especially when we sang the hymn "Jesus is Coming".

The Invitation was Doctrine in the Church of Clichés and Mr Tom Tremball made his standard pious plea to the twelve people in the room every week. Those who hadn't already availed themselves of the offer were children, some of whom were not yet walking. The Church of Clichés frowned on 'youngsters' being baptised and they thought the practice of 'sprinkling', generally known as 'christening', to be positively Heathen. Even if the Galilee isn't handy, God still meant us to get completely wet, Melbourne winter or not. Some nights, poor old Mr Tremball made his Fiery Call when it applied to no one in the room- because you definitely don't do it twice. Mr Tremball was our Minister at Hurstbridge Church of Clichés for eight years, and he got lucky only a handful of times. This was to be one of his Big Nights.

I had been at Church all afternoon attending the monthly Youth function ('monthly' being a good way to describe it) at which Elspeth and Demure Friend had waylaid me. When Grandma and Grandpa arrived for Evening Church, I had to advise them of my sudden conversion.

Um, Miss O'Neill wants me to, um, Go Forward tonight.

I scuffed my toe on the concrete path. My Grandmother's look was piercing. Grandpa was delighted. He was uninterested in the fine points of doctrine. He just wanted us all to be happy. But Grandma was shrewd and her Dogma was as precious to her as her handbag.

What do You want?

Um. *Miss O'Neill says...*

Never mind about Elspeth O'Neill, Louise. It's not her soul we're speaking of, although it is a sin to force a body to God against their will. What do You want?

If I had told my Grandmother then that I didn't understand, she'd have gone forth like a battering ram to release me from this spiritual coercion. From her I learned the meaning of loyalty and to fight for others when they couldn't do it themselves. She was never afraid of what people thought.

But I didn't tell her.

I'm gonna Go Forward.

She knew I'd been coerced. She also knew I could not go in there and tell Miss Elspeth O'Neill that I been joshing her to keep the peace. Grandma knew and she let it go.

Church, especially evening church, was always tedious although I knew each movement so precisely I could fix my mind on some matter of interest and never lose my place in the drill. Not tonight. My mouth was dry and my heartbeats filled my ears. The aisle that was no longer than three cartwheels became a path with no end ... or worse, the shiny, beaming frog face of Mr Tremball.

I moaned my way through the last hymn, waiting for the familiar raised hand of Mr Tremball as the last verse but one closed.

Brethren, he would say, *Christ is here, He listeneth, He knoweth thy heart. He waiteth to lift thy burden and replace it with peace, perfect peace.*

If anyone of our Brethren tonight wishes to avail himself of that peace, wishes to open his heart to admit his Lord and Saviour, let him approach. Christ waiteth.

Down went the hand and the brethren gasped collectively and launched into the last verse. The wobbly warbling that was Hurstbridge Church of Clichés singing began. I lifted a heavy foot but, just in case I had forgotten, the hand of Elspeth O'Neill pressed firmly between my shoulder blades.

I found my way up that red and yellow floral aisle to the pulpit. I felt the brethren gaze tracing my back. I was briefly distracted by the look of immense surprise on the face of Mr Tremball. It was quickly replaced by an expression of pleasure quite nauseating to behold.

Up went his hand again. The organist, my Uncle Dallas who was actually my second cousin, swivelled in his seat to inspect this sudden deviation. I knew this drama backwards but I was familiar only with the role of onlooker.

Lord Jesus Christ, one of our number has answered Thy call.

Mr Tremball descended to the aisle beside me. He placed his fat pink hands on my head and shoulder. I jumped out of my skin when his voice boomed

Louise Kennedy, do you recognise the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, as your personal Lord and Saviour?

Oh, jeez. I'm going to have to lie in front of the whole church. *Y-yes.* I'm sure no one heard me.

Do you profess before this congregation, part of the Body of Christ, His Holy Future Bride, that Jesus Christ is Your Lord?

He turned me to face this so familiar crowd.

Mrs Brown was gently beaming at me. Mrs Kent was as close as she ever got to smiling at kids, with her head sort of wobbling and nodding like it was on a spring. Aunty Rose, second cousin Dallas' wife, had pursed her lips which implied approval. Miss Lemon looked embarrassed. Mrs Lemon was quietly weeping as she did whenever this happened. Mr Lemon was emphatically

nodding and frowning which indicated solemn satisfaction. Grandpa had his head bowed which probably meant he was anxious for this to be over. Elspeth O'Neill smiled mistily at me, her spiritual trophy. And my Grandmother stood in the same pew she had occupied since 1956 and fixed a questioning gaze on me. She knew I had lied. She and Miss Lemon were the only honest people in the room.

I had yet to profess. Better get on with it. A little hesitation looks like reverence. A lot is blasphemy.

I do.

I could not believe it was my own voice, so unfamiliar did it sound.

Will ye seek the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ to drown your carnal body and see ye Born Again?

Ye Must Be Born Again, chanted the congregation automatically. Well, if I must....

I will.

Let us pray, cooed Mr Tremball.

He proceeded to beseech the Lord Jesus Christ to watch over my early walk with Him and protect me from the demons which would try harder to distract

me. I heartily concurred. I was sure I would burn in hell for my wicked thoughts about Jesus having a sex life, not to mention the immoral misuse to which I had put my Giant Panda Bear's legs. Did Jesus know about that? Wasn't it in the Bible as an Abomination?

At the conclusion of this prayer about me, Uncle Dallas struck up the Benediction and Mr Tremball held me firmly in place while we sang it, me in my usual monotone and he loudly in my ear

Drop Thy still dews of quietness 'til all our striving's cease
Take from our souls the strain and stress
And let our ordered lives confess
The Beauty of Thy Peace.

A-a-a-men.

The gentle murmuring of the congregation indicated church was over. But I could not escape Mr Tremball.

Now, Louise, we need to arrange to have a chat about your baptism.

Great. *Um, alright.*

I might come up and see you on Friday night at home, alright?

I kept getting in deeper. *OK.*

As I walked away from the pulpit, various members of the congregation congratulated me. I heard Elspeth tell Mrs Brown breathlessly, *Oh, I was so thrilled when she told me she wanted to accept Jesus. I felt I'd contributed. My witness spoke to her!*

Right.

Mrs Brown continued to smile her small secret smile. Her smile has always been small, ever since her eldest son drowned at the Sunday School picnic when I was a baby.

Grandma said nothing to me but took congratulations offered to her with equanimity. Grandpa was chatting earnestly to Mr Lemon, who told me firmly I was a *good girl*.

Oh, but I wasn't.

My second cousins once removed, Damien and Patrick, had arrived and been informed of proceedings. As they were my age, and held the status of heartthrobs at the local tech, this was a source of great embarrassment to me. They weren't even made to come to evening Church but could turn up for tea and sponge cake without paying penance. Sucks.

Uncle Dallas explained that I could now be happy as *christians are happy people*. All the time Damien kept shaking his rabbit's foot in my face.

I felt anything but happy.

Mr Tremball arrived at Cottlesbridge the following Friday evening just as I was settling down to watch 'The Wizard of Oz'. I was pissed off to be interrupted and then he made me feel guilty by pointing out he had come a long way to see me. It was hardly my fault the man lived in Templestowe. He should have joined one of those Churches that gives the Minister a title and a house. We don't do that in the Church of Clichés. Christ is our only Reverend Father.

Grandma was extremely inhospitable to Mr Tremball. Of course, hospitality was never her long suit. But Mr Tremball was treated to Grandma's fullest disdain and thus he lived up to his name and trembled in her company. Grandma disliked Mr. Tremball for various reasons, many of which were unfair. Her major justification was an editorial he had run in the church newsletter about a recalcitrant possum in Mrs Kent's kitchen being beaten with a broom. He likened it to the demons we must all act against and sweep out. He did not reckon on Mrs Pierre who abhorred any cruelty to animals, saw it as an act against God and frequently said so. In this case, it merely added to her reputation as 'eccentric' but it left Mr Tremball with an easily exploited fear of her. We did not even offer poor Mr Tremball a cup of tea after his trek from Templestowe. Grandpa was embarrassed but tea making was outside his expertise.

Mr. Tremball worked hard to keep my head turned away from the adventures of Dorothy and her ruby slippers. He explained the baptism to me. He would ask

me if I wished to live with the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Saviour. Again. This would be presided over by another elder of the church, probably Mr Lemon. On receipt of an affirmative response from me, I would be baptised.

It sounded not unlike a maths test except that I had to do it on my own.

Mr Tremball explained that all I would be required to do was say 'Yes' in a loud clear voice. Not much to ask, he seemed to think. It was all neatly rehearsed, he hastened to assure me. And I gained the benefit of his having done it numerous times before, as had any Church of Clichés Minister worth his salt. I'd hazard a guess that Mr Tremball had not done 'it' as often as his colleague, Pastor Little of the local Baptist church, who sometimes had a whole queue to baptise. Pastor Little got paid a full time salary and each Sunday he told his congregation of films just released which were unsuitable viewing for christian people. He seemed to go to a lot of films to determine this. He always explained precisely why these films were unsuitable. Mr Tremball never mentioned films. The Church of Clichés didn't need to be told. They knew christians didn't go to films.

At morning church on Baptism Day (for baptisms always occur at evening church) Aunty Rose told me to bring an extra pair of panties that night. I was very confused by this. I was not familiar with the word 'panties'. It seemed a rather licentious variation on the more proper 'pants'. I personally called them undies. Why on earth would I need two pair? What did my undies have to do with the Baptism? Surely the two were light years away from each other? But of

course, one pair would get wet, because I must have 'panties' on at all times, even in an ankle length Victorian multilined gown with 37 buttons.

On arrival at Evening Church with my spare 'panties' in my shoulder bag, I was struck by the chapel's different appearance. The altar was removed and the pulpit was on the same level as the pews, closer to them. The baptistery, a large sunken bath with steps at either end, was now revealed. The little ante-room which doubled as the Sunday School nursery room was buzzing with christian womanly purpose. What preparations were at hand! There was a Special Lord's Supper as was always served at a baptism, for it was the Baptisee's first communion. There would be a tea and sponge cake supper afterwards. And hanging from a cupboard door in this little room was a hideous overall-with-legs made from ochre coloured rubber. This set of gumboots which kept going was designed to allow a Church of Clichés Minister to wear his navy suit while practically immersing himself in the baptistery.

The Baptisee always sat in the front middle pew, alone, for the first hymn and the mini-sermon. At the beginning of the second hymn, Aunty Rose lead me by the hand from my seat in State, to the ante room, where I changed into a long thick white gown, made of heaps of old hospital sheets. It had huge flared sleeves, like trumpets that ended at the elbow. Christian ladies helped me undress and buttoned me into the gown, under which I wore my number one pair of panties. I could hear Mr Tremball chanting the Spiritual Bargain that is Baptism. When his voice ceased and Mr Lemon's began, I felt the strength pour from my limbs. Here he comes. He will slide into his alien suit and dunk me backwards into four feet of water.

I had reckoned without the Church of Clichés emphasis on appearances. It would not be dignified for his congregation to see Mr Tremball negotiate his rubber overalled way into the baptistery holding the hand of an ethereally clad twelve year old. So once Mr Tremball got his Big Boots on, we hopped into the baptistery while the doors were still closed. Mr Tremball bade me kneel. I was side on to the congregation. He knelt at right angles to me and placed his left arm behind me. His right hand lay on my shoulder. All I could think was 'the water will go right up my nose'. I suppose holding my nose would be out of the question?

Mr Lemon was in full flight, briefly out of retirement. As the predecessor of Mr Tremball, he knew his stuff backwards. He had a voice ideally made for Hellfire and Brimstone. It reached a doctrinal crescendo and ceased. The pale mint green sliding doors opened jerkily. I could not see the congregation. I could see only the night sky through the high side windows and the side door of the chapel, outside of which were little hills of green, very pleasant to roll down.

I heard Mr Tremball boom his question about the Lord Jesus Christ being my personal Saviour. I said my tiny *yes*, the pressure on my right shoulder became very firm and back I went into the slightly warmish Hurstbridge water. Water did indeed go up my nose. I was lifted strongly straight back up again and my nose burned and stung. Mr Tremball beamed at me moistly, but it was just that my eyes were watering. The doors jerked shut and he waded up the stairs. I followed. Mrs Brown assisted Mr Tremball with his enormous boot suit. A gaggle of ladies began to dry my hair and unbutton my raiment. Someone told

me to take off my 'smalls'. What? Oh, another word for 'pants'. I did so and they were immediately grasped, wrung out and packed in a tiny plastic bag. I had been thoroughly dried. I dressed myself, staring down at the linoleum. It was a hideous pattern of multi coloured, kidney shaped specks that wormed together. They were green, mustard, mulberry and white. I thought of all the little kids who would associate that lino with Sunday School. How appropriate.

I was told for the rest of the evening as we all munched on Miss Watty's sponge cake (except for Grandma who though white flour wicked) that I was now Born Again. Nothing much changed after being Born Again. The impure thoughts got worse. I traded the Panda's legs for my own two hands. I regularly eyed the cupboard where the Boot Suit lived and thought of the many fates that could befall it. For a while, I thought I must be the one for whom baptism didn't work. I got to eat the Lord's Supper every Sunday as only a baptised Church of Clichés christian may do. It broke up the hour a bit.

This is My Body, broken for you

Do this in remembrance of Me.

This is My Blood, shed for you.

Drink ye all of it.

In the Church of Clichés, we baptise by immersion, you know. Immersion in something even more sinister than Hurstbridge water.

The Vegetable Round

The tray of the FB ute is packed tight with crates, boxes and bags of vegetables. Grandpa is going on his 'rounds'.

I skip behind him, spraying gravel.

Grandpa, can I come?

You'll have to sit inside.

Yeah, but on the way home there'll be room in the back.

Righto.

I race inside to tell Grandma. Bootsie races with me.

Grandma, I'm goin' with Grandpa on his rounds.

Grandma bustles out to the ute.

Herb, get some bread, will you, and some Tarzan Jubes.

Grandpa is rearranging his neatly packed vegies.

Yep, righto Gerty. The faintest shadow crosses his face. He hates buying Tarzan Jubes. He feels like a dill.

I hurtle back inside to grab my pocket money. Then Bootsie and I climb into onto the soft, shredded vinyl seats of the FB. Grandpa throws the ute into gear and sails down the driveway.

Which rounds today, Grandpa?

Strathewen, Arthur's Creek and the Artists Colony.

What about Hurstbridge? For the Tarzan Jubes?

Stone the blasted crows! Can't we get 'em at Panton Hill?

***They** don't have Tarzan Jubes*, I point out derisively. ***They** only have gobsmackers and aniseed balls*. The Panton Hill milk bar was not up to packaged confectionery.

We'll have to go into Hurstbridge then.

Rough and scratchy, the wind sails through the cabin and across my face. Bootsie has his head out and his whiskers are blown flat against his head. He sniffs the warm spring wind delightedly.

We cross the New Bridge. Of course, the bridge is not that new but the folk of Cottlesbridge don't adjust real fast. They had their old bridge for such a long time and it was so much more scenic but then Progress came and she isn't concerned with aesthetics. The old bridge was wooden with railway sleeper planks and huge bolts which shuddered and jarred as you crossed it. Only one vehicle at a time, mind. The new bridge is a huge hideous concrete thing which only jarrs when you look at it. But it has two lanes and lots of pillars holding it up. The old one is still there, grown over until it has almost merged with the banks of the creek.

Are we goin' to Pierre Brothers, Grandpa?

Not today.

We travel towards Strathewen. Our first stop in one of the new flat mud brick villas with debris, dogs and children everywhere. These women love Grandpa because his vegies are organic.

Hello there, Mr Pierre. Oh, what lovely beans! Do you have any strawberries? oh, next week? Can I put my bid in please? She giggles.

I'll reserve the best for you, Mrs Christian.

Grandpa charms all the women. Some of them are closer to my age than his. It is hard to see Grandpa as a ladies' man but that is what everyone says he used to be. Poor Grandma.

I get out and stare at the assortment of children. It is a bright, warm spring day. Bootsie runs back to the FB to escape the unwanted attentions of various dogs. Mrs Christian is now gushing over Grandpa's prices.

This is worth more, Mr Pierre.

I like to undercut the greengrocers, Maam.

But it is organic, Mr Pierre.

Good for the kiddies. Thank you kindly, see you next week. C'mon Louis-A.

I grimace. *Don't call me that.*

Grandpa launches into his *I once knew a Louisa* story. We're off again. Bootsie's claws slide over my bare legs as he scrambles for the window and the fragrant breeze.

We make numerous similar stops at the homes of Mrs Anglican, Mrs Catholic and Mrs Atheist. Grandpa has varying conversations on the same theme with all of them. Then we pull up alongside the home of Mrs Miner, who Grandpa describes as having the Dirtiest House in Victoria. I wonder if he has ever noticed that housekeeping is not exactly Grandma's strong suit. Mrs Miner's house is very dirty because she has the most goats in Victoria and she lets them all into the house. She lives high on the edge of the Cottlesbridge Hills and has

no driveway, so I help Grandpa lug his onions and potatoes up fifty stone steps. Bootsie whines as the goats chase him. I play with a cute baby one with floppy ears until its parent objects.

Grandpa, GRANDPA, he's GOT ME.

Grandpa extracts my dress from the Nanny goat's mouth. Mrs Miner looks at me disapprovingly. She doesn't like children and prefers goats to most people, so she tells Grandma. The Miners are Major Weird but I like them. Old Mrs Miner used to walk into Hurstbridge in the middle of the road all the way. She did it for thirty years, in spite of steadily increasing motor traffic. Sometimes she accepted a lift. You'd see her often, walking along the broken white line. It was common knowledge in the area. We thought, like a cat, if she lasted that long she'd be OK. But one day a semi-trailer came and couldn't stop and Mrs Miner died. We were shocked. Grandma always called the trucks *Big Brutes* and shook her fist at them. She said they hogged the road. But they never took any notice.

Next stop is Mr Polis' house in Arthurs Creek. Mr and Mrs Polis came from somewhere behind the Iron Curtain, says Grandpa. He tries to talk to them about market gardening behind the Iron Curtain but they never want to discuss it.

No good says Mr Polis, *no tomatoes*. They buy a lot of tomatoes and pumpkins.

Grandpa says these New Australians didn't appreciate Lithuania. They sure appreciate our vegies. I think the Iron Curtain sounds awful. It would be hot and

airless. Mr Polis says it was hard to get out. Maybe the Iron Curtain is very heavy?

The Polis's have a daughter a year older than me. Leeza is very shy but friendly and she has beautiful guinea pigs. I go to look at them while Grandpa tries vainly to discuss communist vegetable farming.

Have ya bought any clothes lately? asks Leeza

Um, Mum bought me some treads.

What colour?

Two tone purple.

Grouse.

I got a green pantsuit for my birthday.

Yeah? Flared pants?

Oh yeah. With gold buttons.

Where'd ya wear it?

Church. And into town.

We are examining a beautiful gold and white guinea pig who is bursting with pregnancy.

You can have one of the babies if ya like.

Yeah? Thanks! I'll have to ask Grandma.

Lou-i-se, we're off.

Bootsie, Leeza and I head towards the ute.

Do ya wanna come up and hang out one Sat'day?

Yeah, that'd be grouse.

Bootsie, ever eager to move on, leaps into cabin but there is now room for me in the tray. I settle in the passenger corner up against the window.

See ya, Leez.

Bye.

Arthur's Creek seems arid and flat compared to the rest of the area. Trees are sparser and the ground is rough and hard. I am enveloped in gritty, powdery dust clouds as the FB spins its way towards the Artist's Colony. All of a sudden

the surrounds are green, luxuriant, fresh and filled with the calls of bell and butcher birds. High gums dapple the sunlight. The FB coils up the long driveway to Dunmoochin, home of the area's best known artist and gateway to the Strathewen Artist's Colony.

If it had not been for my Uncle Jack Prask, himself an artist of some success who once stayed at Dunmoochin (and claims he named the place) I doubt Grandpa would trades his wares in the Artist's Colony at all. He becomes grumpy, silent and much more strict up here. The artists are so nice to him and to me and give him compliments on his tremendous produce. Grandpa is suspicious of their compliments and short in conversation. Oh, how I wish to would chat on to them about anything and everything the way he does with his Hurstbridge ladies. Dunmoochin is fascinating. The artist who owns it has a passion for horse drawn vehicles and native animals. There is a sanctuary for the animals and a seemingly never-ending garage for the jinkers, sulkies and carts he collects. I dart between beautiful vehicles with their quilted leather seats and ornately carved wood, then dash to the specially fenced paddock which is home to assorted wombats, echidnas and little joeys whose mums have come to a sticky end. The old artist, although he cannot have been so old, encourages me to talk to the little creatures. He brings milk and honey so I can watch the echidna eat. This man does not hurt animals, he does not disregard them. He nurtures them.

*These fences are hard for foxes and feral cats to get through, see. At night, the animals go into a roofed enclosure to protect them from...*he hesitates.. *whatever might be about. I only keep 'em 'til they're ready to go back on their own. Native*

animals face a lot of threats to their existence so I try to give a few of 'em a leg up.

I was shy but I liked this man who wore exotic paint covered clothes and brought milk and honey to an echidna.

Where do feral cats come from?

People don't look after their cats, love. Poor things go wild and have to hunt. It's not like it's the cats' fault. They should never have brought 'em out here and irresponsible people shouldn't be allowed to have 'em. Foxes, rabbits, bloody cows. It's all the same.

Weren't the cows here?

No fear. We chopped down a lotta trees to fit 'em in and feed 'em.

I am surprised. I always thought cows were everywhere.

Come inside, kiddo and have a coke.

I-I'm not allowed to drink coke.

No coke? Oh, well, milk then, or cordial?

I nod shyly. I don't like to tell him cordial is out too. When people are nice to animals I want to please them.

I have never been in the house before. Grandpa is waiting at the end of the footpath, an embarrassed frown on his face. He always has to go inside to get paid. He never lets me go in and I am dying of curiosity. The kind man can't be so very bad. The house is a huge sprawling mud brick affair with a fence around it enclosing the garden of native shrubs, trees and flowers. Grandma would have loved that garden. It is buzzing with insects and tiny birds and is such a breathtaking sight that I gasp with pleasure.

Look at the little tiny birds. Oh, Grandpa, look at their orange beaks.

Grandpa makes a noise that sounds like *hrrumph*.

The artist smiles at me

You'd have those too if you didn't keep cats, or at least didn't allow 'em to hunt. Put proper noisy collars on 'em.

I squint up at him. *Really?*

Sure. I've got an old cat. He doesn't bother to try and hunt because he's got a great bloody chrome bell with a loud ring. The noise and the shiny chrome warns the birds off and a cat won't hunt like that. Of course, you've gotta get their balls off. Slows 'em down, dunn'it Herb?

I cringe. Did he say *balls* to Grandpa?

Grandpa doesn't even manage a *hrrumph* this time.

The brick walk and garden are dotted with statues, like in a park. Some are wooden, some stone. One is a stark naked woman and even the hair on her privates is shown. I walk another way. She is cupping her own breasts, feeling them, with a dreamy look on her face. Now I know exactly why Grandpa wouldn't let me come in.

Another statue is less distinct but the creature draws me. Made of wood like old railway sleepers, rough and weather beaten, I want to touch it. I reach out a tentative hand and hesitate. It might feel it...and I might not be allowed. I sneak a glance at the artist. He is smiling down at me.

Go on. You can touch it.

I stroke the statue.

He looks like he's hurt.

The artist laughs gently, a very pleasant sound.

Well, he is. You're a good critic.

My Grade Six art teacher didn't think so. Where did that come from?

Grandpa has found his voice, he protests this conversation. *Now, Louise...*but the artist is speaking.

Grade Six art teacher, eh. He snorts. *What's his story?*

Her. It's a her. She said I didn't try. She ripped up my painting. In front of my grade.

I am surprised by my own anger.

The artist is shaking his head. *Jesus.* I look anxiously at Grandpa. He squats down beside me. People who squat to talk to children are usually nice. Horrible people bend down over you.

Bloody bullshit. You should've heard what my teachers said about me. Don't listen to that stupid woman. Learn not to trust 'em. When you looked at poor old Rudolf, he indicates the hunched wooden statue, *you saw he was in pain. Lots of so called art lovers have no idea about Rudolf. You've gotta trust yourself, kid.*

Teachers think they know everything.

Listen, when you come up here, I see ya dashing 'round looking at everything. You get all excited. I feel myself blushing. *You know more about appreciating beauty than Miss Whatshername. OK?*

OK. I sniff. In my life I have never been so glad that Grandpa is deaf.

The artist's current girlfriend is paying Grandpa for his vegies. She has no top on. A woman reclines on a low bench in the kitchen. Another artist is sketching her. The kitchen has a high ceiling with crossing beams and a stone floor. I slip through into the body of the house. This room, more gallery than lounge or dining room, is a riot of colour and texture. Paintings, statues, wall hangings, furniture hewn out of logs and old cars, demand my eye. The sofa is an old jinker seat with a log as its base. There are depictions of nakedness everywhere. And books. I feel a sense of soothing before I see the books. Walls and walls of this cool house are covered with huge eucalypt shelves filled with books. There is a rough hewn staircase; narrow tree boughs form the balustrade. A mezzanine floor is an art gallery, with painting after painting of every imaginable kind. I recognise one of my Uncle Jack's paintings. This is a new world where I cannot imagine dirt or fear.

Lou-ise. Grandpa sounds croaky.

I nip back to the kitchen door.

We're off now. Where's the dog?

Bootsie is still in the shed with the jinkers. He has killed a large rat and is making sure it is very thoroughly dead. His endeavour is accompanied by his tiny whines of pure pleasure.

The artist has followed us.

Well done, little dog, he says. *See ya next round, Herb, thanks for the goods.* I think he is sending Grandpa up but then he smiles at me, *Take care, kid.*

He is gone in his paint spattered overalls, back to the house of calm, nakedness and books. Grandpa is dead silent. I know better than to discuss what we've just seen.

The remaining artists of the colony are not so successful, but they love organic vegies and there are not so many nudes. There are dogs and small children and people who never brush their hair, whom Grandpa refers to as hippies. They are all nice but they call Grandpa *man* which makes him grumpy and me overcome with giggles.

Soon there is only potatoes in the tray, the sun is sinking and we are finished.

Home James. Grandpa always says this.

Tarzan Jubes I say archly.

Blast! Hurstbridge then. What else do we have to get?

Bread.

Rightyo.

I ride in the tray all the way to Hurstbridge, a pleasure forbidden by Grandma. The baby blue duco of the FB is now swirled and chipped like a marble cake with dark red rust. I sit on the hump over the wheel and bounce merrily. The FB has long since done without suspension. We pass various acquaintances and Grandpa honks. When we turn he sticks out his arm. He never remembers the FB has got blinkers.

At the Milkbar I leap out and stick my hand under his chin for money.

I'll get 'em.

He is relieved. *Don't buy rubbish*, he warns.

Huh! I buy thirty cents of mixed lollies, specifying exactly what I want for my money. I stuff the bulging white bag down my dress and the musk sticks scrape my skin. Grandpa receives the Tarzan Jubes gratefully and makes a fuss of packing them in state in the basket beside him.

Our most important errand, Louise.

I once heard Grandpa tell Uncle Jimmy that he wouldn't want to go home if he forgot the bloody Tarzan Jubes.

So, he remembers, usually. After all, Grandma would have looked forward all afternoon to her Tarzan Jubes.

We are just three hundred yards from home when Grandpa remembers he must call in on the Bartons, our neighbours. I debate walking home but he entreats me to stay and open the gates. The Bartons are old and wealthy but very boring. They have cute sheep with black faces like siamese cats but Mrs Barton won't let me near 'em. She provides little houses for her sheep in every paddock, which has make her famous in the district.

I make my impatience obvious until Grandpa finally relents. The Barton's driveway is a long one and I leap out to get the last gate before Grandpa has actually stopped. I fall hard and flat in the gravel. There is gravel in my forearms, thighs and knees. Every bit of me has lost skin. I howl all the way up the hill and even Grandma hears me.

She postpones asking for the Tarzan Jubes to examine my injuries.

You're not dying. Stop making a mountain out of a molehill. Go and run a bath.

Great. A hot bath and gravel rash. I'm in too much pain to play the game I invented in my head on the way home, about being taken up by a famous artist and becoming rich and admired. Oh, well. I'll play it when I'm better. Tonight I will have to listen to Grandma's stories about how gravel rash was worse in the Depression, while she picks stones out of me one by one.

I should have walked home from the Bartons.

Sight

I was always caught between the rumours about Tracy and how much I knew she was just like me. Tracy Reese and her brother Mike were 'different'; everybody knew this and talked about it, although not to their faces. Tracy wasn't like a lot of other girls in our year. I didn't know how to account for her differences but I recognised them. They closely resembled my own.

So, in early high school I walked the tightrope of identifying with Tracy but not too much. Tugged as I was by a sense of something I could not name, maintaining balance was a constant struggle. Eventually, I toppled over.

Except for a two year break in primary school, I had know the Panton Hill Primary School crowd most of my life. We all had our stories, though we all pretended like mad that we didn't. I lived with my grandparents and had an exotic mother. I made her exotic myself to explain her mystery and her absence. Irene Weeks also lived with her grandparents because her step-father didn't want her. Everyone seemed to accept this as perfectly normal. Bronwyn Cobb seemed normal but her mother never smiled and was always nasty to her three daughters. Mrs Cobb looked like she was in constant pain: probably she was. I still thought they were pretty normal until I went there one day after school and we had to go out and kick the cows every time they sat down. We kicked them hard, poor bony things, but they wouldn't get up. Eventually, Bronwyn and her mother got down on the ground and heaved the cows up. I hated to kick the cows but Bronwyn was fierce and determined. She was like that all the time.

Whenever we played Agatha Christie at school she always played the British copper. She did it perfectly. She would lower her already booming voice and roar

Now, where is the dead body?

We would all shriek with laughter.

Sally Stone was a very private kid whose mother hated me because I once suggested that the rash on Sally's arm was scabies. I read about it in Grandma's home medical guide. Apparently this was a profound insult and as a result Sally was not permitted to play with me or invite me to her birthday party. In high school four years later Mrs Stone still bore her grudge. Sally seemed really thick and wet because I didn't know what it was to be shy. Daisy Rhys had a strange way of speaking - her parents had thick welsh accents - and seemed physically uncoordinated. Her mum and dad were as old as my grandparents and she went to great lengths to make sure we knew they were her parents.

Tracy Muldoon really was normal; there is always one. She was beautiful and confident and nice. Her parents both loved her, although they didn't like each other but what could be more normal than that?

We all ended up at Hurstbridge High School where we wore our brown gingham dresses as short as our respective guardians would allow and tried furiously to cope with the complex social world so filled with pitfalls. In primary school, physical education meant a bash with the rounders bat or

enduring folk dancing with sweaty palmed mono-syllabic boys. These pursuits continued in high school but we had to dress in shorts or little tiny skirts for the purpose and learn the rules of various contact sports while 'working up a sweat'. Then we were expected to take a shower. I'm still struck by how nightmarish this seemed at the time and by how dumb the PE teachers were. They heard the showers, they saw wet hair and thought we'd all washed the sweat off.

The gym was a regular site of revelations. What were these ubiquitous 'cramps' which got so many girls out of PE? The constant threat of being seen naked when the PE teachers did a shower raid and flung open all the cubicle doors to make sure we were actually in the showers. The time when Tracy Reese was changing into her PE uniform and she showed me the welts on her upper arm. I think that what most fascinated me was that she had a mark; an undeniable tangible mark. All my welts were unseen.

I felt my own sort of pain at the sight of Tracy's welt, as well as the rush of fascinated horror which divided part of me off from being like her. I didn't have any welts, remember. My concern, which may have been more for myself, soothed her enough for her to confess her fear. Something happened at home. Her father had hit her with his belt and tonight she was afraid it would be even worse. She didn't say 'this time'. She didn't have to.

I did not enquire further into her fear.

The rumours swirled in my head. It was said that Mr Reese had once held Mike's hand on the hot combustion stove as 'punishment'. It was said that they kept their dogs and cats in the house at all times. It was said that chooks roamed in the lounge room, pooing as the urge took them. And chooks poo all the time.

I was suspicious of rumours. For all their urgency and condemnation nothing was ever done. Victim was condemned along with perpetrator. Judgement never extended as far as action and morals were for discussion only. Interference was apparently the summit of immorality.

I struggled with Tracy's tears and despair. She voiced what I had always felt for myself. There was nothing to be done. I had long searched the faces of adults for a spark of interest or concern. I was thoroughly convinced. Tracy too. I could not sneer at her as the others did, although when amongst them and away from her I made half hearted attempts to do so. I was bad at it. It felt like I was sneering at me.

I listened to Tracy, my face stiff. I had Grandma and Grandpa. She had nothing, no-one, anywhere. My lack of malice, my contemplation was the closest Tracy had ever come to help. She drank it in. Still, there was nothing to be done.

What could we do? what could I do?

We sat behind the low brick box that was Hurstbridge High School's gymnasium and probed the ideas that came to me like a salve for my own wound that I could apply to another's hurt.

You could come to my place, I said.

You could hide there and I could feed you. Grandma and Grandpa are deaf. They'd never know.

Tracy was torn; she knew even better than I that life is not simple and safety even less so. She knew that every silver lining comes with a cloud.

But I was eager now and sure I could do this for another that could not be done for me.

We'll catch my bus tonight.

We grabbed at our idea. We nursed our plan.

We both caught my blue bus, instead of Tracy catching her yellow one. We trudged up Church Road. Nerves made me silent and Tracy near hysterical. She told me months later that she had been so happy.

You did that for me, she said.

So what? said I. *I made it worse.*

But I had to do it. I did it for me.

Even as we trudged through the thick silky dust of Church Road's shoulder I am sure we knew, although we did not say that, reality could not be very far behind us.

Tracy hid in my room while I put in the necessary appearance at afternoon tea, ostensibly eating extra cake but actually stuffing it up my sleeve. I took 'my' second cup of tea to my room, to the alcove beside the wardrobe where Tracy had insisted on huddling.

Grandpa returned to his potatoes and Grandma to her lifelong task of ridding Cottlesbridge of capeweed.

We sat in my room, Tracy still huddled in her nook and we stared at each other. What should we do now? It was only half past four.

Our reverie was blasted through by the jangling of the phone. It screamed like a banshee and Tracy burst into tears.

That's him. That's my dad. Oh no oh no oh no ....

I raced to the kitchen to answer it, my heartbeats expanding my chest like ancient bellows. I could not draw breath.

Hello? Did my voice give me away?

Yeah, it's, uh, Bob Reese here. Would that be Louise?

Y-yes.

How could he sound so nice?

Louise, Mrs Reese and I are a bit worried about our Trace. Did she by any chance pop up to your joint after school?

Oh, no, Mr Reese. Breathlessly.

Oh? She didn't? Somebody said they saw her on your bus?

No. I didn't see her since hometime.

Ah. Alrighty then. Better check her nana's house. Toodooloo.

He hung up.

My grandparents were both at work in the main paddock; I could see them through the dining room window, undulating as they hoed and chopped respectively. Of course they had not heard the phone, even with its extra special 'jang for the deaf'. *Deaf people need more clarity, not more volume*, Grandma would tell everyone.

I could hear Tracy breathing. I wandered back down to my room. My resolve had long since gone.

Was it my dad?

I wondered why she said 'my' dad? I know what 'dad' meant.

Yep.

Shit. What'd he say?

He believed me that you weren't here. He's gonna check at your nana's. Someone told him you got on my bus....

WHAT DID YOU SAY?

She had gone even paler; her eyes were huge and the strain in her face made me feel weak.

I said, someone told him that you got....

Before that.

He's gonna check with your nana..

I don't have a nana.

We stared at each other. She no longer looked strained. Her face showed what I now know only too well to be resignation.

Maybe I heard him wrong. Maybe he said he was gonna check with my nana. Do they know I live with Grandma and Grandpa?

She nodded. She was unconvinced. She knew many things I didn't. Perhaps it was a code; he knew she would understand. Bob was always doing that to me. One mention of the word 'kitten' and I was pliable. *Don't be silly*, Mum would say. *We haven't got a kitten*. But it wasn't me that was silly.

The phone screeched again. My legs went wobbly. I could not move. Tracy merely sat still.

*You'd better tell him I'm here, s*he said. *Tell him, tell him, I came up to see your guinea pigs and you fibbed because you thought he'd be mad. Tell him I'm walking home now, up Church Road.*

But I could not do that.

Did I lie again because I was afraid of his wrath? Was I, never protected by anyone, really trying to protect another? Was it another pathetically small act of resistance? If it was, this time the bile would not burn me.

He did not believe me. His tone had lost its youthful charm.

The biology teacher saw youse get on the bus, Louise.

Well, I didn't see Tracy on my bus.

Everyone saw youse together.

Everyone. Everyone saw the welt on Tracy's arm. It's the stuff of staff room coffee chat. And absolute disregard.

I dunno where she is Mr Reese.

The weakness in my voice must have revealed my lies.

Well, we'll keep looking for her. Do you understand that we're worried about our girl, Louise?

No. I don't. Are you worried that she might be hurt? What exactly are you worried about?

Yes Mr Reese.

Now, listen, you give me a ring straight away if you hear from Tracy, alrighty?

Yes, Mr Reese.

I knew it was over. I knew we just had to end it and it would be over.

Tracy was peeping out of the bedroom as I walked up the hall.

I need to go to the dunny, Lou.

It's all clear. Grandma and Grandpa are outside. They won't come in for ages yet.

Oh, but what if they do?

They'll think it's me.

Noooo. Where can I go?

Outside?

What if they see me?

They won't. They're out in the paddock.

But Tracy would not be persuaded so I brought her Grandpa's cast iron bucket.

When she called me in to dispose of it she wore an expression of extreme embarrassment.

Geez, I really needed to go. Phew, it pongs.

Don't worry, Trace. It can't smell any worse than the blood and bone Grandpa had in it before.

Having rinsed the bucket, I went back in to tell Tracy of my idea. We would confess to Grandpa. I would tell him the whole story. He would deal with Mr Reese. Grandpa was good at that sort of thing. At least when it involved children other than his granddaughter.

Tracy showed no resistance; she barely responded at all. The walk down the paddock to the dam where Grandpa bent over his hoe was a long one. The sun was just beginning to set.

Grandpa, I said, to let him know I was there,

I've done something silly.

My voice was small. He heard me. He wedged his hoe in the earth and leaned on it.

What's up, precious?

I'm in trouble.

What've you been up to?

I told him in short sentences. I didn't linger over the welt but I knew he heard me. I started to cry.

Where's Tracy now?

In my room.

Do you know the Reese's number?

Tracy will.

He started for the house. I followed. He wasn't angry but I could tell he was tired and....maybe...unsure. And I so need certainty.

Grandpa was so nice to Tracy that I felt a bit better. He was very gentle.

Look, love, I'll ring up your Dad and explain to him that Lou thought he'd be a bit annoyed that you came up here without his permission. Then I'll drop you home. It'll be apples once he knows you're alright.

Tracy looked pale again. She shook her head vigorously.

No Mr Pierre. You mustn't ring him. I'll walk home; it's not far. I'll go now.

I can't let you walk, Tracy. It's dark now. I'll drive you in the ute and see you in to Mum and Dad. It'll give me a chance to smooth things....

No. Tracy would not agree. Still she shook her head. She was taut and I could see the urgency of her need to convince Grandpa.

You mustn't talk to Dad. You can't. It'll make it worse. Much worse.

Grandpa slumped on my bed. He did not ask what it would make worse. I wish he would. I don't ask either.

For a long time Grandpa and Tracy continued their debate. He wanted to do the 'right' thing. She knew there was no 'right'.

Eventually, we go out to the ute. Grandpa had convinced Tracy to have a lift by agreeing to drop her at the end of her road.

Tracy and I rode in the back of the ute. It wasn't cold. Usually it would be fun. At the end of Youngs Road, St Andrews, Grandpa stopped. They continued their debate again.

Please, please, Mr Pierre. I'll just go now. It's only three hundred yards. It'll be better this way.

She backed away from us into the mottled early dark.

See ya, Lou. Thanks a lot.

See ya tomorrow Trace.

Silence.

Grandpa didn't look at me. He looked at nothing, his face showing its many lines.

I'm sorry Grandpa.

Not much you could do, precious.

Surely there was something I could've done? I created this hope that fell hollow like a cake when you open the oven too early. We could still hear the faint crunch of gravel as Tracy hurried grimly home.

Not much I could do. True. I remembered this the next morning when I got to school and found Tracy and Mike Reese were both away. I was called to the principal's office. First time ever. It came over the PA in ceramics class. Miss Valda Marks, who let us call her by her first name, looked at me in surprise.

Off you go, Louise. I wonder if they'd call you out of maths.

I left my pot and wiped clay on my school dress.

I carried my few books up the mottled green linoleum past rows of identical grey louvred lockers. This was what the bad kids meant when they referred to

'the long march'. Hurstbridge High School was like a whirly you bought at the Show. It had angled arms off a core in the middle. That core was the office of Mr Dick. A tiny man, he still terrified every student and most of the teachers. He was not cruel or malicious. He was indifferent. Those were our choices, as kids.

Young lady, do you know why you're here?

Mr Dick's moustache was way too big for his face.

I don't know.

You know alright. You deliberately lied to one of our parents regarding the whereabouts of his daughter.

I was worried about...

Did I ask you for excuses?

Give up now Louise. Fighting takes energy you need for other things.

The Deputy Principal, Mr D'Arcy, stood near the window. When he turned to look at me, he looked sad. He was one of my very favourite teachers and I'd let him down.

That's right. I had done something wrong.

Mr Dick was anxious to acquaint Mr D'Arcy with my behaviour.

This young lady caused terrible worry to Mr and Mrs Reese, Mr D'Arcy. She deliberately lied twice and contradicted Mrs Maher who was on bus duty.

Mr Dick pushed a button on his desk. Mrs Maher came in. Her usually warm face was hard. She glared at me.

I used to like her. She was my Year Eight biology teacher. Now I could easily slam a clenched fist into her.

Mrs Maher, I have the Kennedy girl here. She doesn't seem to be sorry for the distress she caused you.

Mrs Maher turns to look at me.

You little troublemaker. Who exactly do you think you are?

I, I'm Tracy's friend.

Remember the price of resistance, Louise.

Oh, is that right? So you tell bald-faced lies about her?

Er, um, Mrs Maher. Mr D'Arcy tried to intervene. He is ignored. I try too.

Could somebody please ring my Grandpa?

I don't think he'd be too pleased with your behaviour, missy.

He knows exactly what happened. He'll tell you. He drove Tracy home.

Mr Dick's face darkened. Mrs Maher shook her head at me and left the room.

I've heard all I need to know, young lady. You'll do a week of lunch time yard duty. Mind your cheeky tongue and get to home room before you're late. The bell's gone.

I slid down from the chair. Lunchtime yard duty. I felt the stares of friends who knew only the rumours they heard. My punishment confirmed them, described my crime. Tracy and Mike didn't come to school for a week but Mr Dick did not learn anything. I learn. I learn that what I did was something dreadful.

Silly of me, because I knew all along.

There was nothing to be done.

Aunty Olwyn

If Grandma Gertrude Prask was eccentric, it must have been hereditary.

Aunty Olwyn was the youngest of the three Prask sisters and won the title of Spoilt Brat. The competition between Gladys, Gerty and Olwyn was profound, even when they were elderly ladies. Their rationalisations were legend, along with the intricate secrets they shared, protected amongst them, yet hid from each other.

Olwyn lived in The Hole, which was a desperate youthful statement about Diamond Creek, in a war service home she paid off in tiny installments. Olwyn was 'footloose and fancy free', having lost her abusive husband to a landmine in the War and replaced him with the Department of Repatriation, and a succession of local lovers who scandalised the Diamond Valley community.

With nine years and a dead, cherished brother between them, Gertrude bitterly resented the relationship between her mother and her youngest sister as one she longed for but could not have. Such resentment- even jealousy- characterised Gertrude's entire life. Women could support each other and did in many things but competition was always what they knew underpinned everything.

Eccentricity is a peculiar thing. Is it pejorative? Not always. Sometimes it's a breath-of-fresh-air compliment. Olwyn's little ways were different from Grandma's but they were little ways just the same.

Of course, Grandma wouldn't have seen it that way.

Olwyn Prask was the youngest but she married first. Gav Timin was a cad and a bounder but Olwyn was pregnant at 17 and so they were wed. Grandma used to tell me indignantly about the dreadful things Gav did to his kids. Some of these would positively flare my nasty, suspicious antennae. Grandma would denounce Gav's actions but she never described any plan of action or intervention.

It took me years of hearing these same stories to find the courage to ask

What did you do?

and Grandma's indignation grew greater.

What could I do? Shrill, defensive. *What could I do?*

What indeed?

But at least she condemned him. I heard such judgements only rarely and it helped. It helped.

I probably should have taken a grain of salt with Grandma's judgements of Olwyn. But I had many times studied the family photo of the Prasks and I thought I could see what Grandma and Aunty Gladys were on about.

The Prasks had one family photo, taken in the early 1920's. My Great Grandfather Prask is in his wheelchair. My Aunty Gladys looks old at 20. Grandma looks stunning and angry and rebellious and .... sexy. Great Grandmother Prask looks loving but long suffering. I suspect she was.

But Aunty Olwyn! Aunty Olwyn looks like her grandsons, my cousins. I always thought that look was the Timin in them, but it is clearly the Prask, there in the face of an eight year old girl. She absolutely glares at the camera, with a look that spits chips. She is holding a small ugly doll. I am told by Olwyn herself that 'they' made her hold a doll. She had wanted to hold a kitten. Olwyn had to give up the kitten, but she made sure every subsequent generation knew about it. No one could look at that photo and miss Olwyn's fury.

So Olwyn set up her own reputation, although any explanation involving a kitten is one I'll fall for every time.

These Prasks are my ancestors: I issued from this couple, Hope and Lancelot. Lance Prask: my Great Grandfather. I can't imagine him as anything but hard and cold, based on that one image and countless family tales. Although he lived on this earth as I do, we did not and could not know each other.

I think the crossing of paths of too many generations is dangerous, like time travel. It is a potential threat to history. At least they knew I was coming. People so often refer to unknown hypothetical descendants. I do it myself. But we don't think much beyond that. I can't imagine these people who wore nineteenth century clothes and didn't have running water and raised my grandmother. They

voted in elections contested by Barton and Deakin. Or at least he did. She wasn't allowed to do so yet.

And I can't believe they could have imagined me: our lives are removed from each other's comprehension. They are a history lesson to me. I was nothing but limited possibility to them. I think of the Prasks as stoic and stern. Olwyn was their daughter and she was light years from stoic. If some Only Children are adults from birth, some youngest children stay children all their lives. Fair enough. Better a long childhood than an early adulthood any day. Olwyn and I hit it off well and played together for years. Eventually, Trish came and joined us.

Initially, Olwyn was a Special Occasion Relative, meaning that was when I saw her. One Christmas, Grandma asked her to come to us, because Dallas and Rose went to the in-laws. This was considered a crime; other people's parents were of secondary importance. So Olwyn came to the Church of Cliche's Christmas Service and drove home with us to Christmas dinner.

We were a bit ungenerous to her.

After church, Grandma and Aunty Gladys got into the Valiant first and I climbed in the back. Olwyn was still approaching, having chatted a bit longer than Grandma approved of. Grandma drove closer to the church to pick up Grandpa, who was counting the Christmas offering.

As I got in, I settled my Christmas pride and joy, my gigantic black and white panda bear, in the middle of the back seat. The drivers side was left for Olwyn. Unfortunately, she was only half in the car when Grandma mistook Panda for her real passenger and took off.

I saw Olwyn crash backwards out of the car, and hit the ground hard. The car sailed along with the back door flung wide. I was frozen with my mouth agape. No sound would emerge. I managed to prod Aunty Gladys, who turned and saw Olwyn was back on the nature strip, arms and legs flailing.

Although the car was moving very slowly and Olwyn had fallen onto a thick patch of clover, the wailing implied severe injury. I felt as small as I ever had, when Universal blame was laid on me and Panda for duping Grandma. Only Grandpa was my champion.

Really, Gerty, how could you mistake a three foot cuddly toy for your sister? If I was her I'd be a bit offended.

Olwyn blamed me loudly and repeatedly, I guess because I didn't cry out straight away. Her endless tales of woe about her injuries eventually alienated much of her audience, especially Grandma.

Oh, my knees. I've got gravel rash.

From clover, Olwyn?

I fell hard, Gerty. I fell terrible hard.

I was hardly speeding, Olwyn.

Fast enough, Olwyn sniffed.

My Grandmother's mouth set in a firm line and her chin jutted out. Olwyn reminded all of us about the Panda Christmas every chance she got. After that, Grandma did turn around to check her passengers were actually in the car.

Olwyn forgave me eventually because we became close buddies. After Gladys died, it was Olwyn Grandma went to visit and I would explore all her sheds and examine in detail all her gorgeous ornaments. She had a miniature lion with a real fur mane. She had china horses in every size and colour imaginable. She even had a record player and Cliff Richard records!

It was such fun at Olwyn's house. I never got away with so much with Olwyn; although in some ways I got away with more. It didn't matter how many kittens or puppies or guinea pigs I brought home, Aunty Olwyn always found room for them. She understood that I could not leave little creatures with uncertain futures for fate to arbitrate on. Sometimes kittens were outside the Divisional Church of Clichés. I cannot resist helpless creatures, largely because I have so often been one myself, so I would take them home. The kittens obviously knew it was better than relying on the highly doubtful christian charity of Diamond Creek churchgoers. Aunty Olwyn was a much better bet.

Staying with Aunty Olwyn felt safe and comfortable because she was alone and independent and her husband was dead and so were her boyfriends and she was in control of her own life. I lived with her for my first year of freedom. She made wonderful cooked dinners; stews, roast chicken, shepherd's pie, custard, wine trifles. Olwyn always offered me *black tea and a ginger nut*, which seemed more sophisticated than Grandma's granita and chocolate wheatens. Olwyn wrote the exact price against everything she bought in the supermarket. She only used pens with green or black ink. Blue and red were disliked and she took this obsession a fair distance. She would only fly Ansett because she didn't like TAA's colour scheme (too much red). The Bank was chosen using the same principle; one shared with Grandma. We would go riding together and Olwyn showed me through the back of Diamond Creek and showed me her old haunts and where her boyfriends lived and the property of the man who used to fuck the cows during the war. I told you Diamond Creek was not what it appears. The cows, big sleek jersey ones, grazed happily as we rode past. I felt so awfully sorry for the cows. It did not occur to me that they were unlikely to be the same cows. Aunty Olwyn showed me a less pretentious Diamond Creek. I liked it better than the one we lived in. Eventually, Trish started coming on these rides too. We had hysterics riding through Diamond Creek. Aunty Olwyn would make us shriek with laughter when she talked about her men friends. Trish and I had never heard an old woman say she liked sex, let alone talk about simultaneous orgasms (actually, Aunty Olwyn called it *coming together*). We thought it was great that Aunty Olwyn wasn't frigid. We also thought she was a rare exception. Everyone used to say that Aunty Olwyn was eccentric. But it's the Prask way, you know.

Graft

I think I'd been revisiting Glenferrie Road, my old stomping ground. At twenty-three, I suddenly couldn't miss how middle class it was. When I was a kid, I never noticed. Strange, because class has a smell and I'm into smells. The higher you go, the richer, more perfumed the smell. Fortunately, I like earthy smells. They remind me of Grandma's kitchen on a sunny Saturday evening. Daylight saving. I hate it. The sun stays out 'til 9.00pm. Everybody loves daylight saving except me. I am climatically anti-social.

Grandma was exactly the same. A very few things, we shared. Mostly, the things we had in common caused us to clash. Bombast. Sarcasm. A need to have the last word.

I went home on a number six tram. I have often mused over my return to 'these parts': a shared terrace house in Prahran with Trish, a daily walk to Chapel Street, weekly tram rides to Glenferrie Road. I think coming back is something I will do all my life.

Trish looked mutely at me as I entered the house. Her room was the front one. She was curled on her huge bed, sniffing.

Lou, we have to go to Cottlesbridge. Your mother rang. Your Grandmother is much worse.

Everything was muffled, removed. I tried to comprehend what Trisha was saying. She cried; I couldn't process anything. I remember I rang my mother but I cannot recall any conversation. We got into the car and drove the dead familiar route to Cottlesbridge. I know it off by heart. All the way along Burke Road I remember thinking how many times we had done this drive. How could it feel so different? How could East Kew and Deepdene and Greensborough look so unfamiliar?

Autopilot. There is so much in our heads we are not aware of. It surprises even us.

Trish talked to me and I replied but I am not sure what we discussed. It wasn't like this had come out of nowhere. Grandma had been 'sick' for two years at least. She lost her mind and Mum moved in with them, into my old room, to care for her mother when she returned from the operating theatre every night. My mother, with her bright false nursing home voice, restructured her entire life so as to keep her mother at home. Grandma, who measured out the drinking water when I was a kid and jealously guarded the precious tank supply, took to turning every tap in the house on full bore. She ran the tanks out completely at least twice. She stuck knives into operating toasters and fought those who tried to stop her. The worry drove Grandpa to distraction. She became violent when Mum tried to bath her so they put her on Meloril. Of course, I understand about the bath thing. Mum tried to bath her every day. All her life, Grandma took one reluctant half filled bath a week. If Mum had tried a happy medium, a gradual introduction to real cleanliness, the results might have been less dramatic. But

once the Meloril kicked in, nothing much fazed Grandma, which was not like her at all. Normally, everything fazed her.

I am exactly the same.

Meloril meant her dementia went from manic and maudlin to mild and pathetic in a week. She mixed us all up and talked gibberish but she was calm and peaceful.

It would have been great if it hadn't been chemically produced.

So her illness wasn't new. But to me, who'd been around nursing homes and dementia and strokes all my life, this stage was outside comprehension. What was I going to do? What do you do? Say *goodbye*? To my grandmother? Impossible. Larger than life, Grandma's old age had been just as raucous and dramatic as her middle age. Death could never compare.

When somebody has strokes and dementia they leave you slowly. At least that's how it was for me. Mum and Grandpa shouldered all the responsibility. I just fluttered in, kissed her, listened to her call me by seven (wrong) names and skipped back to my city life. Mum and I had swapped roles, not for the first time. It was I who dropped in on Sunday afternoons with lollies, and got shown around the garden. Trish brought her puppy, Harvey, for Grandma to *ooh* and *aah* over. Then back we went, to Living our Lives. In the City.

I let go of her stage by stage but her senile self was not that different to the persona I'd lived with. What I did not know, what I could not imagine, was her absence.

In the driveway there was an unfamiliar car. My heart sank and anger bubbled. Who were these interfering people who intruded into....what? I didn't know. We went inside. It was my Uncle Jack Prask and his wife Margaret-Mary, the Roman Catholic smoking daughter-in-law. It strikes me that Grandma never even lectured her. So many things that Jack's family did that were Sins or at the very least Weird and still she never said anything. I had not dared to wonder why.

My cousin, Therese, was there with her parents. Amareille, Francesca and Therese Prask were my first cousins. They were the Exotic-Good daughters of Jack and Margaret-Mary Prask. Amareille was not there, nor was Francesca. They were off Living their Lives. I was glad, even though I knew she was their Grandmother too.

Amareille Prask was a mere two months younger than me and had the advantage of birthing on the moral side of the blanket. *My* parents were wed eighteen months after my birth and six months before their separation. Seems a bit pointless, really. Had this been the sole entry on the page of illegitimacy in our family, Amareille would have immediately established her superiority. But Amareille and her sisters faced the disadvantage that my Grandmother could not acknowledge them as she did me due to my mother being the child of *both* my grandparents. Amareille's father was Exotic-Good but he was also the son of

some cad whom Grandma had known and misjudged in the misty days before she met Grandpa. Really, Grandma was not in a position to be pointing the legitimacy finger, although that never stopped her.

This was an open secret amongst the Pierres and the Prasks. Grandma received Mother's Day cards and chrysanthemums from the Prasks every year. I had a twinging sense that, coming as they did from the family of her first-born, they meant more than the matching cup, saucer and plate sets she exclaimed over for my benefit. Amareille had the additional drawback of being *half a little catholic* in the bull-ring of fierce and bigoted Protestantism. As a small child in this rocky world I could only assume that the last word in Exotic was a **Roman** Catholic *smoker (don't they know their bodies are God's temples*?) who was free of regular church attendance (*they go to confession so they can go out and do it all again*). Aunty Margaret-Mary wasn't Italian, but it occurs to me now that exact details were somewhat inconvenient in Grandma's mission of anti-Catholic bigotry. Yet she broke a lifelong habit for Jack and Maggie-Mary. She never said a thing to their faces.

Amareille assumed carelessness; her thick spiral curls and white-rose complexion set off a tiny scarlet mouth; sensual mouths not being fashionable in the seventies. Amareille's beauty transcended Pot-o-Gloss and Dolly cuts. Jack beat out a success as an artist of some note, so Amareille was part of a family, and a subculture, which lived on the edge or so it seemed to me, stuck as I was in the Mainstream Central of Hurstbridge High School. Amareille went to school in France and attended a Private *Catholic* Girls School and ran naked in the bush and it wasn't even called a Sin. Amareille didn't shriek at her elders or

stamp her foot in a temper tantrum and wasn't a worry to her poor mother. She was the sort of quiet which *seems* to accompany confidence. Amareille wasn't shy, she had poise. My cousin Amareille was Exotic-Perfect.

In spite of the closeness of our ages, Amareille and I hardly knew each other. We were certainly never friends. I often wonder if she knows that. We may have had a mere dozen conversations in our childhood. Amareille and I kept our distance from each other. I am not sure why. I wonder if she knows?

Amareille was never as close to Grandma as I, yet their relationship seemed to forge almost of its own accord, across the chasm of unfamiliarity and awkwardness, into a bond which was as tangible as the chain knit we made together under Grandma's terse instructions. Grandma was my primary caregiver, who raised me because of the rules about single women with children to which my mother was brutally subjected. In spite of being her closest grandchild who knew her infinitely better than all the others, I felt Grandma's special affection for Amareille. I came to resent it.

Uncle Jack and Aunty Maggie-Mary were always very nice to me, but they weren't a real aunt and uncle, like Davey and Shirl. All my life I called him *Jack Prask*. His whole name. That's what I mean. He wasn't real, like a person you call by their first name. I could hardly call him Uncle, which doesn't make sense as everyone pretended he was Grandma's much younger brother, in which case he would have been Great Uncle Jack. I called all the other great aunts and uncles by those titles. But as I said, Jack Prask wasn't real. Poor man, it isn't very nice. I know now why he wasn't real. It was because Grandma didn't talk

about him. She told stories about all the family, she dissected their sins and motivations constantly. Even those who died decades before I was born were laid bare for examination. She never discussed Jack Prask at all. Never. I guess applying her usual scrutiny to her first born would have meant looking closely at herself. She wasn't into that. Understandably.

On this particular day, the house in which I grew up felt strange. Mum was strange. Unreal. I know now death often feels like that. But all I felt, besides that muffled distance, was a desire for things to revert to **normal**.

Luckily, Bob did not appear. I would normally endure his presence with clenched teeth and remove myself as soon as humanly possible. My mother would look at me sadly

He'd like to be your friend, she used to say.

She could talk but she still couldn't listen.

When I stood in the front hall, I knew Grandma was dead. Although I had not allowed myself to know why I was coming here, the feel of her death so strong in the house brought everything into sudden, sharp focus. Strength pumped into me. She was dead. I had been saying goodbye to her gradually. I took her totally for granted. I'd had her all my life, right there making my after-school snack and giving me money for the offering plate, which I then spent on lollies. I had shared in her care and in her death. Amareille, Francesca and Therese Prask could not call her *Grandma*, as I did. I barely noticed the march of her illness or

the implications of her age. And now she was gone, the largest one of us, the most fascinating person I had known, and my life would change for ever.

I heard Jack Prask and Maggie-Mary slip out the back door. The consciousness that they might be intruding is something we all shared silently. He is her son but he couldn't mourn for her with us. Maybe that was out of respect for her. I don't know. I was just relieved.

Grandpa sat in her room, holding her cold hand. She had been dead for half an hour. Mum was alternately crying and manically making Tea and Plans. That's Mum, a cup of tea to lubricate the plans. Grandma didn't have plans with her tea. She could plan things in thirty seconds. *No mucking around*, she used to say.

I am exactly the same.

It was different for Mum. It was her mother. That is supposed to be the hardest loss in life. For me, it was complicated. The realisation was like a new beginning grafted onto the old person. *Cuttings*, Grandma used to call them. She was always getting cuttings from other people's gardens. I grieved for what would become of us more than I did for the loss of her. She was our glue, our momentum, our centre. She was going to be with Gladys and Freddy. She had long looked forward to her Eternal Reward. That would suit her fine. It was us I was worried about.

Grandpa was impossible to reach. He tried to be comforting to Mum and I but it was he who needed comfort and for once even I could not reach him. He could scarcely believe it, I think. She was his life companion. Literally. They endured fifty often difficult and painful years. They stood together through poverty, war, scandal, drought, Black Friday, the Egg Board and Pig Iron Bob. They witnessed the deaths of most of their families. Grandpa looked quite helpless.

Trisha stayed with me. I wrote up my death notice for Grandma. Our family is very big on personal notices. I walked around her garden endlessly. I listened to plans for the funeral that it comforted my mother to make. I was all right. I did not grieve the loss. I grieved what the future would bring. I had forged some kind of confluence between my lives. Always used to having the compartments of City and Bush, I needed continuity. How long would I have it now? I had no idea.

Grandma was buried on a wet September day. One of our neighbours spoke of her constant desire for rain.

Gerty always wanted rain, he said.

We laughed. So true. I was so glad it was raining. The elements were seeing her off. Mud, rain, cold winds. She would have rejoiced in the funereal weather.

I am exactly the same.

I held a special place at the funeral, in the family pecking order. I was like an honorary child. The Minister even said so.

Gertrude was often more Mother than Grandmother to Louise.

I felt a sharp twinge for my mother. By definition, he had just left the Church in no doubt of her mothering skills. And every time I was reminded of Our Differences, I wondered what it said about me.

I felt no twinge for my cousins, the other granddaughters, three pews behind me. Amareille and Francesca had made the Dutiful Appearance, taking time out from their Lives. But I was struck by the grief in Amareille's face.

I did not need to work at my disregard for her. I saw it as reciprocal.

Amareille always did seem to disapprove of me. I could feel the quiet never-spoken judgements being passed against me, like she had a checklist of sins the Rebellious-Bad grandchild could be expected to commit. I suspect by this time I had regressed to be merely Mundane-Bad. Loathsome though it was, still it represented the safest option for an adolescent hiding from the spectre our family smilingly ignored. I tried to immerse myself in the safer backwater of Cottlesbridge, trading Exotic Danger for Mundane Safety or....Mundane Less Danger. Like the rest of them, Amareille never looked closely enough to know that my life was not the boring open book everyone deemed it to be.

As we outgrew adolescence and our paths crossed less and less until not at all, I became increasingly aware of - amused by -the vicissitudes of the Prasks. Standing one day in my university's Baillieu Library, I was struck that in spite of such different choices as Amareille and I had made, ours paths had merged in many ways. Not literally of course. Still, Amareille had before me scoured the same shelves, sat in the same Reserve reading room, looked over the graceful curving shoulder of the same South Lawn and graduated in the same Wilson Hall. We ate, years apart, in the same Lower Dining Hall and perused the same *Farrago* in its multiple incarnations. On her wall hangs a certificate with the same dignified red promise. *Postera Crescam Laude* indeed. I knew that our attendance at that institution had never been something we were expected to share.

Amareille and I last saw each other at Grandma's funeral nearly a decade ago. Amareille carried white chrysanthemums. My contribution was included in the family wreath of red roses which draped the length of the mahogany casket Grandma would have loathed (*the wood is too dark, it's hideous, I'm not leaving my mortal body in that hideous thing*). I roused myself. I tried to be generous. I admired the chrysanthemums.

After all, our Grandmother had just died. I'd had her all my life. Amareille, Francesca and Therese Prask could not call her *Grandma*, as I did. But Amareille was in no mood for my attempt at generosity. *Chrysanthemums were her favourite flower*, she bit at me.

I wanted to say *No, Amareille*. With a knee-jerk, I wanted to say *Don't be silly. We know her favourite flower*. Roses were Grandma's favourite flower; that is why there are red ones all over her coffin, demonstrating an extravagance which would make her shriek if she could see it.

But I didn't say it. I knew her. I know her favourite flower. I don't need to point it out. The strength that came to me with her death remained. Amareille's pain was for a dual loss; the death of a grandmother she never had.

The Chrysanthemums are lovely.

Amareille and I are both the Granddaughters of our Grandmother Gertrude Pierre. We remember how much she liked roses and chrysanthemums. I remember that once I felt ugly and inadequate compared to Amareille and that now I do not. I only wish I had known Amareille better, learned more from her, been friends with her. There is no longer a need to resent her now that I have learned that there is plenty in the pot for all of us. Still, I might have made a connection, through our grandmother, with my cousin Amareille.

From the Mountain to the Molehill

Surviving

Spinning, I go down into the ground like a corkscrew into a cork. I'm being wound down until the thick earth fills my mouth, my ears, my eyes.

But I will come up again.

The earth leaves a film over my eyes. And it takes so long to get the taste out of my mouth.

I will carry an anchor on all my voyages on land. I will never be rid of it. It will throw itself down at times, defying me, and I will break my nails and rip my skin and pop the muscles in my neck trying to drag it up, just a tiny way, just so as I can move forward a step or two. But it will not budge until it is ready. And its weight will exhaust me.

One day, the weight will just go out of it. It will spring up as though gravity were suddenly switched off beneath it. It will float along behind me like a helium balloon, as though it is my friend, like we want to be together.

For a time. For a few days, years, hours. Until the next time.

I never know when the drop will come. Or how long it will last.

Living this way puts me off surprises. Oh, and I'm told it makes me *anally retentive*. This means I plan obsessively, never leave the house without lipstick,

make timetables, schedules, financial plans, lists, lists of lists I should make. I really love lists.

Lists pin things in place where they should be, rather than where they might end up if you leave them unpinned. Because there are some boulders in life that no nose, shoulder, grindstone, elbow grease or faith can budge. Even thinking about it exhausts me.

We all have our anchors.

Sylvia Plath called hers a 'Panic Bird'. You can imagine the fluttering, the swooping, the fear of predators.

Mine hasn't always been an anchor.

Once it was an old-fashioned pressure cooker. The kind that has an aperture on the top for releasing the mass of steam slowly, safely. The idea is you open the little hole gently, as the pressure is building. After all, containing that much steam in that tiny environment is asking for trouble.

And thus we have the expression *letting off steam*.

Before I had an anchor, I lived life on top of our family's pressure cooker in which was slow-boiling a rotten, smelling carcass and if I moved the wrong way, some of the desperate steam might escape. I could not let that happen. Within was no eagerly awaited, lovingly tended meal. This carcass would never

be cooked and the steam would just keep coming. Holding down the lid of that cooker was hard work and distracted me from things I would have enjoyed, like childhood, but still it was way preferable to living with the constant emission of vile reminders of my own powerlessness. Such reminders were already thick around me.

But the pot's off the stove now. The carcass is still in there but I jumped down from the lid years ago. Turns out that once the pot is off the boil, the steam isn't as bad as the desperate striving to hold it in.

It is this memory of the long immovable seat on a scorching lid, which transformed itself into the anchor that now is my companion, my familiar, my muse.

The Way It Is

Mum stands at the closet door; there is a mirror there. This flat is weird. The closet is in the lounge and to go the bathroom, you must go through the main bedroom. Mum has a dress-and-jacket suit, it is red and winter-white, the jacket has big gold buttons and the dress has a box pleat skirt. She looks so smart. I watch her pull the dress down over her head from my seat on the couch.

Bob strides into the room. He speaks to her in Croat, a few expressive words. With a few paces he is across at the closet, he grasps the dress roughly, drags it up, right past her hips and waist and breasts to her shoulders. He runs his hands fast over her body, speaking those thick words. She pushes at his hands,

remonstrating, half giggling, half serious. Then she sees me. She has forgotten I was there. She pushes him away, grabs her dress, drags it down. She berates him, as if he were a small child.

Don't ever, ever do such a thing where any one can see. It is for private.

He appears confused. She indicates me. He acknowledges. **He knows**. He knows how it works. I am stunned. He knows she must be on guard. He has slipped through her guard and he knows the cost of this.

The magic word is private. *It is for private.* That way, no one will see that the whole deal is a bullshit veneer.

* * * * * *

What is it about boys? I didn't wonder this for long because the answer came quick, keen, regular. Boys are all the same. Old men stare hotly at you and their tongues come out, they move them wetly in their mouths. Little boys, tiny little boys years younger than you, practice their biological and social destiny on you....

I wanna give you a BAAYBEE.

They run off together, chortling at their courage.

Even the nerdy boy with no friends in the form below you sees you as Object, Demonstration. This boy, who is too smart and too dumb to hide it, can help

you pass the time in French class when the idiots are stuffing up their readings, but in the lunch hall later he is just like the rest of them.

Why have you got your legs crossed? Have you got your thing and you haven't got a plug in? Is it all gonna run down your legs?

Your friends are no use at all, having well imbibed the motherly advice to ignore, dismiss, pretend they did not hear. Your humiliation is, as always, yours alone to bear.

Boys your own age push you around, make fun of you, mock what you are saying, make stupid meaningless guttural noises from deep in their chests.

OOOuuuhhh. OOOuuuhhh.

At the time, their hand gestures seem meaningless too. Now I know what they were representing. Soon they wave their groins around like Elvis. Grandma told me it was disgraceful to watch.

But isn't it disgraceful to do?

They're boys, Louise Daphne. It's different. Boys are different. We must watch out for them; it is our God-given task.

I fell for this for a little while. But soon I realised that to take on such a task would be a tad too time consuming. I had my hands full guarding morality already.

I was spectacularly unsuccessful. I was also confused about just what constitutes morality.

Women are the guardians of morality. A little tip: don't ask them to start work at four years of age. Out of the question.

Even the boys at church knew this fact that eluded me for so long. They can touch you, feel you, drag you behind the dunny and try to rip your undies off. Sometimes, one holds you while the other *scores*. But you do not rock the boat of silence. You do not go back into the church, where sex is seen as a fiendish plot by Satan, and demand justice for the weekly humiliation imposed upon you by boys. Who would be at fault?

If women are the moral guardians, we must be failing at the job.

Boys in your class don't even let you speak when it's your turn to report on the GDP of Belgium and Luxembourg. You try to ignore the back row whistles, grunts, pelvic thrusts but no one can hear you anyway, so your voice drops and your face goes red and the teacher, only a few years older than you, vaguely demands that they be quiet, but of course they ignore her, drown you out, and the other girls and the wimpy bookish boys look at you with pity and even...contempt.

And you hear people say *she asked for it, look how she dressed, you don't go to places like that, boys will be boys.*

I don't go to places like....school? ...Home? ....*Church?* Right. I get the picture.

It took a while but it clicked in. Knowing and understanding are two different things.

Little boys, older boys, young men, old men, hot eyes, thick tongues, no choice.

I like the winter. I like the cold.

Play

You're such a lucky girl, Louise. You never appreciate how lucky you are.

Oh yes, I do. I just don't admit it to you, so you can use it against me. Besides this luck is tempered. Your idea of discipline, I suppose. The recurrent theme of discipline. I know, I shirk it, I resist it, it's all my fault, I just don't like discipline.

Headstrong she is, strong willed and pig headed, like her grandmother. She'll come a cropper. Pride goeth 'fore a fall, young lady. You'd do well to remember that.

Remember? Oh I'll remember. I'll never forget. I won't let myself and my memories will haunt us all and their bile will scald us all and they will show you as you are.

Pig headed, like her grandmother.

They always compare me to Grandma. It happened to her too, of course. No one admits it but I know. I recognise the scars, the bits and pieces, the desperation. We are headstrong, pig-headed, all right. Grandma. I felt your pain before I ever knew it was the same as my own. But we couldn't help each other.

Discipline is important, you must submit to it, but don't touch yourself down there, it's dirty, it's wrong. Louise, DID YOU HEAR ME?

Sure. I heard you. You are always contradicting yourself. I am not permitted to point this out. Therapists call this crazy-making behaviour. They are not wrong. But it's apparently only a crime to be *made* crazy. If you make someone crazy you've absorbed the dominant paradigm just fine. It's not okay for me even though I never hurt anyone. He hurts all of us. I rescue kittens. He tortures them. I try to stop him from blowing up. He likes to be unpredictable. It's okay for him though, isn't it? It's rare for him to let you see and even rarer for you to look, so that's okay?

You are all twisted.

The bile burns me too. It's reaching my throat. Soon my eyes will water and the lump will get bigger.

It was Grandma who said *what can't be cured must be endured.*

Like I said. It happened to her too.

I am lucky. They're right. It's possible to be a lucky victim. That's me. But I can't admit it to them because they might quote it back at me at an inopportune time and that would never do.

Of course, for a long time the nightmares disturbed me at least once a month and sometimes they even came when I was awake, but you must take the bitter with the better as they say...

Who were 'they' again? I mean the psycho-professionals. Or maybe it's the *old wives*. Funny to call them that, they handed down such wisdom. But of course, men hand down money and property and names and identity and power. What else was left for women?...wisdom...but I digress.

I realise you need an objective distance to get a handle on what the hell is going on. It wouldn't be difficult to get confused. Nowadays, people often tell me to calm down. Grandma always used to say *clam up*. Clam up - calm down- get it? It sounds like a see-saw.

You hardly ever see see-saws anymore. Because play equipment is designed by a spatialist. People who teach parents how to teach children to play while using all their motor skills. Not that I've got anything against motor skills. They are crucial to survive childhood. When I played it was with implements fashioned by Goddess for purposes other than play. I never needed instruction in how to play. Not that that is possible. I mean, only kids know how to play. Adults can't teach them.

My play was almost too creative. I was great at play. You could have learned a lot from watching it. Fortunately, few people ever did. Except Grandpa once or twice. And he worshipped me so he just thought my play was adorable.

Funny thing, play. It teaches you those precious motor skills. As I said, you need them to survive childhood. A disempowered, dangerous state. Devised by nature but re-interpreted by man. (No *sic* is necessary here, I mean **man**. Women did not devise modern childhood. They were already well acquainted with oppression).

Thank Goddess for play. I still play. I'm 30 years old and I still play to hide from the world like I did at 5. Play is learning. You never stop.

You don't have to teach kids to play. Goddess knows, if you did, someone would have worked out that you could hurt the kid if you didn't.

Oh, that's right. That's what this story is about.

3. Now

Making Me Mysterious.

I was a resourceful kid. If I didn't like who I was at a given time, I could be anyone I wanted. I could make a world where I would control what I didn't like. I was beautiful and desirable, but what was desired was to adore me. I was clever and accomplished and therefore admired, by women who wanted to be like me and by men who wanted to be seen with me. But I would only deign to associate with women who liked me *for myself* and men who were strong, handsome, silent and ..... who desperately wanted me. I was a private detective, a tough lady lawyer, an investigative journalist or a spy! My vehicle, a Malvern Star, could also effect this metamorphosis, becoming an E type Jaguar or a little Mercedes Sports. My carefully selected op-shop handbag, containing equally precious toy-store cap gun, was slung casually in the bike basket, er, glove compartment. I would set off to play out my dramas with me as heroine around the streets of East Malvern, where Mum happened to live at this particular time. I played different dramas in Cottlesbridge. They were less frivolous, partly because my props weren't suited to the bush but largely because cycling was not so effortless amongst the perpendicular hills. In Cottlesbridge I was a missionary (non-evangelical, of course) who came to teach English to little children, or I was a third world freedom fighter, ridding some unknown nation of the Catholic peril. (My Grandfather would not have approved of me fighting communists. Besides, I did not know what they were).

But the fleshpots held my favourite jaunt; to Glenferrie Road, which took me along Wattletree Road past many glorious mansions which in my personal drama conveniently housed drug dealers or corrupt Catholic priests (were there any other kind?), to the strip of op shops wherein I could add to the wardrobe and props of the Young Spy about Town. Elbow gloves, pill box hats, cigarette holders, lighters, jewellery, all found their way into my stash. As my little dramas developed I purchased ballgowns, for the purposes of attiring the young spy as if she had the resources of the state at her disposal. Gradually, the booty of many complex role plays necessitated the purchase of a old and battered Louis Vuitton suitcase.

Mum didn't always line my pockets adequately for intrigue via the op shops, which meant I elected to ride around East Malvern, noting down innocent people's registration numbers and picking highly suspicious looking supermarket dockets or TAB tickets up off the ground. That I must have looked quaint, if not downright bizarre, did not occur to me at the time. I was living as I was meant to be, certain of my own great significance. I was playing. Funny how, when I analyse it, I realise all the things I did as a kid, that everyone commented on and described as unique, all those things were about survival. What I didn't have, I made sure I got in my own world.

I definitely wasn't alone in finding myself by becoming someone else. Agatha Christie did it and so did Nancy Drew and Trixie Belden. I didn't discover this until I was at least twelve, suddenly unearthing a whole new source of plot ideas. At high school, I found other Agatha Christie fans, who agreed to indulge

in dramatisations of our favourite stories. Fortunately, various members of our little group could convincingly play the English Country copper, or the red-haired vixen or the plain, older woman who felt life had passed her by. Once again, we looked quaint. But we had a ball and, since Hurstbridge High School wasn't always the happiest place to be, we had a brief escape.

I don't play this way much anymore. I've spent quite a long time now carefully crafting my life so I don't need to escape it so very often. But it is true that when you lose a piece of childhood, you often have to go back later to look for it. When we are children, we play to learn. When we are adults, we play to pick up the bits of childhood we missed.

I kept playing these games way longer than most kids probably do. It was well before role playing games were fashionable and I was bemused when How to Host a Murder came onto the market: I'd been doing it for years.

Hurstbridge High School

I met Trish at Hurstbridge High School. Year Eight Biology. They didn't call it that. They called it "And Then There Were More". So I guess it was sex education. We did it with chickens. But there was no sex of course. At least, not that anyone could see.

Isn't that usually the way?

We each got assigned an egg in the batch in the school incubator. We waited for the warmth to persuade them to hatch. Then we identified our chickens with multi coloured Textas, poor things, and played with them for an hour four times a week.

This certainly taught us the concept of 'Imprinting'. Eventually we took our chickens home. Mine chased me everywhere I went. Shame he was a rooster. Trish got a hen. She called her Chooketh and kept her for eight years. Chooketh laid a lot of eggs. She was a cute chook. If you ran up behind her, she would crouch down, like she thought you were a rooster.

Imagine that. A whole life of waiting for the rooster.

When Trish's mother came out to hang up the washing, Chooketh would peck her shins. Chooketh never attacked anyone else. This led me to believe that she was a good judge of character.

My poor chicken eventually became someone's Saturday dinner. At least he had a nice life first. That's a lot more than most chickens

Trish and I stayed friends after Year Eight biology, even though she thought I was a 'bad' girl. It was an identity I cultivated but I was spectacularly unsuccessful. Only the christian kids thought I was 'bad', because I talked about sex all the time. The real 'bad' kids (who did know about it) thought I was wet and the normal kids just thought I was weird, which was true.

But I had an excuse.

So Trish and I were 'sort-of' friends til about Year Eleven, when we started to, as Trish loved to call it, 'communicate'. We talked about the lives we would lead and the poems she would write and who God was and thought ourselves incredibly sensitive and intellectually superior.

In reality, what it meant to be friends was to offer some respite to each other; not support, certainly not protection, but relief, from endless the emotional danger that was high school.

Ah, schooldays. They were carefree days. No bills, no decisions, no time running short. Happiest days of your life, Louise.

Sure. Just agony and heartbreak.

Walking through the undead, youth just ripe, half knowing it would mostly be wasted and go rotten.

Trish and I saw two different worlds at Hurstbridge High School. Our lenses were different issue. Mine bore the mutating gaze of the Church of Clichés laid across the warp of molten fear. Trish's view probably saw a more run-of-the-mill casual terror. All adolescence is fear. For some it is concentrated, for others more dilute. I didn't know Trish was afraid and she didn't know I was. But we both needed a kindred soul in the other and having found one, we've clung on.

Back then, I thought the terror would completely disappear.

* * * * * *

It was often easy to forget that Hurstbridge High School was in Hurstbridge at all. Even now, passing those buildings as the train draws into the station, I remain unconvinced. Hurstbridge High School was the place you arrived at when you went into C S Lewis' wardrobe. It used Hurstbridge's name and educated Hurstbridge's children but it did not intrude into the world of Hurstbridge. I guess that's why, when they changed its name, closed it and sold it off, no one grieved. No one seemed to notice.

Well, not quite no one. Trish and I noticed. We grieved. But me; not as much I would have liked to. Sometimes, pain is something I know I'm in, rather than feel.

"I" went to Hurstbridge High School. But not an "I" I see much of these days. She would have wept, so out of loyalty, *I* ranted. I vaguely remember her, I liked her, but I know I won't see her again. Life is actually a series of little lifetimes; when each incarnation starts to die, it passes the baton in the relay to the Phoenix of the next life. And the new one must run. There is no time to stop and get acquainted.

But, between races, our various new selves keep going back. We revisit the sites of our past lives. We reminisce them with friends, family, acquaintances, anyone else who had a former self present.

And sometimes the revisiting is a disappointment. It doesn't feel as it...should. As we expected. As we rehearsed it. The expectation is too.....high?

Impossible.

Because we are really trying to meet our old selves.

Church

My body is so heavy and time goes so slow...church is a place for learning how to endure because I can't cure it. It is only supposed to be an hour but it is far slower than all the time before and after. It is like an hour in maths or sport or Youth Club. Things I loathe slow down the clock they hang their dragging weight on the hands.

One day in the future I will learn that time like this is called mental freedom. One day when I sit in excruciating boredom I will use it to think and plan and I will make lists and plot things and it will be a luxury because it will be the only thing I *can* do.

But now, I do not appreciate this fact. I'm still trapped by my teenage sense of immortality; time is still plentiful. I am not yet conscious of the precious need to conserve it. One day, when I have used about ten more years that speed by in a glorious wrenching flash, I will know. Until then I will use this mental freedom to torture myself. It is absurd, this service of Pious Theatre; the language, the ceremony, the dogma. They believe it. Great, more power to them, I'm all for believing in things, but does it make them happy? No. Does it empower them? No. Does it imbue them with humility and love for living things? Absolutely not. It even erodes their self-love. If they ever had much. It has to, of course. Religion could hardly function as it likes to with a lot of subscribers who liked themselves. Mutually exclusive, you see, religion and self-love. One of the sado-rituals is this complete waste of my time, making me listen to a lot of humbug which will actually have a detrimental effect on my psyche, which, lets

face it, I can do without. I mean, I have enough other stuff going on with my psyche. But that's religion. The Up side of this waste of my entire Sunday is I am getting too large a dose and I will in spite of the shit going down in my psyche be permanently innoculated.

'What can't be cured must be endured'.

So, the theatre deal every Sunday didn't imbue me with respect for the Institution of The Church in spite of their efforts. It did teach me that there is a Lamb of God who washes us in blood and makes us eat his flesh and drink his blood for Sunday morning tea (*and* that somebody is using metaphor). Now I had that pumped into my head from about 4 years of age which is ironic really because most of these 'moral obscenity' types have a problem with kids watching violent or sexually explicit films. They just have a weeny blind spot when it comes to religious imagery.

Fortunately I took all this nonsense with a fistful of salt and developed a useful capacity to weed out the rhetoric and thus was not subject, like the poor Catholic girls, to terror about serpents ripping away my flesh with razor sharp teeth for all eternity if I looked at a boy's bum. This discernment has been very useful in other areas of my life, particularly since I joined the Australian Labor Party.

But that's another story.

In spite of its sheer inert boredom and utter waste of my time, I had good moments at church. Sunday evening church eventually became a comfort; something I did rarely as I grew older and thus associated with the more secure time of my early childhood. The utter predictability of evening church meant you could sleep briefly and never lose your place. Nor did you need hymn or chorus books. I knew every lyric and every note perfectly and when exactly to stand and sit, not that the good old Church of Clichés does a lot of bobbing up and down because you know they are a Bible Based Church and the apostles never bobbed up and down in the chapter on their Acts. (You know, Acts of the Apostles. I call it Chapter 5 of the Real Part because the Old Testament is only for those stubborn ones who won't accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. But I digress). It was those other churches that bobbed. But still, we did more bobbing than you'd do if you stayed home and watched 60 Minutes. Evening church was easier because it felt like the times years before and it was always warm in evening church and the birds in the roof chirped loudly during prayers and serious preaching (sorry, tautology, have you ever heard of frivolous preaching? I didn't think so). Ladies would cast horrified glances at the ceiling and hope the birds didn't fly right out or do any droppings while I, of course, pleaded with God to lighten the proceedings in just that manner. I would think about going home and getting into bed and Grandma would make me cocoa and toast-and-vegemite and I would read *Little Women* for the umpteenth time. This sent the sweetest flood of joy through me despite its utter simplicity. I can capture those moments of pure contentment and feel them through me again. Now I recognise it as a moment of safety. Such moments seemed like joy; they were as fleeting and as common.

And then Church would be over and we would sing the same old lines "Drop/thy/still/dews/of/quietness/'till/all/our/strivings/cease" which never made any sense at all until I was about 15 but which I could still sing verbatim and all as one long word. For a bright and questioning child, I had dull patches at Church. Once, intrigued by the use of the word 'brethren', I went to my dear old deaf Grandfather and asked for a definition. "Oh, it means 'paint the church'", he replied. I think it's odd now that I didn't say, *Grandpa, that doesn't make sense.* I accepted his response with a sense of confusion and the beginnings of my general distrust of rhetoric. Of course, Grandpa had not heard me properly and as was his wont he just answered the question he thought I was asking; a practice which was successful for him more often than you would have expected. (Unfortunately he eschewed a career in politics in spite of this exceptional qualification). But for a few years I was destined to be doubly stumped on every use of the word *brethren*.

Getting Out

Maybe it will be glamorous. A professional mother, divorced or widowed, needs an 'au pair'. She must go to work, beautifully groomed each day, and entertain her clients at her home with an elegant cocktail party or at restaurants or the ballet. I will feed and bath her child, iron her beautiful clothes, collect her dry-cleaning and help keep her home spic and span. On my Day Off, I will explore East St Kilda and meet my mother for lunch. St Margaret's is only two small suburbs away but 'St Kilda' is an exotic mystery. It is a place where nice girls don't get out of the car.

I am just seventeen. I can glamourise anything, even moving as a live-in help to escape the grey sordidity of life with my stepfather, laid over like perfume on sweaty skin with my mother's determined, thin cheerfulness. Our lives are sordid. I cannot escape this fact but I can create other lives. Some are even outside my head but unfortunately they are the ones which tarnish as I try to live them. 'Au Pairing' is a good example. I persuade my mother, baldly telling her averted face that I cannot go on living with Him. She knows in spite of her efforts not to.

I fear for you, she says, *it is an awful world out there*. It is ironic: it is not so good in here, either. *He'd never hurt you*, she says.

Right.

So off I go one Saturday afternoon, my little bag packed with what is precious to me, to a flat in Westbury Street. I am overcome with excited apprehension. Until I cross the threshold. The old nibblings of impending dread ripple through me. My employer, Jan, is matter-of-fact. She has made no attempt to prepare for my arrival, leaving me assured of my welcome and significance. She shows me my unmade bed, pushed up against that of her child. The room is greatly dishevelled. There is no cupboard. There is no privacy. Privacy is, always will be, the silver cord by which I blindly feel my way to survival. My heart beats those rhythms you feel through your whole body. I know this will not work. I start to suffocate, panic rising in me. The kitchen is covered in tiny ants. I watch them, running hither. They are free to go where they want. She is talking, talking. She is going 'out' soon and will not be home `til 2.00am. I hesitate.

I can't stay. I'm sorry. This is not what I expected at all..

Phew!

I expect anger. She is disbelieving. She does not ask why, what were my expectations? Obviously, she knows. I promise to stay to babysit and take a cab home afterwards.

I ring Mum on evening shift at St Margaret's.

It's awful, I speak as softly as I can. *I have to come back.*

I hear her relief

Now?

No, I said I'd babysit. It'll be late- 2 am.

Gosh, you'll have to get a taxi. Have you got money?

She'll have to pay me.

Mum is silent, worried like me that Jan might not see it that way.

I am crushed. There might be glamour in the world but it is not for the likes of us. I must go back.

Don't tell Him, will you? Just tell him I got a shift babysitting.

Mmmh. He'll be at the Trots all evening.

I resolve to ask Jan about money before she goes out but there is no opportunity. A man arrives to collect her. She appears in a ruched red evening dress. But it is not glamorous. It is only glamour if it goes all the way down.

They are gone for more than eight hours. I feed the child her meal and bath her. She is silent, like me. We are not so different, her and I. She goes easily to bed. I leave my still-packed bag near the door. I watch Penthouse Club on TV. I cannot relax, I leap up, pace the room, drink lots of coffee. Periodically, there are angry knocks on the door calling for Jan. I refuse to open the door, saying that she is out. They swear and continue to bang but they all go away eventually. I ring Mum, who is patronisingly cheerful. She has got what she wanted. I tell her about the men.

I can't wait 'til you get back here. Now you'll see there are much worse men in the world, my girl. Her tone is one of self-congratulation. I wonder at it. These men are all the same.

At 3.30 am Jan returns, with three men. They stare at me horribly. They smoke and drink liqueurs and talk very fast in another language. I follow Jan into the kitchen and ask for fifteen dollars for babysitting. I am charging barely one dollar an hour.

She gives me ten dollars and a hard angry look.

I ring a cab.

Where are you going?, ask the men.

Home, I say coldly.

Stay, we are going to have a party!

No, thank you.

They laugh.

I think of the little girl behind the closed bedroom door. What does that laughter mean to her? Our lives are so similar. But in the end, we all seem to prefer the devil we know.

As I unlock the door to our flat, I hear Mum murmur sleepily

Louise?

Yep, I whisper. I go into their room. He is asleep.

I'm home. It was OK.

Thank goodness.

Go to sleep. I'm going straight to bed.

Sometimes, life is a series of choices. Other times, there are no choices at all, just forces and you do well to just go with the one that pushes hardest.

Up

Life as a Nanny in The City appealed for a while. I lived on the periphery of glamour. I got to see that many people's lives were not so glamorous as they might appear. The grass is so often greener. So Mum paid my board and I moved in with Aunty Olwyn.

Daily life in The Hole was OK. Trish was there and we became Best Friends in about 3 days. We talked all night. We went to Op Shops and bought old evening gowns and even wore them in public. I avoided employment. I fell in love or so I thought. Trish and I sailed over Diamond Valley, after boys, clothes and potential careers.

Mostly, we were just looking for ourselves.

I went to Church and met a beautiful boy called Gabriel. I met lots of young christians. I had never known such christians existed. They weren't like Elspeth O'Neill. They had fun. I joined them. Trish and I would sit on the adventure playground equipment at the Church. She would sing 'evil, satanic' pop songs and I would screech roaring hymns

Hark how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own.

Poor Leif Garrett never had a chance.

Trish worried about me being a christian because normally I was so irreverent and I now thought everything was a sin. But amazingly, we still had fun.

The beautiful boy paid me a lot of attention. I still wanted more. I used to tap on his window late at night and when he came out I would cry and say

Oh Gabriel, there's so much sin in the world.

And he would comfort me. Eventually we comforted each other. Below the waist. But as Gabriel clearly said to me

We know we can't have sex.

Then his parents got upset about it and he went to a prayer-fest (not very festive, hey?) to talk about it and when he returned he said my distress was really a Satanic Lie. I didn't know what that meant but I knew it meant an end to 'not having sex' with him. I begged him and pleaded with him and emotionally blackmailed him and then I went home to Aunty Olwyn and cried for about a month. I thought I would die. I wrote very bad poetry.

I even went back a few times and begged him again. I cringe to think about it.

Maybe I just need some spiro company?

Spiro was the hip streetwise word to describe a very spiritual person. The streets of Diamond Creek did not offer much wisdom.

And he would patronise me with streetwise christian pop-psycho babble.

Now, listen Lou. There's a lotta stuff goin' on here. There's ya' self-esteem; there's ya sexuality.

He was counting on his fingers. He did not offer a conclusion.

Soon my loathing of humiliation kicked in. I gave up church, stopped praying and wrote more poetry. Trish and I would talk about the inherent contradictions.

God gave us sex and said it's a sin.

Not if you're married. He meant it for when you're married.

Then we would think about the marriages we knew. Silence.

We used to joke that there was no sex after marriage. I'm still not sure how funny that is.

I went to parties with Trish. Her boyfriend had lots of friends and they were always having parties. I decided I would have sex. The boys I considered didn't even try. The ones that did were out of the question.

A short guy who was in the army and wore camouflage gear everywhere tried. His name was Private Something. Those four factors would have ruled him out individually.

Then I met a tall cute guy at a costume party. He wore a leopard spot loincloth. I decided to do it with him and he seemed perfectly willing. But then I went into the kitchen and heard two women talking

Is the Tractor here? They called him this because he rode a motorbike with a sidecar.

Course. Why? You that desperate?

Could be. At least you know what you're getting.

But do you know where it's been.

They laughed. The Tractor lost his appeal for me after that. Desperate is not a good look.

The project was on the back burner for a while. I got into nursing, hated the discipline, quit after a fortnight. I got another nanny job, with twins and a baby all under three. I had a beautiful room and a kosher kitchen to look after. I was fully absorbed in these changes. On my Thursday off I would shop and then sit with Trish in Coles' Cafeteria, eating wine trifle and inspecting my purchases. On weekends, we roamed Diamond Creek. On Saturday nights we would eat dinner, take away, on the steps of the Diamond Creek op. shop. Motorists would

stare at us. Then Trish'd borrow her father's car and we'd drive to Greensborough McDonalds and drink really bad coffee and talk...boys. Actually I do us an injustice. We talked philosophy, values, dreams, plans, even politics.

But boys cross all these categories.

We debated the objectivists (represented by me) and the subjectivists (represented by Trish). I lost. I hated it. We searched our minds for signs that what we wanted would come to pass.

There are no Coincidences, only Significances, Trish used to say. I believed her. This was a bit dangerous.

Trish used to pick up her bible and think of the Latest Boy and let the bible fall open. The verse would be Significant.

Sylvia Plath did the same thing, but she used Auden's *Collected Poems*. That's a bit more likely, I think. I do not recommended *The Living Bible* for relationship advice.

If it happened to fall open on the word 'love', that was terrific. You'll see how the process just wouldn't work with the King James Version. 'Charity' ain't the same thing.

So life was hectic, almost glamorous, even though I was hurriedly waiting for it to Really Start. I was safe. Life was predictable. That is a luxury. And I wasn't so determinedly on the Lookout for a Boy. So, of course, I got one.

Trish dragged me to a party with the Creature. That is what we called her boyfriend. It was not his usual crowd. They wore black, studied psychology and used substances other than alcohol. They were intense and sophisticated and some were even gay. I never knew what to say.

I know. Why would I have to say anything? God only knows.

There was a boy there. And what a boy. Jack was moody, unhappy, intense. He rarely smiled. He looked at me a lot. And he could hold a conversation.

He wasn't taller than me. But he was strong.

I spent half my life at his place and the other half he spent at Aunty Olwyn's with me. She was nice to Jack and fed him as she did all my friends. But she looked at me with soft disapproval that said *too much*.

Jack and I walked in the bush. He shot rabbits and killed them while I cried. He shot at kangaroos and missed them while I prayed. He kissed me, passionately, tenderly, in a way than ran like power through my body. But he didn't have sex with me.

We didn't have sex.

I thought sex was the man's job. To a point. So that made it dodgy. And besides, I had no idea what to do.

We were so happy, in a tragic doomsday sort of way, except for the shooting. And his being so depressed. And my being so insecure...

Jack was how I found out I was insecure. I was constantly afraid I would lose him.

Each Sunday night I would head back to Caulfield on the train, weeping and desperate that this was it and it was over.

One Sunday Trish borrowed the car and drove me home. Jack came too. That was worse, if anything. He stood in my room. He touched my things. Then they drove off. Usually, by the time I got home I was a least composed. This night, I bawled in my room for half an hour. The twins came in and stared at me.

Louey, did you get a smack?

Every Friday, as the train inched the full nine minutes between Eltham and Diamond Creek, my heart would start to rattle and I would wriggle and my mouth would be powder dry. Then I would be off the train and in his arms.

His very strong arms.

I loved him. I thought. No, I did. I did love him. But I loved being loved. We consumed each other. And then, like hot bath water on icy feet, the unfamiliarness of love started to hurt.

First him.

Then me.

He pushed me away, sometimes physically, always emotionally. He said we were doomed. It was too hard. He couldn't love. We couldn't be happy. He said it would end and so it had to.

Or he'd be wrong.

In the end it was only two months we'd been together. But it was a whole small life that I'd worn and it had been cosy and exciting at the same time and I had to take it off and hang it in the built-in robe.

And then I knew what they meant. The love songs. The movies. They were all written for me. You could distill the sweetest times we'd had into a few hours. But they were perfect. Beautiful and perfect.

And this without sex.

I wept constantly for days. I was grey and flat all over. I craved sleep but woke before dawn, instantly to full consciousness. It was nearly winter; the worst possible time to have your heart broken. The light was always grey. I wrote desperate poetry. I wrote lots of it. I still think it wasn't that bad.

I would visit Trish, visit mutual friends and he'd be there and we would ignore each other, study casualness, but I always dressed carefully and laughed too much and ran a script in my head, *Is he looking? Doesn't it hurt him? How can he do this? When will it stop?*

My mother came to lunch, as she did every week and told me to *snap out of it,* so I told her *fuck off* and she said *it's puppy love,* and I turned, so I would not slap her, and walked away.

She was worried about me so she sent the local minister. I was incensed. But the local minister was a twenty eight year old woman named Amelia. She was not a fundamentalist. She was nice. We went shopping. We talked boys. We became friends. Amelia took my mind off it.

And then I saw Jack one day at Diamond Creek Pony Club. He'd been shooting. Trish and I were 'out walking'. He came over to chat. He looked at me. Long heavy looks. Trish asked him to come to the movies with us. We saw *Flashdance.* He put his arm around me.

It felt like velvet. I wish I could cut the feeling out and keep it forever. I did not know how long it would last. Why do we always think too much? When I have something I want, I think, *how long will it last*? This means wasting the time you've got it.

But I don't do this any more.

We went to his place and I lay in his arms and every time I tried to ask he kissed me quiet and then he said

I just love you. I just love you.

So we were back together. Louise and Jack got back together.

I walked tall and sang and I saw everything. Every little thing. Nothing was grey. I rang him every night. I saw him every spare minute.

One day were eating Monte Carlo biscuits in his room and he said

I want to have sex with you.

And I said

OK.

It's a bigger deal for a woman, he told me. *So you decide when.*

So we planned it. I went on the pill. He bought condoms.

And soon I left my nanny job and went to College and Mum rented me a flat in Prahran. Suddenly my life was a huge open flower, all glamour and excitement and happiness.

Trish moved in with me and we cooked pasta and bought Mishpet the siamese cat, who broke all the ornaments. Trish got a photographic job and on Friday nights we walked to Chapel Street.

On the weekend Jack came to stay. We lay on the futon in my room, watching TV. And I said *I've been ready for a while.*

And everything I heard about sex came back to me; the ridiculous and the stupid and the frightening and the wonderful.

They get so big.

If they stop moving, you're in trouble.

It hurts, you know.

I remember Aunty Olwyn told us about *the pleasure*. It was an esoteric concept. She raved but she couldn't describe it. *When you reach the pleasure together*, she said, *that's just...*

But who can put it into words?

Suddenly, neither of us were virgins any more and this strong tender man was all over me. I couldn't believe how simple it was and how physical and yet...

Oh?

Oh, my God??

It crept up on me.

No wonder. No wonder all the fuss. The shock of it was overwhelming. This is what it is. All those people, all this time, have been feeling this? I could hardly believe it.

I said to him *it works. It works!*

He laughed.

Of course it does!

And we did it again. In the shower, In the kitchen. And in my bed. Especially in my bed.

Now that was love.

For a while, we were welded together with our not-very-Secret. But the last thing we needed was more intensity. The bath water got hotter and created even more contrast as we immersed our cold selves in it.

It started again. Jack said he couldn't be happy. He said it was impossible. He said all the things he had said before. He wasn't capable of love, he said.

Yes, you are, I said. *I am loved. I am very loved.*

No, he said. And he went away again.

I wept. It hurt. I longed for him. I looked for him. At least three times I seduced him. And the last time, more than two years after we first made love, something clicked. He rolled away from me and I felt it. It was not meant to be. It had been wonderful and it had to end.

How can you do it? he said. *It hurts too much.*

I'm sorry, I said. *I didn't know.*

Without even knowing it, I had grown stronger. I had come up.

He looked at me. *You're a wonder*, he said.

I'm a wonder?