

*This town, last town, next town: the women of sideshow
alley and the boxing tents: a novel and exegesis.*

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Abstract

This town, last town, next town: the women of sideshow alley and the boxing tents: a novel and exegesis.

This doctoral creative thesis comprises a novel *This town, last town, next town*, and an accompanying exegesis. The novel is set in Western Australia in the 1950s in sideshow alley, a unique part of Australian culture that has not previously been represented in Australian fiction. It is a period in which the sideshow is coming to the end of its heyday as a place of carnival and spectacle. The three main characters are: Joan Tiernan, a dancer and married to the owner of an entertainment show; Rose Jackson, the wife of a boxing tent owner; and Corrie Cooper, married to an Aboriginal boxer. Joan and Rose travel with the show but Corrie stays behind, living in a small timber shack on the outskirts of a wheatbelt hamlet, while her husband travels with the tent most of the year. The narrative explores the women's hopes and personal desires and how these are negotiated and shaped by the needs of the community.

Official records show that women played a significant role in the sideshow community as performers, spouses and operators. Some women travelled with the show for a large part of the year, while some stayed behind to care for children. However, the details of their lives and their particular circumstances remain largely unrecorded.

The central artistic and theoretical aim was to explore the representation of women in writing back to the past, and the accompanying exegesis reflects on the creative writing process in addressing the questions: Considering that women have largely been left out of the historical records, what are the challenges for a fiction writer imagining and writing about their lives? What are the challenges for a non-Aboriginal writer imagining and writing Aboriginal characters? What are the ethical challenges for a contemporary writer

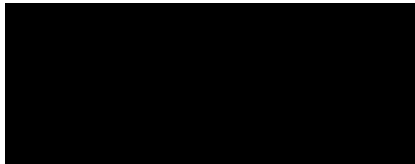
imagining and writing the 'freak show', its participants and audiences in its historical context?

The exegesis reflects on the ambiguous positionality of the creative writer as a white settler woman and examines some of the current debates within postcolonial and feminist frameworks around the larger themes of gender, race and class. It reflects on how these larger themes are complex, shifting and ongoing issues, and when explored creatively with notions of the body, body image and ageing contribute to ways of writing back to the past in addressing the absence of women from the historical records, giving voice to Aboriginal characters, and the 'other'.

For the doctoral examination the novel is weighted 70% and the exegesis 30%. Although the exegesis is an integral part of the whole thesis, the novel should preferably be read first.

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

"I, Delia Frances Allen, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *This town, last town, next town: the women of sideshow alley and the boxing tents: a novel and exegesis*, is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.



17 February, 2014

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Introduction

The whole point, after all, is to avoid laying down requirements for what a woman's writing must be like. Every writer will have her own voice, and her own vision. Inevitably, a woman writer writes as a woman, not as a generic woman, but as the (highly specific and idiosyncratic) woman she is.

Toril Moi (2008: 268).

I lived in Perth from my late teens to early thirties, married into a West Australian farming family from the South West, and my children spent their childhood in Perth. During that time I travelled extensively through the state, camping out, and the more remote, the more I loved it.

Coming from Victoria, my initial love was for the space and emptiness, the vast skies and the light. My first impression of the bush was of the muted greens and greys, the spindly shrubs, often prickly with brittle leaves, and the tough, tussocky grasses. Then, once a year, the seeming blandness transformed when it flowered: some amassed, like the everlasting daisies in the desert, which covered the red soil in carpets of gentle cream and pink; the *Hardenbergia* creeper, which splashed the bush with purple, or the 'egg and bacon' shrubs covered in tiny pea-shaped flowers, bright yellow with a slash of red. Then there were the tiny, exquisitely shaped and coloured orchids, so small you could easily miss them.

In the early 1980s I was employed by Mount Lawley Teachers College to work in Fremantle and Canningvale prisons as a tutor in literacy and numeracy for Aboriginal inmates. Most of the men were young, aged seventeen to early twenties and most were Nyungar, from the southern and Wheatbelt areas of Western Australia. This program was initially set up as a bridging course for Aboriginal teachers' aides in remote areas so they could gain entry to tertiary training to become teachers.

The program proved successful in the prisons and several students were accepted into university. For most of the young men, having a separate classroom space not directly in the field of vision of the prison officer's cubicle provided a time for more than just literacy and numeracy.

My memories of that time are of being challenged in many different ways. I had assumed that the removal of Aboriginal children from their families was something that had happened in the generations before mine, but it was not uncommon for the students to tell us that they had found a brother or a cousin whom they had never met before. The laws under which Aboriginal children were removed from their families leading to what is now known as the Stolen Generations, are discussed in chapter two.

There was sadness and alienation in these young men's lives, yet they had the ability to find humour, and, in spite of the sadness I felt and the anger at their circumstances, I have never laughed so much as I did in that prison classroom.

We did not ask questions, but often the students would tell us things about their lives. However, I remember one day I did ask one of the students what he did before he was 'inside'. He told me he worked in a boxing tent. I had never heard of a boxing tent and asked him what it was. As he described, in just a few short sentences, what he did, travelling to country towns, I could see the pride in his eyes. Pride was not something in evidence in that place and this moment has stayed with me all the years since.

I grew up in Croydon, Victoria. We moved to a small house on an unmade road about two years after migrating from England. My father was a journalist and accepted a job in Australia to work at *The Argus* newspaper. I have very clear memories of a sort of double life as a child growing up in the outer suburbs of Melbourne in the 1950s. The parents of my school friends were addressed as Mr or Mrs and there were all sorts of social niceties that had to be followed and rules that had to be obeyed. It was a serious world and adults were remote, mysterious and authoritarian. One never answered back to an adult or questioned their rules; having 'good manners' was essential, as was deference and obedience.

My other life happened on weekends when my parents had parties at our house with all the journos, their wives and children. These would sometimes revolve around a large keg of wine being decanted into bottles and everyone taking their share home. My father's would be stashed in the cupboard in the hallway to be left for a year or so 'until the wine matured'. Those bottles never lasted a year.

There were none of the rules that governed my other world here. Adults were addressed by their first names. I would climb onto Sam Seba's lap and ask him to draw me a cartoon. I can still remember his pictures of fat ladies. We would cajole Brian Hansen into taking us for a ride in his red sports car. We would all clamber in and he would take us for a drive, the roof down, our hair blowing. These men were accessible, unlike the remote fathers of my school friends, and the women were funny, opinionated and some of them swore; such a contrast with the mothers from my other life. I was always very impressed by the way Gwen Deamer, wife of Adrian and sister of cartoonist Les Tanner, could hurl out a string of 'bloodies' and 'buggers'.

Weaving in between legs, sitting on knees, hanging off hands, I listened to stories and conversations that were funny, serious, political, puzzling. I remember overhearing a story about a man with no legs who plucked chickens for a living and lived with two women who were lesbians. I had no idea what this meant, but I knew that such talk would not happen in my other world. I knew quite clearly the difference between the two, and my weekend world was never spoken about in that other one. I knew as a child that I was lucky to have this world.

I began my degree as a mature-age student, majoring in literature and journalism at Deakin University. While I had often felt a sense of frustration in my reading life with either the lack of female characters or, more frustratingly, representations of women that I could not relate to, it was in the process of studying literary texts and the theoretical frameworks, particularly poststructuralist, feminist and postcolonial, that I began to understand the construction of the representation of women within the dominant cultural paradigm. I explored this issue of

representation in my honours thesis, writing a series of short stories and reflecting on the historical silencing of women within a framework of feminist theory.

When I came to consider a doctoral thesis in creative writing, somehow my memory of the young Nyungar prison inmate's story of the boxing tent, my sense of insider/outsider from childhood, and my interest in representing women's stories came together. I would write a novel about an 'outsider' community, sideshow alley; it would be set in Western Australia in the 1950s; I would write it from the point of view of three women, and one of the women would be married to an Aboriginal boxer.

According to the historical records, sideshow alley communities in Australia played a popular and important part of the annual agricultural shows, local fairs and rodeos, in bringing the outside world to people in remote and country towns as well as the cities. Following in the steps of the popular fairs and markets in England, and before the advent of television and cheap air travel, sideshows provided entertainment and a taste of the world beyond, particularly for isolated (mostly homogeneous) rural communities.

Historian Richard Broome writes of the ambivalence local communities had towards the sideshows and the showies themselves, that 'like wanderers everywhere, they were perceived to be beyond the moral and social controls of the local community, or at least a threat to that control' (Broome & Jackomos 1998: 29). He quotes Alick Jackomos, who worked as a showie, and recalled: 'the local community distrusted showmen, because any time anything was stolen in town while the show was on, they'd reckon it was the showies' (29). However, they also brought economic benefits to the towns. The showies often had a particular pub they would frequent or a favourite butcher to buy their meat for barbeques. Word would spread to other showies and they returned year after year to the same traders.

My research also revealed that the ambivalence went both ways. According to Jan Napier (2005), who worked as a casual employee, a 'warb', for over seventeen years from the late 1970s, 'the thieving is

usually the people of the town trying their best to break into our vans or make off with our equipment' (35). A challenge in fiction writing is to avoid writing stereotypes, particularly when they reinforce common cultural assumptions about certain groups, so my aim was to represent a range of attitudes and beliefs within both the showie community and the communities that frequented the shows.

The showies travelled in mostly endogamous, tight-knit communities; a large unruly family, with its own codes of conduct, language and shared meanings. There were squabbles and brawls; sometimes serious disagreements between the men were 'settled on the grass', but 'the customary ease with which everyday traumas and dramas were habitually solved is a tribute to the tolerance, pragmatism and common-sense approach practised by those families who spend their lives on the road' (Napier 2005: 8).

According to Broome, some showies took their families with them when they travelled from town to town, while others were separated for most of the year, seeing them only during Christmas breaks (Broome & Jackomos 1998: 118). However, although some of them travelled for up to ten months of the year, the showies did not live permanently on the road in the same way as the European traveller communities. They returned at the end of the runs to their homes and, from the few historical accounts available, it appears they aspired to the same material advancements as the wider mainstream community. Western Australian boxing-tent owner George Stewart (1997), who started off with a tent and an old bus, drove a Bentley from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s and said some Showmen sent their kids to private schools.

The showies brought all the elements of carnival to the towns and hamlets they passed through. Broome (1999:11) argues that for the patrons, as well as entertainment, the 'human oddities' and 'freak' shows provided glimpses into the world of the 'other', be it of class, body or race, and this was one way settler Australians developed self-knowledge, discovering who they were by knowing who they were not.

We may now cringe at the idea of the actual displaying of 'freaks and oddities', but Broome's argument, from a mainstream perspective, articulates the notion of the 'exotic' other; that thousands of ordinary Australians could go and watch a show which displayed people with disabilities and be fascinated, frightened, challenged and entertained, and come away reassured of their 'normality'.

Richard Broome and Alick Jackomos' *Sideshow alley* (1998) is the first history of Australian sideshows. It covers the rise and demise of sideshow alley at the agricultural shows in eastern Australia and provides accounts of the 'freak' and novelty shows in the heyday of sideshow alley in the 1920s and 1930s and again briefly in the 1950s. Three chapters are dedicated to the boxing tents, one of which deals solely with Aboriginal tent fighters. West Australian boxing-tent owners George Stewart, Mickey Flynn and Tom Ryan are mentioned, but there are no records of other Western Australian sideshow alley operators apart from the George Stewart oral history tapes in the Battye Library (Stewart 1997).

Broome has written more extensively on Aboriginal tent boxers in other articles (1995 & 1996). His accounts of the lives of the boxers travelling together: sleeping together on the sawdust on the tent floor or in fitted-out vans, eating communally, and of the camaraderie that was part of tent life, provided material for me to imagine the boxers of Jackson's boxing tent.

The documented records of the sideshows are few, and within those there is even less detail of the women who worked alongside their husbands as performers or owner/operators as well as caring for children and taking care of the domestic work. Bob Morgan's *The showies* (1995) is the selected transcripts of taped interviews with seven showies including one woman, Shirley Castles, the wife of an operator of a sideshow act. Morgan writes in the introduction that he included a selection of the interview with Castles 'to place on record an appreciation to those female showies who worked alongside their partners through tough times and good, and filled in for the menfolk either in the drag, up on the line-up board, or in a more domestic role' (xvi). In this interview Castles talks

about meeting her future husband when she was fifteen years old and marrying him two years later, in 1943. She began work as a line-up girl, standing up on the boards outside the tent, and later as a spruiker, the job of 'calling' the show (27–9).

Broome & Jackomos (1998) provide glimpses into the lives of a few of the women who were married to boxing-tent operators. Win McNabb travelled and lived in a caravan, while her children were raised by their grandparents until they reached their teens. They saw their parents at Christmas, school holidays and when the show run brought them close. John McNabb said of his mother, 'Mum did all the cooking and she became "Mum" to a lot of the coloured boys' (138).

Stella Johns always accompanied her husband on tour, staying in hotels, while their three children, Frances, Harry and Ernie, stayed at home in Fitzroy with a housekeeper. Frances recalled, 'he used to pay them five pounds a week which was a lot of money them days to look after us... They used to get us fish and chips and saveloys'. According to Frances, her mother was a 'placid' woman, who played little or no part in the daily running of the troupe (Broome & Jackomos: 118–19).

There is a photo of Sylvia Paulsen with her arm around Aboriginal boxer Erwin 'Tiger' Williams (185) that suggests the close relationship the Paulsens had with the men cut across racial and boss–worker boundaries. Alick Jackomos, who worked as a wrestler, spruiker and general hand in sideshow alley in the 1950s and 60s, recalled that Harry Paulsen operated a tent in Tasmania in between running a demolition business. Jackomos (Broome & Jackomos: 138) writes:

He and his wife Sylvia would take the boxers into their home when you were showing in Hobart, instead of you camping in the back of the truck or something, you'd sleep in the house.

Broome (Broome & Jackomos: 138) confirms that this was unusual and Jimmy Sharman's crew slept in the shed at his property in Narellan.

Specific Western Australian research material on sideshow alley is very limited. Jan Napier's *All the fun of the fair* (2005) is an account of her time as a casual worker, a warb, for seventeen years from the late 1970s.

She mentions only one woman who was an owner/operator in her own right, and the tough, no-nonsense attitude that all the wives of the owner/operators had to running their businesses. She writes of the pride the women had in keeping a very neat and clean caravan, and the spoilt lap dogs that travelled with them.

George Stewart's autobiography, *The Leveller: the story of a violent Australian* (1979) has only one chapter about his career as a boxing-tent owner and provides very little detail, although he ran a troupe for twenty-five years, from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. However, in the *Project: Royal Agricultural Society (WA)* oral history recordings in the JS Battye Library, Western Australia, George Stewart spoke about his wife accompanying him on the north run. Her job was to take the money on the door and wash the outfits (Stewart 1997).

These recordings did provide more detail of the day-to-day life of the boxers and some invaluable information about showie terminology. For example: 'heelie whackers', referring to people who would set up tents with games that were rigged to undercut the prices of the regular showies. It was in these tapes that Stewart talks of the years it took to form an association to deal with the 'heelies' and the issues of 'ground', the place where tents were set up along the alley for the showies. These issues are explored in the novel as part of the overarching narrative of the sideshow alley community. He also revealed that, at one time, one of the showie families owned Luna Park in Scarborough, Western Australia.

Researching Luna Park I came across records of the 'Snake Pit', an outdoor area that became an informal dance venue opposite Luna Park, where young people would gather. Stirling City Council Library has a new community history site online called Chronicle Scarborough (2013), which provides photos of Luna Park and the 'Snake Pit' and includes anecdotes told by locals. As both these entertainment venues are long gone, I decided to incorporate them into the novel, albeit briefly, as part of recreating what Perth would have been like in the 1950s.

My research also led me to the Coolbaroo Club. Although the club does not feature significantly in my novel, watching the documentary *The*

Coolbaroo Club (1996) and reading the exhibition catalogue *The Coolbaroo Club 1947–1960* (Darbyshire 2010) helped the development of a context for my characters Corrie and Stan and provided material for me to imagine Stan's story. According to Darbyshire, the Coolbaroo Club began in 1947 and ran until 1960. It was founded by returned Yamatji servicemen, Bill and Jack Poland, with their white friend, Geoff Harcus, whom they had met in the army, and Helena Clarke, a young woman from Port Hedland.

Darbyshire also provides background to the situation at the time. The city of Perth had been declared a 'Prohibited Area' for Aboriginal people in 1927, and this law was not repealed until 1954. Aboriginal people committed an offence if they came within the five-kilometre delineated square, unless they could prove they were in 'lawful employment' and had been issued with a special 'native pass'. A six-o'clock curfew also meant particular hardship for many Aboriginal women who worked in domestic service. Fraternisation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people was considered an offence and those found guilty could be charged and imprisoned.

The club began operations in East Perth, and soon spread to a number of outlying regional towns. Coolbaroo, a word for 'magpie,' was suggested by Jack and Bill Poland as the name for the club and came to represent a message of reconciliation, of black and white coming together.

Originally beginning with the popular weekly community dances, the Coolbaroo League grew to become an Aboriginal-controlled community organisation responsible for running the *Westralian Aborigine* newspaper; lobbying the state government on issues such as the removal of children, citizenship laws, deaths in custody, and repealing of the worst elements of the then 1944 Aboriginal Citizenship Act, the 1936 Native Administration Act; and eventually having an impact on changes to the 1954 Native Welfare Act.

The documentary, *The Coolbaroo Club* (1996), directed by Roger Scholes in collaboration with Aboriginal historian and author Steve

Kinnane, captures the spirit of this time and place. This is what the Ronin Films' website has to say:

The Coolbaroo Club was the only Aboriginal-run dance club in a city which practised unofficial apartheid, submitting its Aboriginal population to unrelenting police harassment, identity cards, fraternisation bans, curfews, and bureaucratic obstruction.

During its lifetime, the Club attracted Black musicians and celebrities from all over Australia and occasionally from overseas—among them Nat "King" Cole, Harold Blair and the Harlem Globetrotters. Although best remembered for the hugely popular Coolbaroo dances attended by hundreds of Aborigines and their white supporters, the Coolbaroo League, founded by Club members, ran a newspaper and became an effective political organisation, speaking out on issues of the day affecting Aboriginal people.

A review by Australian writer, Robert Drewe, is quoted on the website:

More shaming than a hundred news stories, this chirpy, dignified and scathing documentary by Roger Scholes does more than just recall a less tolerant time and place. In a modest way, it lifts the lid on postwar relations in this country. Some wonderful interviews with feisty former club members, especially several still remarkably articulate old women. This is a shaming documentary but an educative and surprisingly forgiving one. A COPY SHOULD BE OBTAINED BY EVERY SCHOOL IN THE COUNTRY - Robert Drewe, *Sydney Morning Herald* 1996 (Ronin Films n.d.)

I have watched the documentary and agree with Robert Drewe. There is something hopeful that, against such odds, this organisation existed in Perth.

My memory says that my character Corrie was always imagined as a young white woman married to an Aboriginal boxer. In the retrospective process of writing the exegesis I cannot claim a fully conscious decision based on engagements with the debates around appropriation and representation in my creative writing.

What the research did was to create a framework in which I could reflect on my writing of an Aboriginal character, Stan. This included careful

consideration of the debates by some Indigenous academics and writers that non-Aboriginals should never write on Aboriginal issues, including Heiss (1999) and others, such as Jackie Huggins (1994), who advise that for non-Aboriginal people to write Aboriginal representations they should have experience of working with or friendships with Aboriginal people and do the appropriate research.

Marcia Langton (1993), in her writing on legitimation and authority, also examines 'the other act of racism, that of making Aboriginal people invisible' (24). The historical records (Broome 1995, 1996; Broome & Jackomos 1998; Corris 1980) show Aboriginal boxers played a significant part in the boxing tents. Given this and Langton's argument for that 'other act of racism', I decided to write a more detailed account of Stan's story than Maurie's or Tommy's.

I researched the history of the Nyungar peoples and found historian Anna Haebich's (1985, 2000) work invaluable in providing material which confirmed some of the stories I'd heard in the prisons, and from which I could create a backstory for Stan's character.

The creative part of this thesis, my novel *This town, last town, next town*, is a fictional account of sideshow alley, a unique part of Australian culture that has not previously been represented in our literature. Set in Western Australia in the 1950s and early 1960s, the narrative opens when sideshow alley had re-established itself after World War II, but was still a collection of people rather than a formally organised community. 'Conmen', or 'heelie whackers', were a common feature, although the general public would not always be able to discriminate, particularly between those showies who thought of themselves as genuine businessmen, and the 'heelies'. Arguments about 'ground', the place along the alley where the showies erected their tents or 'joints', were frequent and sometimes serious. Both these issues made it imperative for the showies to become a more formally organised community to protect their common interests.

The narrative also alludes to the advent of television, which along with new sensibilities about people's rights and notions of exploitation,

irrevocably changed the face of sideshow alley, so that today it bears little resemblance to the place of 'freak' shows, novelty acts and boxing tents of the 1950s.

The opening and closing chapters are from Corrie's point of view; in a structural sense encircling the closed/outsider showies' community. The idea of the showie women looking back at the patrons disrupts the notion of the showies being a spectacle, and legitimises their community by giving them a (female) voice.

Rose and Joan do not come from the showie community. This allowed me to explore the reasons why, as young women, they each made decisions that led them to the showie community and the social, economic and familial influences of the 1950s that differ significantly from the present. Class and economic position were more rigid, the age for marriage was much lower and young women were expected to assume the maturity necessary for a marriage relationship and then the responsibility of raising children.

These young women were, by current values, little more than children themselves. As they stepped into adult life, they each envisaged a more promising future than the economic and familial background they had come from.

This exegesis discusses some of the ideas and theories I have engaged with (although it does not encompass all those I have read, considered and discarded) in reflecting on these creative writing components of this doctoral thesis. Each chapter addresses a specific question:

Chapter one: As the sideshow women have largely been left out of the official records, what are the challenges for a fiction writer imagining and writing their lives?

Chapter two: Given the issues of appropriation and legitimization, what are the challenges for a non-Aboriginal writer writing a novel that represents the lives of Aboriginal characters?

Chapter three: How can a writer represent the so-called 'freak' shows in a way that is both 'true' to the time and ethical in its representation for a contemporary audience?

While my fictional representation of the sideshow alley community provides the overarching narrative, the focus of the novel is the stories of my women characters, which were not mapped out in advance, but revealed themselves as I wrote. The creative decisions I then made with the material led me to reflect on the complex interplay of the conscious and subconscious in the intended, revealed, surprising and serendipitous in my writing practice, and this also highlighted some of the differences between the scholarship of creative writing and literary studies.

For instance, there was no intended literary allusion, as a literary critic might suppose, to Jeannie Gunn, author of *We of the Never Never*, in Corrie's maiden name of Gunn, nor to Katharine Susannah Prichard in Rose's daughter's name Katharine. I wanted a Scottish name for Corrie to reflect my research on the settlement patterns of British migrants in the Wheatbelt, and I know someone of Scottish descent with that surname. As for the particular choice of spelling the more unusual version of 'Katharine', it was because in my imagined backstory of Rose she liked the actress Katharine Hepburn.

At other times, when I wrote aspects of the characters or events that reflected symbolic or metaphorical literary intentions, such as Rose's scar and the death of Corrie's child, I deliberately re-wrote them. These creative decisions were based on the intention of this thesis to explore ways of writing a realist fiction to tell the stories of women missing from the official records, and are discussed in the following chapter.

This process of writing creatively and then reflecting in the exegesis also revealed a deep engagement with notions of myself as a writer. Understanding the layered, ambiguous positionality of the writer as a specific woman, as white, and as a settler; in drawing together the threads of a story I heard in the prison, a childhood sense of 'insider/outsider', and my memories of the women from the 1950s to write the novel, added a further dimension to ways of approaching creative writing practice.

While the three following chapters address the specific questions with their own particular focus, the exegesis as a whole contributes to debates which address the concerns of representation, appropriation, legitimation and ethics in writing back to the past and giving voice to those absent from the official records. When these concerns are considered in conjunction with the ambiguous positionality of the writer, notions of authority and orthodoxy in literary representation are challenged by offering the potential for multiple and alternative narratives in creative writing practice.

As Toril Moi expresses in the quote at the beginning of this introduction, the point is to avoid laying down requirements for what a woman's writing must be like: she will have her own voice and vision, but, as I discovered in the process of reflection and research, she will also understand where that voice and vision comes from.

Chapter 1

Literature is the archive of a culture. We turn to literature to discover what makes other human beings suffer and laugh, hate and love, how people in other countries live, how men and women experienced life in other historical periods. To turn women into second-class citizens in the realm of literature is to say that women's experiences of existence and the world are less important than men's.

Toril Moi (2008: 268).

My novel *This town, last town, next town* is realist fiction. Susan Lever (2000) has challenged realist writers to question the conventions of the genre while using them, and to do it in a way that allows for the writing of women's stories. In her discussion of a selection of Australian women writers from the past hundred years, she argues that realism does not merely reflect or reinscribe masculine assumptions, but has been used by women to subvert the strict definition of the genre to suit their own writing purposes.

The traditional realist narrative arc requires a central protagonist and a plot in which a significant event occurs which changes the protagonist in some way. While this has been challenged in women's writing by exploring psychological rather than material change, in essence this narrative arc reinscribes the notion of individual agency and reflects the 'heroic' journey of classical literature.

My decision to have three main characters with equal voices in the novel was a decision to explore that aspect of women's lives that are defined more by relationship rather than individual endeavour. The sideshow community offered such an imagining and the opportunity to challenge the dominant hegemony and interrogate the expectation that women's stories, whether writing back to the past, or in works of

contemporary fiction, need to conform to the conventional realist narrative arc to have their stories told.

In acknowledging that the patriarchal structure of the community was not all that different from mainstream society, I wanted to explore ways of writing the women's lives as I imagined them by highlighting and celebrating the important contribution of their work, both domestic and in the businesses, as without this labour, and their relational lives within the community, the community itself would not have existed.

The first part of this chapter reflects on some of the specific challenges I faced in writing the women of sideshow alley. My interest in imagining and writing their stories was sparked by finding them missing from the official records that document the showie subculture. As a feminist I was interested in exploring the social and cultural contexts in which these women lived, especially the complex interplay of gender, class and race, which all women have to negotiate, in imagining what their lives might have been like.

Susan Hawthorne's (1989) article on the politics of the exotic argues that it is not only other cultures, but also minority groups and subcultures that are subject to the process of exoticisation; a paradox in which, while there is financial and cultural gain for the people whose culture (or subculture) is being exoticised, those who benefit most are the publishers, and the consumers, whose appetite for 'knowing the other' is little more than another act of appropriation. Hawthorne's article, along with the other academic writers I have sourced in this thesis, affirmed my decision that, although I am writing about the sideshow alley sub culture, I am not writing a fiction that highlights the contrasts between its potential for the 'exotic other' and the mainstream, but exploring the ambiguities and imagining the commonalities as well as the differences in writing women's lives.

I did not pre-plan the stories of the women, and I found as I wrote them and made my creative decisions with the material, that through this process, their bodies, how they felt about their bodies and the process of their ageing became central themes in their stories. I hope that by the end of the novel they emerge with the patina of a lived life.

For Joan the challenge was to explore and represent how childbearing and ageing affected her identity as a woman and as a performer in sideshow alley. With Rose it was to explore a character whose young body was scarred and how this marking of her body affected her sense of herself and the impact this has on her relationships with others.

The final part of this chapter discusses my writing of Corrie. The historical records reveal that the showies were largely oblivious to the landscape. It is unlikely, then, that Joan and Rose would have admired the Western Australian landscape in the way that I did. However, Corrie, as something of a sideshow outsider living permanently in one place had, I imagined, a deeper relationship with the landscape. The later reflective research led me to understand my response to the landscape as gendered and ambiguous, and the ways in which this informs writing the white woman in the particular Australian landscape.

I have drawn on a number of feminist writers, academics and philosophers to reflect on the challenges of this project. I have engaged with the feminist debates which argue for complexity and multiplicity in feminist thinking about categories of gender, class and race, and for more nuanced notions of agency of the female body, all of which support my writing of the complex subject positions of my imagined women.

Gillian Whitlock (1992) writes that the analysis of Australian women's writing needs to shift from the view of woman defined purely by sexual difference. Whitlock argues that in the ongoing effects of a masculinist nationalist mythology there can be no single woman's tradition, but a sense of multiplicity is required and recognition that 'women at different moments in history have been both oppressed and oppressive, submissive and subversive, victim and agent, allies and enemies both of men and of one another' (242).

In researching for this project I read current theories in the social sciences on Intersectionality, a term used by feminists to theorise subject formation and identity, not just in gender difference, but between social categories of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, (dis)ability, and geographical

space in identifying disadvantage (Bilge 2010; Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 1998; McCall 2001, 2005; Nash 2008; Samuels & Ross-Sheriff 2008; Valentine 2007). While the debates are ongoing and use different methodologies, their research reveals that the subject and identity are constituted along, across and within complex intersections in which both power and powerlessness are experienced.

Whitlock's challenge essentially asks that women writers recognise and represent these complexities in their fiction. In attempting to explore women's relational lives, I have attempted to incorporate some of these elements, and to explore how these are not always stable, but can be fluid and change over time as both self consciousness and external circumstances change.

Throughout this project, I have tried to imagine what the women's lives might have been like; how within their community complex intersections of factors such as gender, race, age, experience, attitude and education, at different times, meant they experienced both oppression and being oppressed, submission and the ability to be subversive, feelings of victimhood, but also having agency, and being both allies and enemies of their husbands and each other.

I have tried to explore this through, for example: the sense of cohesion as they travelled for extended periods of time and protective responses to threats to their endogamous identity; the benefits of living in a tight-knit social group, but also the social exclusion of the tent fighters from the group; the camaraderie of the shared values of the sideshow community and the divisive and exclusionary practices instituted over issues of ground; and, commitment to the businesses when it also meant compromising dignity and self esteem, or sacrificing the maternal impulse.

In the popular imagination 1950s, at a time when the majority of women did not work outside the home, Australia is viewed as a decade of conformity and conservatism. The reigning ideology of a passive femininity, if the images of women in advertisements and on television were to be believed, was one of suburban domesticity and contentment with childrearing and supporting husbands' careers. Feminist academic

Shirra Tarrant (2005) argues that, contrary to the conventional accounts of a feminist dry spell after the World War II, sociologist Mirra Komarovsky's theories on gender provide evidence of a continuing, if constrained, feminist project throughout the 1950s. While it was not 'active' feminism as we understand today, it was a transitional era in which cultural contradictions of sex roles and possibilities for difference existed. It is in these possibilities for 'real' difference, and my own memories of the strong and outspoken women from my childhood, that inspired and influenced the writing of the women of sideshow alley as they worked alongside their husbands in a variety of roles.

As I had decided that neither Rose nor Joan would come from the showie community, I needed to create a backstory and to imagine what would draw two young women into that life. Joan comes to sideshow alley as an attractive fifteen-year-old girl from a poor background who has no illusions about her opportunities or lack of them. Teresa de Lauretis (1986) argues for a 'more difficult and complex notion that the female subject is a site of differences; differences that are not only sexual, or not only racial, economic or (sub)cultural, but all of these together, and often enough at odds with one another' (14).

Joan comes to work for an established showie family, Barb and Artie Banks, who recognise that she is not just a pretty face but can talk the patrons into spending their money. In the competitive market of sideshow alley, where there was more than one of the same game on offer, being a good spruiker, to 'build a bridge', that is, to pull in a crowd of players (Napier 2005: 144) was a valued talent.

She meets Tommy, who is charming and offers to teach her to dance and work in his show. I imagined, when Barb warns Joan about him, 'He's a bit too fond of a flutter, Joanie, there's other fish in the pond' (Allen: 20), that Joan is very aware of her options, and so she 'had smiled, said nothing, and thought, more like a puddle where I come from' (Allen: 20).

Through the character of Joan, I wanted to explore the life of a young woman who has little education and no family support. It is the late 1940s and, having a body shape that conforms to popular cultural notions of

beauty, Joan chooses to use her desirability to work as a dancer in a sideshow. In Barbara J Coleman's essay, 'Maidenform(ed): Images of American women in the 1950s' (1995), she writes that in the 1950s the United States was obsessed with large breasts. Hollywood stars such as Jayne Mansfield, Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell attested to this fascination with breasts and sex, and their images were touted openly in movies, magazines and advertisements. British and European 'sex symbols', such as Diana Dors and Brigitte Bardot, were also similarly promoted. These images of big-breasted women were echoed in Australian culture and titillation shows with scantily-clad women were a very popular part of sideshow alley.

Joan is a young woman who enjoys her sense of self as a sexual and desirable woman, who gets pleasure and agency from the sense of empowerment that men's admiration gives her, and is excited by the male attention she receives, 'Tommy was dead right, they couldn't get enough of her and she loved every minute of it' (Allen: 14).

The fictional writer's challenge is to imaginatively represent her vision of the complexities of the characters' lives in the situation in which they find themselves. Broome & Jackomos (1998) and Morgan (1995) both record that the sideshow women were as committed to the economic success of their businesses as the men. When Joan 'smiled at the thought of what the wives and girlfriends would think if they could see their blokes now, their eyes popping out of their sockets and their hard-earned cash filling Tommy's leather satchel' (Allen: 14), I am writing against the notion that the young Joan can be reduced to a victim who only has an internalised objectified male view of herself.

Brooke Beloso (2012: 62), in her critique of feminism, class and prostitution, argues that intimate labour of all sorts has served women throughout history as an exploitative means to a liberatory end. She challenges the feminist position that sees only victims, arguing that it misses entirely the ingenuity and agency of the person who chooses to work in the sex industry. A similar assessment by Christine Braunberger (2000), also referred to in chapter three of this exegesis, traces the history

of tattooed women, and their historic linking to prostitution. She argues that 'the women who made their living off their tattoos had more independence, money and opportunity to travel than were otherwise available to women' (10).

It is in Beloso's and Braunberger's analysis of agency and opportunity that I can place Joan. I imagined her desire to have something very different from the terrace in East Perth where she had grown up, with its small yard, a 'patchwork of brick where the only thing that grew were the weeds, pushing up defiantly through the cracks each spring and withering again in the baking summer heat' (Allen: 20). I imagined her excitement when she and Tommy have saved enough money to buy the two-bedroom house in Scarborough:

She was going to have forget-me-not borders in her new garden, along with poppies and behind them, roses—pink and yellow and orange and red, as many different colours as she could get. Between the borders would be grass for the girls to play on and she'd get Tommy to make a frame so they could have a tyre swing—a big truck tyre so both girls could sit on it together. (Allen: 20)

In the absence of official documentation of the sideshow women's lives, the challenge in writing my characters was to 'flesh them out' as the saying goes. Iris Marion Young (2005: 25) argues that the concept of the lived body offers ways of articulating how people live out their positioning in social structures, along with the opportunities and constraints they produce. While the wives of journalists from my childhood were perhaps differently positioned socially from the women of sideshow alley, my adulthood has brought with it the awareness that all these women, whatever their social positioning, had the responsibility for the domestic chores. Those who had children also had the responsibility of childrearing, and for many, their bodies bore the consequences of childbearing. I now know as an adult that they, like all women, had to deal with issues of body image and ageing; the often confronting, and often hidden, realities of women's lived experience.

As the women's stories were revealed during the writing, it was these confronting and often hidden realities of women's lives, the lived and lived-in bodies of my characters that I wanted to explore. The notion that women's bodies continue to be sites of discourse rather than just 'being' in the way that men's bodies 'just are' has been demonstrated and challenged as a major focus of feminist inquiry. For example, Susan Bordo (1997: 91) writes:

Viewed historically, the discipline and normalisation of the female body—perhaps the only gender oppression that exercises itself, although to different degrees and in different forms, across age, race, class, and sexual orientation—has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control.

While I know and understand the importance of this discourse in feminist theory in identifying the power of this form of gender oppression, the challenge for me as a creative writer was to explore what agency my characters might possess as they deal with notions of beauty and desirability, the effects of childbearing, and ageing, and how these factors impact on their lives. I did not want to write these women as simply victims. Like the women I know in the real world who negotiate these factors throughout their lives and are not just 'victims', but have complex and meaningful lives, I imagined my characters negotiating these challenges and finding new and alternative meanings and identities.

In researching and reflecting on my writing of Joan and Rose as they aged, I looked to the nomadic, metamorphosing female subjectivity that feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti explores in her book *Metamorphoses: towards a materialist theory of becoming* (2002). Braidotti theorises that a person's identity takes place in the spaces between Cartesian binaries, and that 'we live in permanent processes of transition, hybridisation and nomadisation' (2) and this transformative account of the self, this figuration of internally contradictory and multi-faceted subjectivity, is not a metaphor, but rather a material expression of difference.

I found Braidotti's writing is infectiously optimistic, and when she sets as the starting point of her work, 'at the top of her agenda: the point is not

to know who we are, but rather what, at last, we want to become' (2), it is a seductively aspirational concept. While I can appreciate this concept intellectually, as a writer it is of interest to me to creatively explore the lives of women who may or may not know what they want to become, who don't always achieve a desired becoming, but rather respond to the events and circumstances which shape their becoming.

Braidotti admits there 'is a clear advantage for those who are committed to engendering and enjoying changes', but adds, 'and a source of great anxiety for those who are not' (2). In writing my women characters' process of their becoming, I wanted to reflect some of the complexities of the known and anticipated, and the unknown and confronting changes that occur in their lives. I imagined their hopes and desires, faults and foibles, how they changed as they aged and how these were negotiated for themselves and within the sideshow community. My aim was to create complex women characters who possess degrees of autonomy and don't necessarily achieve their desires. Rather, in their becoming they find other meanings and attain a level of conscious self-awareness that comes, upon reflection, with age and experience.

I wrote Joan's third pregnancy as very much desired. She had felt like an only child, as her much older brother left home when she was still very young. Living with the Banks family, she 'loved being in a big family with all its rough and tumble and laughter and rows' (Allen: 36), and giving Tommy a son was very important for her, a sentiment deeply embedded socially and culturally. However, this time, unlike her first two pregnancies, Joan has to face an unanticipated consequence, the marking of her body:

She had assumed that after having the twins her body would go back into shape as it had after she'd had the girls. But her boobs had gone south and the skin on her belly was stretched and sagging. She didn't tell Rose how she missed the mugs whistling and making comments. Or how she cried when she looked in the mirror at the stretch marks and loose skin. Or how she'd felt jealous of the two pretty local girls Tommy'd lined up to do a South Sea Island dance. (Allen: 63)

In her essay 'Mirror mirror' (1998) Marcia Ann Gillespie writes that every time she reads Toni Morrison's novel *The bluest eye* she:

... weeps for that little girl lost in a world of pain and for all the women who carry pieces and parts of that little girl buried somewhere in their spirits. For who among us has not at some point in time succumbed to the propaganda, looked in the mirror and felt ourselves to be wanting? (184).

Gillespie encapsulates the internalised messages of inadequacy that women of all socio-economic levels absorb into themselves, which become part of the female psyche and enmeshed in women's identity, so that in Joan's exchange with Tommy, after she has to dance again, there is no reassurance for her in his words:

She looked up and Tommy was standing on the top step watching her. 'What're you staring at?' She grabbed her dress off the stool and tried to cover herself.

'What do yer think I'm starin' at?'

'Bugger off.'

'Why? Yer beautiful.'

'Go on, bugger off. I mean it.'

'I love yer belly.'

'Yeah, well, that lot don't,' she inclined her head at the curtain.

They stood, looking at each other. Joan pulled the dress over her head.

(Allen: 116)

It was important to me to explore the negative feelings Joan has about the changes to her body. I did not want to ignore the very real changes that happen to women's bodies as they are 'lived' and 'lived in'. Rather, I wanted to explore and represent the way Joan negotiated other values and meanings for herself and her life, so that at the end of the novel Joan is a woman approaching forty and an owner/operator of a financially successful ride, standing in front of the mirror:

She took the tweezers out of the floral bag and plucked the stray hairs that had grown outside the arch of her eyebrows then blackened them with pencil. She drew the black lines around her eyes and filled the lids in with iridescent blue. She turned the lipstick until a stub of bright red appeared and drew it back and forth across her lips, rubbing them together so the colour spread outside the line of her mouth. She put a few dabs of red on

each cheek and smoothed it over her cheekbones. She stood back and looked at her face, 'There, I'll just put me glad rags on then I'm ready to face the day'. (Allen: 157).

While feminist theory documents the socio-cultural reasons why women face body-image issues, my aim with Joan was to present one woman's individual story and explore the ways she negotiated these changes within the context of her particular circumstances. She is a woman attempting to come to terms with who she is and the life she is living. She has her strengths and blind spots, her pet vanities, her acts of selfishness and of generosity, and her ageing body that is going to die. As I allowed her story to evolve, her own narrative 'truth' was revealed; she comes to understand the need to 'roll with the punches' as she wryly observes, 'We're all just flip flopping round, aren't we, making it up as we go and hoping we don't cause too much damage on the way' (Allen: 138).

When I first started to write Rose's narrative I did not register the significance of her scar. Initially it was just part of a description of her appearance and I did not follow it through in her story. It was in the re-drafting that I realised the scar had a deeper meaning, not as a symbol of cultural inscriptions of the female body, or as a metaphor, but as part of her lived experience and something fundamental to her identity and the way she felt about herself.

Elizabeth Grosz (1994) writes that body image is as much a function of the subject's psychology and socio-historical context as of anatomy. Rose is scarred in childhood and has always lived with a perception of herself as 'flawed' and this has an effect on her life. The challenges were in exploring and writing the ways in which her thinking, decisions and actions were influenced consciously and subconsciously by this sense of herself.

I decided that Rose would not have an economic imperative to join the sideshow community, but, rather, a less conscious desire to escape her narrow world. When she first meets Maurie:

... he wasn't polite and careful like the young men she and Irene and Iris and their friends went out with. They would never have held her round the

waist like Maurie had. And Maurie was funny; he made her laugh. He made her feel grown up. (Allen: 69)

However, when Maurie proposes she is caught between her attraction to him and doubts as to the sort of life he is offering. She is about to talk to her parents when she overhears her mother:

‘... I suppose him being an older man, he might not mind the scar’. Rose had never known a time it wasn’t there and she was never allowed to forget it, with her mother was always reminding her to do up the top button on her blouse. (Allen: 31)

Her mother’s misguided and unexamined belief that her daughter’s scarred body needs to be hidden, is transferred to Rose.

In Braidotti’s (2002: 12) analysis of the power of location in the exclusionary practices of Western feminism she writes that ‘a great deal of our location... escapes self-scrutiny, because it is so familiar, so close, that one does not even see it’. Although she is talking about location on a cultural level, about our cultural ‘blind spots’, this idea of familiarity and inability to self-scrutinise can also be in the location of the inner self, our personal ‘blind spots’; the interplay of the subconscious and unscrutinised with the conscious and how they both play a part in subject formation and identity.

It is here that I can place Rose; the subconscious effects of her scar, the choices she makes because of it, and how they continue to play out in her life. The young Rose does not possess insight into the ways the scarring has affected her, only that it has, so that when she goes to her room and looks in the mirror her doubts about Maurie’s proposal are obscured by her desire for a man who will not mind the scar:

She ran her fingers over the ropey skin. It felt hard and smooth and cool. She imagined Maurie tracing the ropey skin with his fingers and putting his lips against its coolness. She decided then that she was going to marry him. (Allen: 31)

She enters her marriage grateful and defers to Maurie in his decision that their daughter, Katharine, will live with Rose’s parents when she starts school. She finds the politics of the sideshow community are much more complicated than Maurie’s summation that ‘We all look out for each other.

We stick together. We're family' (Allen: 8). When Rose does assert herself with Maurie to defend their position at the top of the alley, she makes her arguments based on economics, but it is driven by self-interest underpinned by her sense of not fully belonging in the sideshow community: 'so she could overhear the talk, the little snippets of this and that, the plans and intrigues, as the men passed their van to get to the bar and the women passed to get to the troughs' (Allen: 110). She is unprepared for his angry response and instead of challenging him she retreats and questions the marriage:

She found herself wondering what her life might have been if she had married someone younger, someone like the men Irene and Iris had married. She would, she imagined, like them, get that husband ready for his day every morning and wave him good-bye. She'd keep the house clean and cook and wash and welcome him home at the end of the day. She thought about how she cooked and cleaned and washed for Maurie and the boys. Then she remembered how alone she'd felt when Katharine was born. (Allen: 96)

In her questioning and reflecting, Rose realises that her choosing to marry Maurie and join the more communal life of the showies was right for her, despite the challenges that both the marriage and the community have brought. She finally understands that her role as a kind of 'mother' to the young men who work in the boxing tent gives her agency and a strong sense of identity. Rose ensures the men are provided with good meals; she does the washing and makes their costumes, repairs their clothes, hands out drinks and towels, and treats the injuries they get in the boxing matches.

My inspiration for Rose's identity as a sort of 'mother' to the boxers in the troupe came from two photographs. One is a picture of Sylvia Paulsen smiling, with her arm around the Aboriginal boxer, Erwin 'Tiger' Williams (Broome & Jackomos 1998: 185). In this photo (below) Paulsen appeared to me to have a genuine affection for the man. The second is a photo of a smiling Williams playing the double bass at Sylvia's 25th birthday celebration in Launceston, 1954 (Broome 1996: 9).



Feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Simone de Beauvoir, according to Iris Marion Young (2005: 123), were critical of the cost to women historically in providing the domestic work which deprived them of support for their own identity and projects. However, Young, like Beloso's (2012) nuanced analysis of women's work in the sex industry, also offers a more nuanced analysis when she looks at the activity of meaning-making by women engaged in domestic activities. Young argues that not all homemaking is housework and valuable meaning is given to individual lives through the domestic activities of arrangement and preservation.

She is referring to the preservation of things which hold other meanings, such as the cleaning and dusting of objects which also have stories attached to them, or making a meal with a recipe handed down from mothers and grandmothers and so preserving family and cultural practices. I can relate this preservation to the way Rose takes care in providing meals for the boxers and to the way she sews on missing buttons, patching and darning, not as a preservation of a distant past linked to forebears, but as an act of both creating and preserving her own past and in so doing creating a future for herself.

Young links these themes of subjectivity and identity when she writes:

The activities of preservation give some enclosing fabric to this ever-changing subject by knotting together today and yesterday, integrating the new events and relationships into the narrative of a life, the biography of a person, a family, a people. (143)

She argues that this is not nostalgia, a sentimental yearning for the past, but rather, it is an active and continuing process of remembrance to create meaning and value. It is this meaning-making that I reflect in writing Rose's strength, care and attention in her domestic/maternal role. It is a strength which sustains her, albeit with some trepidation, in the face of showie matriarch Barb's overt racism, 'Those boys used to look after themselves and she comes along and cooks and cleans for 'em. She's too friendly with the blacks, that one' (Allen: 9). Later in the novel, when Stan tells her about Herbie's death, although fear of Barb's criticism surfaces when she realises that Colleen is watching as she shares an intimate moment with Stan, she is able to dismiss it:

'Bugger her', Rose thought. She squatted again and took Stan's hand and held it between her own, 'I'm so sorry, Stan. I want to say something to help. But I don't know. This is such a terrible thing'. She stayed there until she heard the bell ringing. As she turned and walked towards the tent, she reassured herself, 'I don't care. Anyway, she's too far away to see anything, I could've been fixing a cut on his face for all she'd know' (Allen: 58).

As with Joan's character, I have used the passage of time, age and experience to explore how Rose's strengths as well as her self-doubts, self-interests and idiosyncrasies inform how she deals with the changes in her life, both welcome and unwelcome. She clings to a type of de facto agency in being at the top of the alley, and the fights and disagreements about 'ground' continue for years, until Barb challenges her attachment to this place as a barrier to the need to form a guild for the survival of the community. Rose's sense of belonging and not belonging shifts when Barb tells her, 'We all got our battles, Rose, but we got to pick the right ones. This is about all of us... Come on, cheer up. You always was a bit thin-skinned. You're a Showie, and about bloody time you knew it' (Allen: 110).

A particular challenge I found in writing Rose's character was revealing to the reader her strength and the agency she derived from her

role as a 'mother' to the boxers before she becomes aware of it herself, and to follow through her story to allow her to come to her own narrative 'truth'. Rose doesn't undo the top button of her blouse and reveal her scar, but she does come to understand her place in the showie community:

She had waited until the Royal finished to talk to Maurie. She had thought about what Barb had said to her, and she'd remembered the time after she got married, when she'd sat in the shed watching the boys sparring with each other, the dance that was boxing; the quick, light steps, the ducking and weaving, the split-second timing of the punch, like lightning. And she thought about the way she danced—with Maurie, with the boys, with Joan and Barb and all the other Showies. (Allen: 124)

After the association is formed, Rose takes on the role of secretary, including writing a newsletter, which provides her with an active role in the community. She gathers stories from the showies for the newsletter, and so has a reason to knock on their doors and talk to them, rather than relying on overhearing conversations as they pass by, as she did when she was at the top of the alley. This new way of belonging validates a different sense of herself and her place within the showie community, which allows her to defend Katharine's choice to become a showie against Maurie's objections.

Rose's character occupies multi-layered and sometimes internally contradictory subject positions, but with age she does experience her own becoming when 'Joan noticed Rose wasn't scratching her chest like she usually did when she was upset' (Allen: 160).

At the beginning of this chapter I stated that my research on the showie communities indicated they seemed to have resisted any engagement with the landscape. Napier (2005:67–72) describes the showies' camps in lay-bys by the side of the road between towns as a place to gather round the fire for a barbeque, drink beer, tell stories and have a drunken sing-along. Except for the inconvenience of the weather in that it affected business, the landscape was simply something that needed to be traversed to get to the next town. Napier sums up the months of travelling and the days of driving between towns as 'long stretches of

straight road and the uninspiring landscape of scrub, scrub and more scrub' (67). To reflect this attitude I resisted my urge to use description of landscape when writing Rose and Joan as they travelled on the runs.

However, for Corrie, the landscape was an important part of her identity. While I also explored themes of body image and ageing for Corrie, a young woman left at home to raise her children, she provided an opportunity for me to evoke the landscape that I love, and to share, as a writer, some of my sense of its particular beauty. Delys Bird (1998) articulates the power of landscape in Western Australian writing when she writes:

The landscapes of Western Australia have been given particular social and historical as well as literary significance, while the meaning of 'the West' has its own classical and contemporary mythology in Western literatures. At the same time, much recent critical attention has been brought to bear on questions to do with the ways that place, space and region may be said to figure in literary works. Universal significance has traditionally been attributed to such issues. However, when gender is brought into conjunction with questions to do with place and literature, their configuration changes. (241)

Some literary criticism seeks intentions in writing, but the writer does not always necessarily or consciously intend them. In my introductory chapter I alluded to the intentional, surprising and serendipitous aspects that happen in creative writing and the creative decisions that are made with the material. This can be illustrated by the following example.

In the passage where Corrie goes to the Stirling Ranges with Stan I describe my sense of the bush and its subtle beauty in Corrie's response to the landscape:

He'd led her through the smokey green bush, stopping now and again to crush a leaf and hold it for her to smell the strong peppermint, or bend the branch of a wattle so when she'd lifted her face to the baubles of yellow to smell, it was vanilla. He'd picked a tiny orchid with mauve-blue fringed flowers and the delicious smell of chocolate had filled her nostrils. She loved the orchids the best. She had marvelled that such beauty grew from this stony, barren ground and paraded such beautiful colours; pinks, reds,

yellows, blues and purples. And the petals – like butterfly wings. Little miracles she had called them. (Allen: 3)

Only recently, however, I found my sense of an individual and personal evocation of the landscape being challenged by more complex meanings. I read, for the first time, Dorothy Hewett's short story 'The fences of Jarrabin' from *A baker's dozen* (2001) and Elizabeth Jolley's novel *The well* (1986), both set in the Western Australia Wheatbelt, as part of my research. Out of interest, I also read Hewett's autobiography *Wild card* (1990). I came across this passage:

In September my mother goes with us to pick wildflowers in the bush... spider orchids, donkey orchids, clumps of pale blue leschenaultia, eggs and bacon, smoke bush and golden morrison. We fill the house with the scent of the delicate bush flowers that come up from the scrubby earth like miracles in the spring. (40)

My initial concern was that the similarities in these two passages would be seen, wrongly, as plagiarism or literary imitation, but in reflecting on the research I had done, I realised that this chance similarity of vision, Hewett's and my responses to the 'miracle' of the Australian bush, was part of a shared gendered European sensibility, an authentic response to the landscape. In reflecting my sensibilities of the landscape I had placed Corrie's character as part of the larger white settler female experience.

In a more complex interrelationship of texts and creative revision, when I first wrote the death of Corrie and Stan's son Herbie, it occurred in the bush. After writing and re-reading it, I realised I had rewritten a trope of settler writing. Historians Peter Pierce (1999) and Kim Torney (2005) have written on the pervasiveness of the trope, not just in literature, but also in the visual arts and theatre. Pierce has written extensively on the figure of the lost child in the history and folklore of Australia and its symbolic function in the unresolved anxieties of white settlement.

However, I did not want Herbie's death to be a metaphor for a masculinist expression of the anxieties of white settlement, either as a symbol of the hostility of the bush when the child dies or as an emblem of male conquering of the hostile landscape when the child is rescued. I re-

wrote the death as a domestic accident to focus on the ‘lived’ experience of my character Corrie, to represent her life and circumstances as a young working-class woman living on her own with young children, and to explore as a writer how a moment’s inattention results in a child’s death and what that might be like:

The next moment Grace, pulling back off her nipple, roused her. She jumped, remembering Herb in the tub. She put Grace back in the crib and ran to the kitchen. Herb was lying in the tub, the water just covering his face, lapping at his nose. (Allen: 46)

Torney (2005: 13) reports that in the ten-year period, from 1860 to 1869, *The Argus* newspaper reported approximately seventy children fatally lost in the bush. While these were front-page stories that captured the public imagination, in the same period 323 notices of other accidental deaths of children occurred, 205 of which were drowning—in dams, creeks, rivers, water tanks, quarries, sludge holes, reservoirs, city baths, the ocean, and washtubs. These notices do not capture the loss and grief, or the guilt, brought by those moments of inattention that result in domestic accidental deaths of children. I wanted to explore the personal impact of such emotional experiences.

Initially, when I wrote Corrie embroidering the orchids onto the matinee jackets for her first child, I had no other intention than showing her engaging in a common activity of the time. However, after writing the death of her child Herbie, I decided to use the motif of the European female activity of embroidery to further explore Corrie’s gendered relationship with the landscape and how she uses it to come to terms with her grief:

Corrie had kept practising and Maureen had been right; she had started to feel better. As she concentrated on trying to get the stitches right, she didn’t hate herself as much for what happened, or feel so angry with Stan for leaving her alone. She found, after a long time, when she had learned to make something she was happy with, that she could keep her thoughts of Herbie to when she was stitching and they didn’t crowd her when she was meant to be answering somebody’s question or getting dinner on the table. When all the children were in bed, she would get out her embroidery and

stitch her memories of Herbie into placemats and doilies and pillowcases.
(Allen: 82)

Australian writer Jessica White (2013) has examined the circumstances of early settler Georgiana Molloy's botanical interests in collecting plant specimens in Augusta, Western Australia. Molloy's initial response to the densely forested landscape of Augusta was that it was a 'dreary land' with 'indistinguishable vegetation' (2). In 1838, after the accidental drowning of her son in a well, Molloy took up the offer to become a collector and send the specimens to England for classification.

White argues that Molloy's grief led her to a particular gendered response to landscape in the act of collecting; she learned to see the detail in the bush, which she had previously thought of as a wilderness, and came to appreciate its beauty. Reflecting on my writing of Corrie, I can connect both White's account of Molloy's engagement through her collecting and Corrie's embroidering of floral representations as belonging to aspects of a female-gendered response to the landscape that for Molloy, White argues, contained the 'seeds for transformation and creativity' (10) and was a step towards acceptance, not just of her new country but a way for her to come to terms with the loss of her child.

However, White also argues that although Molloy was unable to participate in the male activity of giving the plants botanical names in developing her own numbering system and poetic descriptions of the flowers, she nonetheless participated in a gendered form of colonisation in the act of erasing the Indigenous names.

Corrie does not attempt to name the plants she embroiders and works from her memory. In the tradition of European women's embroidery floral representations are highly stylised, 'perfect' variations of a theme, but towards the end of Corrie's story she is coming to understand a different sense of the gendered landscape when 'she had stitched the little marks and blemishes into the flowers and leaves as well because that was how they really looked—not all perfect, but flawed and damaged like nature, like everything' (Allen: 102). Corrie's sensibility has shifted, even if only slightly from Molloy's poetic early-settler understanding, so that she

sees the 'real' bush and has a different understanding of her place in the landscape:

As they turned to go, Corrie heard one of the women behind the table mutter, 'If she thinks she could win a prize with that. Who's ever seen a flower like that, anyway'. And she knew that the woman was right, that those who judged the craft would not give her work a prize, not because it wasn't good, but because it was different and how can you put a value on difference if all you understand is grades of sameness? (Allen: 103)

The research into my gendered response to the landscape and reflecting on my sense of 'place' in writing Corrie's character also led me to a deeper examination and reflection as I researched the challenges of writing Aboriginal characters as a non-Aboriginal person. The research undertaken and decisions I made around writing the character of Stan, a character I had decided was specifically a young Nyungar man from the Wheatbelt, meant I needed to understand the history of colonisation of that part of Western Australia. This process led me to critically examine my gendered response to that particular landscape, and articulate my ambiguous position as a white settler woman, examined in the following chapter.

When women's voices are missing from the official records and popular cultural notions of women only offer stereotypes, Toril Moi's (2008: 269) argument that literature is the archive of a culture is of particular importance to writing women's lives. As Moi argues, it is the place where we discover what other people feel, how they suffer and laugh and love and hate, and how they lived at different times. When women's voices are missing, or representations of women in literature do not acknowledge the complexity of their lives, then we are saying that their experiences of existence and the world are less important than men's.

There are many possible literary representations of sideshow alley, but my purpose was to write the stories of the women missing from the official records. My intention was to imagine what their lives might have been like; to imagine and write their lives as individuals who are just as important, in a representation of the sideshow community, as the men who

owned and operated the businesses and formed the guilds and associations.

In writing back to the past I have reflected my own interests as a writer in exploring issues of class, race and gender. In the process of writing the women's stories and allowing the stories to reveal themselves as I wrote, issues of the body, body image and ageing became central themes for my characters. On reflection, writing the body can be seen as the weft, that when woven across the warp of the larger categories of class, gender and race, becomes a creative tool to use to 'flesh out' the characters and give them a specific and individual story.

The research on gender and landscape was arguably the most revealing in terms of reflecting on my writing practice. While I was aware of the gendered difference in my decision not to place the death of Herbie in the bush, as I did not want to reinscribe a masculine trope, I have come to understand that my female response to the landscape also possesses its own tropes in the ways that Australian women writers evoke the landscape and our European notions of what 'beauty' means. My further research also revealed the deeply ambiguous nature of this gendered response, which I have articulated in the following chapter.

In researching and writing about the challenges I faced I have linked my writing to feminist theorists who argue for complexity and multiplicity and a more nuanced approach in recognising that power and agency operate to different degrees and at different times in women's lives, and support the position that women's lives are sites of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experience.

Chapter 2

As colonials we were always questionable, according to British imperialism. As women, we are still questionable. But we could aim to become postcolonial feminists in the near future on the faultlines where tensions and collusions between 'sex', 'race' and 'nation' become visible.

Susan Sheridan (1995: 169)

Although my novel's focus was the representing of the women of sideshow alley, the historical records show the high number of Aboriginal boxers in the tents. Historian Richard Broome (1995, 1996, 1999; Broome & Jackomos 1998) has researched and written extensively on this participation. Central to my concerns, decisions and choices I made in writing about sideshow alley, was the acknowledgment of this reality.

Aboriginal writer and academic Marcia Langton (1993: 24) argues that while there is a dense history of racist, distorted, and often offensive representation of Aboriginal people in film and other media, the easiest and most 'natural' form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible. Langton further argues that 'there is a naive belief that Aboriginal people will make "better" representations of us, simply because being Aboriginal gives "greater" understanding; a belief based on an ancient and universal feature of racism: the assumption of the undifferentiated *Other*' (27). As a non-Aboriginal writer writing Aboriginal characters, given our colonial history and the dispossession of Aboriginal people, even taking into account Langton's point of view, the political and ethical concerns for me were strong and arguably the most considered and most difficult of all the decisions and choices I made in writing the novel.

The setting of the novel in Western Australia was a personal choice, as I have travelled more in that state than anywhere else in Australia and feel a strong connection to the particular landscapes. However, if I was going to enter the highly contested area of writing Aboriginal characters as

a non-Aboriginal person, I not only had to research carefully the debates around this but also examine my own ambiguous connection to that landscape as a white settler woman. For me the significance of place, the particular landscape of the Wheatbelt and my responses to it, and the research into its history with its patterns of dispossession and settlement by whites were integral to my engagement with the debates by Aboriginal scholars around the issues of representation and the decisions I made.

This chapter articulates my connection to the landscape and examines some of the debates around the ambiguous position of settler women by engaging with the debates on representation of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal people. The discussion outlines my research of the history of the Nyungar peoples of the Wheatbelt and Aboriginal participation in the boxing tents, all of which informed my awareness and rationale for writing my Aboriginal characters.

I lived in Western Australia for a number of years, from my late teens to early thirties. I feel a strong but conflicted connection to the landscape. It is beautiful and harsh and I would not survive in it more than a few days without the trappings of my 'civilised' life. The Wheatbelt country, the vast area that stretches from Geraldton in the north to the south coast, east of Albany and beyond Esperance, holds none of the mystique of the central desert landscape, the sort of country more often associated with (white) literary representations of sites of possibility and potential such as the novels discussed in Alison Bartlett's *Desire in the desert: exploring Australian desert narratives* (2001). I would never have been able to travel through it if my European forebears had not slashed, burned, fenced and carved roads into the woodlands that covered the land.

Sue Kossew (1997) examines the relationship between settler culture and the land in both Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929) and Thea Astley's *A kindness cup* (1974), and more importantly, the relationship between the settler/white woman and Indigenous Australians. She asks, to what extent are the issues raised by and in the work of these earlier women settler writers still important to Australian women writers now?

Kossew draws on a number of women theorists to examine the intersections of gender, race, class and colonialism, power and disempowerment, of belonging and unbelonging which characterise the ambivalent position of the colonising woman and concludes that contemporary women writers are still and will always be writing from a 'complex mixture of resistance and complicity, of authority and lack of authority' (42). As Dorothy Hewett (1982), who spent the first twelve years of life on a Wheatbelt farm, acknowledges of her love/hate relationship with Western Australia, it nonetheless gave her 'a country to write about and to begin from, a landscape and a society that will be forever central to my imagination' (103).

Susan Sheridan (1995) also examines early settler women's writing and in the final chapter she interrogates some of the debates around postcolonialism and the legitimising of women's voices as authentically marginal, speaking for, or as, the marginalised other, or reproducing the other. She argues that it is not just postcolonial discourse that has caused heated debates about who may speak for whom, but also refers to Ann Curthoys' point that the new Aboriginal histories call 'us' as Australians into question. Sheridan says, 'this is a challenge not to be ducked' (169) and suggests a postcolonial feminism along the faultlines of sex, race and nation where tensions and collusions are visible.

The quote at the beginning of this chapter articulates the importance for me as a writer of not ducking the issues of representation and legitimisation in my decision to not make Aboriginal people invisible in my novel. So it is from here that I wrote Stan—my gendered insider/outsider identity, the paradox of alienation from, and complicity with, the patriarchal structures of settlement, the sense of belonging and not belonging, the borderlands of agency.

Given the history of appropriation of Aboriginal representation in all forms of narrative: history, fiction, journalism and ethnography, writers in any genre have an obligation to write representations of Aboriginal people with consideration of the issues outlined by Indigenous writers and academics. In considering the issues, it enabled me to make decisions

about who my Aboriginal characters would be and their 'voices'. Before doing the research I decided that none of the main women protagonists would be Aboriginal, that my choice to write Corrie as a young white woman was based on my belief that I had no right to appropriate the point of view of an Aboriginal woman.

However, I could not make Aboriginal characters absent from sideshow alley, as the boxing tents were integral and the historical records show that many Aboriginal men worked in them and experienced some degree of agency (Broome & Jackomos 1998; Broome 1995, 1996, 1999; *Tent boxers* 2008; *The last Outback boxing troupe* 2006). Broome (1995) estimates that over the sixty or so years that the tents operated, a third to half the boxers were Aboriginal (also Maori, Islander, Filipino, Asian and African-American), and Western Australian tent owner George Stewart had a full troupe of Aboriginal boxers for a time. In recognition of and with respect to their significant role in the tents, and with respect to the young Nyungar man with whom I worked in the prison and who gave me such a powerful memory, I wanted to have an Aboriginal boxer as one of the characters. The difficult decision was whether to write him backgrounded, as I have with the other male characters in the novel, and risk what Langton (1993) argues is the most natural form of racism, to make Aboriginal people invisible, or to privilege his story above those of the other men and in doing so, risk committing yet another act of appropriation.

Anita Heiss (1999) reports that some Aboriginal writers and scholars believe non-Aboriginal people should never write on Aboriginal issues. She quotes Archie Weller, 'Australian authors have failed dismally in the case of portraying Aboriginal people. They only look at one aspect of the image without attempting to explain it' (3). Alexis Wright also argues that Aboriginal people have remained almost invisible or misrepresented in Australian literature and Melissa Lucashenko writes that 'when non-Indigenous people come in and write about us they are writing in ignorance... of us and our lives, and ignorance of Aboriginal Law' (Heiss 1999: 4).

Thomas Keneally (2003) in reflecting back on writing *The chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, stated that 'for a white fella to appropriate an Aboriginal point of view, in a world in which there was an increasing number of Aboriginal writers, was not justified' (2). Keneally articulates the difference between the legal and moral rights to Indigenous stories. While he believes that whoever does the research and writes the book, having paid just fees and compensations, owns it, it is the question of the moral ownership of the story that is the most vexing. He cautions that writers should tread carefully in writing representations of Indigenous cultures because stories in oral cultures are more than mere stories; they are words and viewpoints that are owned, and he now wishes he'd had a greater sensitivity to that when he began to work on *The chant*.

Keneally's caution is salutary, particularly as Lorraine Johnson-Riordan (2006), in writing about the Stolen Generations¹, argues that history wars are the cornerstone of the race wars and whoever controls history not only controls the past but also the future. However, she says that 'in the struggle over history the archive is never closed. The possibility is ever present that new stories can be told, challenging currently accepted meanings... new histories have the power to overturn the subject/object relations, the objectification and abjection of Indigenous people since colonisation' (115).

Other Aboriginal writers and scholars have also presented different alternatives. Jackie Huggins (1994: 22) writes:

The best books written about Aboriginals by non-Aboriginals are by those who have some relationship and friendships with Aboriginal people. Having a respect and knowledge of Aboriginal culture, history, social issues and what was happening to Aboriginal people in the era in which they are being written about is imperative to how one writes the Aboriginal characters and situations.

¹ The Stolen Generations were children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent removed from their families by federal and state government agencies and church missions. The practice began in 1909 and was officially ended in the 1960s at the federal level, although it continued into the 1970s in some states.

In addressing the concerns of representation I heeded both the concerns that Jackie Huggins outlines and Thomas Keneally's reflections on appropriating an Aboriginal point of view. I had some experience of working with Aboriginal people in the prisons, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and working as a journalist in Darwin, which allowed me the opportunity to write articles at the invitation of Aboriginal people in Darwin and in remote communities in the Northern Territory.

Heiss (1999) and Huggins (1994) identify necessary preparation and processes for non-Aboriginal writers—such as consultation, appropriate research, using Aboriginal resources, respect and knowledge of Aboriginal culture, social issues and what was happening to Aboriginal people in the era in which they are being written—to produce material of an empowering nature.

Most of the young men I had worked with in the prisons were Nyungar². I had a general, but not well-informed, understanding of the history of the particular circumstances and the effects of colonisation in the South West of Western Australia. I relied on secondary research including oral and written history, fiction, film and documentary as well as my own sensibilities and experience.

My research, wherever possible, was material specific to the Nyungar peoples. However, when there was a lack of specific material I did use other sources. For example, the only interview with a Nyungar tent boxer I found was the very brief one with Jack Cox, referred to later in this chapter. I watched the documentary *Tent boxers* (2008), which is not explicit about where the Aboriginal boxers come from, to gain more understanding of their life and circumstances in the tents.

² 'Nyungar' is a collective term for Aboriginal people from the South West, who were originally from different language/tribal/nations according to Colin Tatz in *Aboriginal suicide is different: a portrait of life and self-destruction*, Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS, Canberra, 1–17. He states, 'Aborigines have engaged in a long struggle for the right to name themselves, culminating in the 1980s and 1990s in the now common usage of "Nyungar" in the West' (10). There are a number of different spellings of 'Nyungar', and I have used this one except in direct quotes where alternative spelling has been used.

Anna Haebich's historical accounts (1985, 2000) provided me with a detailed background of the history of the Nyungar peoples. In particular, her book, *Broken circles: fragmenting Indigenous families 1800–2000* (2000), covered the time period of the setting of my novel. She writes in chapter four, titled 'Special treatment Western Australian style' that the exposure of Nazi eugenics-based atrocities after World War II turned public attitudes against AO Neville's (Chief Protector of Aborigines WA 1915–40) vision and policies of social assimilation. However, it took until the early 1960s for the states to consider repeal of all discriminatory legal restrictions for Aborigines—Victoria 1957, NSW and South Australia 1963:

It wasn't until 1964 in Western Australia that the power to forcibly remove Aboriginal people to reserves and otherwise restrict their movement, automatic guardianship of illegitimate children from birth to age twenty-one, controls over earnings, property and penalties for interracial sex was removed. Aborigines in 'proclaimed areas' were granted drinking rights. However, the definition of 'native' as any person more than one quarter Aboriginal descent remained and the Department of Native Affairs retained the right to intervene in Aboriginal families. It was not until 1972 that all remaining discriminatory measures, including interventions in families outside mainstream welfare channels, were repealed. (513)

Haebich (2000: 516) records that, even though legislation was repealed in 1964, Aboriginal people living in the Wheatbelt town of Gnowangerup were still barred from the swimming pool, the drive-in and local cafes. In 1978 I was visiting a friend who was nursing in Wiluna, a tiny town six hundred kilometres north-east of Perth, with a large community of Aboriginal people and a very small population of whites. Aboriginal people were not allowed into the hotel, but were served through a small opening in the wall at the side of the hotel.

Haebich (2000) provides some clues as to why Western Australia lagged behind other States in repealing its discriminatory legislation. She writes:

A strong code of silence built on isolation and parochial networks of family and business interests kept the scandalous treatment of Aborigines in the state out of the national public eye. Of all the states (excepting the Northern

Territory), Western Australia's system of removal and institutionalisation of Aboriginal children was the most separate from mainstream child welfare processes, and the most extreme in terms of powers to remove children. (186–7)

This research allowed me to understand why many of the young men I had worked with in the prisons in the early 1980s found family members there they didn't know about, as they had either been removed from their families or their siblings or cousins had.

Haebich's doctoral thesis, "A bunch of cast-offs": Aborigines of the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900–1936' (1985), provided a detailed and chilling history of the social conditions and impact of various parliamentary Acts that governed the lives of Nyungar peoples. While the time period for this research is before the setting of my novel, this thesis provided invaluable background to the attitudes of whites towards Aboriginal people and the appalling conditions and restrictions placed on them by Acts such as the 1905 and 1936 Native Administration Acts. For example, Haebich explains: 'Under this Act the definition of native included half-caste on both sides, "quadroons" on both sides and those with an Aboriginal father and other than Aboriginal mother. This applied equally to those living an Aboriginal or European lifestyle' (563).

The political and geographical significance of the Wheatbelt region can be understood by the patterns of dispossession and white settlement. In Western Australia the initial invasion, where large tracts of the most productive land was taken, was succeeded by much more recent schemes to increase the white population. Haebich (1985: 217) records that vast areas of bush in the southern and Wheatbelt regions were cleared for farms of less than a 1,000 acres for the 55,000 British immigrants who arrived between 1903 and 1915. Seventy-five percent of the Aboriginal population of the south lived in this area. Family blocks (usually about 200 acres) that had been granted to Aboriginal people were mostly resumed by 1914 and the traditional owners, the Nyungar peoples, were left trapped in poverty in camps on the fringes of Wheatbelt towns.

The Battye Library online site 'Western perspectives on a nation: Settlement' (LISWA 2001) records another scheme beginning in the early 1920s for five years, which saw over 6,000 British civilians' assisted migration to Western Australia to strengthen British cultural identity and open up more potential agricultural land in the South West and Wheatbelt regions. Parcels of land of between 99 and 160 acres were allocated and after a period of establishment, repayment of the 30-year loans was to commence, eventually giving freehold title to the settlers. However, lack of farming skills, inadequate equipment and resources, uneconomic farm sizes, depressed prices and poor land quality all led to failures. Many people walked away and those who stayed endured considerable hardship and deprivation.

It is from these historical records that I imagined Stan's backstory and attempted to place him in the context of the social and political circumstances of the times:

I got sent away to a home. Me job was to cut the wood for the old people. They lived outside the fence. One old lady used to scare me. She'd just sit outside her hut and stare straight ahead and never say nothing. She had watery eyes. Always running down her wrinkled old cheeks. I thought she was blind. Then one day she says, "You a Nyungar, from the Goreng people, from the south. Your mother, she's living in Mt Barker camp now". (Allen: 24)

I also needed to research as much as I could find on the boxing tents and discovered conflicting accounts, which I carefully considered for my writing of Stan's character. Richard Broome (1995, 1996; Broome & Jackomos 1998) writes that the Aboriginal boxers found degrees of acceptance, respect and equality not afforded in other areas of Australian society. In his article 'Theatres of power: tent boxing circa 1910–1970' (1996) he explores the internal dynamics of the tents as places of cross-cultural drama and performance, with the boxers acting out mostly predetermined scripts. He argues that the Aboriginal fighters 'were not only victims of white power and racial discourse, but also agents and manipulators of that power and discourse' (3). Peter Corris, in his book

Lords of the ring: a history of prize-fighting in Australia (1980), has a completely different view and argues that the tent-boxing shows were places of abuse and exploitation, that some fights were badly mismatched, some boxers stayed in the tents too long, fought too often and suffered long-term injury.

The Aboriginal boxers interviewed in the ABC documentary *Tent boxers* (2008), the oral history tape interview with Western Australian tent owner George Stewart (Stewart 1997), and Bob Morgan's (1995) interviews with showies provided perspectives from Aboriginal boxers and from tent owners and both seemed to confirm Broome's view of the tent fights as organised trickery, with most of the fights set up between the boxers and 'gees'³ using a repertoire of moves that made the fights appear genuine. The Aboriginal men interviewed for *Tent boxers* recounted memories of enjoying their life in the tents, particularly the camaraderie between the boxers.

Broome's accounts of the tent owners in 'Theatres of power: tent Boxing circa 1910–1970' (1996) reveal different treatment of the boxers. According to an interview with young white boxer, Billy Primmer, who travelled with a troupe in the 1940s, the tent owner 'treated them [his boxers] like dogs', buying cold pies and throwing them at them, 'you either caught them or dropped them... that was their meal, and that was the way he used to treat them' (6). It is unclear to me from Broome's account of Primmer's recollection whether he is referring just to the Aboriginal boxers or to all the boxers.

Alick Jackomos (Broome & Jackomos 1998), who travelled with a number of different tents for years, recalled that some of the bigger tents had cooks who provided stews and steaks for the men, but admitted that 'pies might be given when on the road or during the pressure of setting up' (6). Broome (Broome & Jackomos 1998: 6) writes that 'none of these memories recall differential treatment between black and white boxers in food, accommodation or even wages'. However, he later records that

³ Men employed by the tent owners to stand in the crowd and be chosen for matches.

several white boxers claimed Aboriginal boxers were paid less than other fighters, including Primmer, who 'stated that while he got £3 a fight in the 1940s the Aboriginal troupe members received £1' (6). Broome surmises that the reason might be 'a differential of skill or bargaining skills involved in this case or the fact that Primmer was a casual, fighting only those shows in the Warrnambool area' (6), and writes that Jackomos also 'believes payments to boxers were made on their level of skill and their bargaining skills rather than their ethnicity' (7).

While the official records show inconsistencies on the issues of differential treatment within the troupes regarding pay and provision of food, both Corris (1980) and Broome (1996) agree that the life of tent boxers varied across a spectrum with regard to other living conditions. Some owners deducted expenses for food and other costs so that by the end of a run the boxers had little or no wages left; some had vans to sleep in, while others slept on fold-up beds in the tent, and others slept in the sawdust in the tent.

Tent owners Harry and Sylvia Paulsen, who welcomed the boxers in their home, and John McNabb's recollection of his mother Win doing 'all the cooking and she became "Mum" to a lot of coloured boys' (Broome & Jackomos 1998: 138) offer an alternative (and perhaps gendered) account of the attitudes and treatment of the men who worked for them.

Based on this research I decided to write a more nuanced gendered account of the relationship between the boxers and the Jacksons. For example, when Stan tells Corrie, 'since Rose it's better, much better. Rose always has a good stew on the boil' (Allen: 22) I wanted to reflect the official accounts that the wives of the tent owners could and did have some say in the treatment of the boxers. I also wanted to portray some of what Corris (1980) has written about some fights being mismatched and boxers suffering long-term injury. While I wrote that Maurie's motivation to put on a good show outweighed his better judgement in the incident where Stan is hurt in chapter twenty-two, I was also trying to express some of the complex racial ambivalences implicit in the fights the tent owners set up between Aboriginal boxers and whites. In writing that eventually, after long

years in the tent, Stan shows signs of memory loss when he forgets he has told the children he has some spare change for them to go to the shop (Allen: 101), I was attempting to represent the position of Aboriginal men having limited opportunities for work in the broader society and therefore being more likely to stay longer in the tents and thus more at risk of long-term injuries such as brain damage.

I also wanted to reflect some of the drama and theatricality that Broome (1996) argues provided Aboriginal boxers with degrees of agency and power. When Corrie first sees Stan up on the boards I imagined him enjoying looking down on the white farm boys and stirring them up, 'as he shadow-boxed the young men gathering in front and a smile on his face so's you couldn't tell if he was laughing at them or with them' (Allen: 4). When Rose watches from her ticket box, 'The boys worked the crowd too, staring them down, dancing on the boards and throwing punches in their direction' (Allen: 124), I imagined both the Aboriginal and white boxers enjoying the power of teasing the crowd, knowing that Maurie would line up most of them with a gee, and 'select a few mugs to fill the rest of the house' (Allen: 124).

The research also revealed the high status and attraction the boxers had with women who went to the shows. The Aboriginal men interviewed in the ABC documentary *Tent boxers* (2008) recounted having plenty of young women in all the towns they travelled through keen to go out with them. Broome (1996) estimates up to forty percent of the crowds that gathered outside the tents to watch the young men were female. I wanted to capture some of this sense of how the constant travelling provided many opportunities for socialising in the different towns, and casual relationships were not unusual for both Aboriginal and white boxers. I represent this when Rose watches the groups of girls gather at the back of the tent to get the boxers to take them out:

Rose knew the boys would take the girls on the dodgems or the octopus or any of the rides that would thrill and scare their girl enough to make her cling to him and if he was lucky he'd feel her breasts pressing against him. Then he'd demonstrate his expertise on the hoopla or knock-ems and win a

prize for her and hope that would be enough to get him a kiss and later, perhaps, more. (Allen: 69)

And for the young women, 'The rule among showies was whoever works in the alley goes for free so the girls knew that to team up with a boy from the tent would get them a couple of rides, a hotdog and ice cream and at least one pretty memento to put on their dressing table' (Allen: 69).

The research, and to a lesser degree my personal experience, gave me the confidence to write the character of Stan. The research into the specific history of the Nyungar peoples gave me a context to write his backstory, and the research into the boxing tents provided the material to imagine Stan's choice to remain working in the tent given the limited opportunities for him in the broader society, and to try and capture a more nuanced account of both the hardships and agency and power that Aboriginal boxers experienced.

Although my novel focuses on the stories of the women, it was important for me to address Langton's concern of racism through non-representation. I chose to privilege Stan's story above those of Tommy and Maurie, given the high number of Aboriginal participants in the boxing tents. Although the research revealed their treatment was undoubtedly racist, there were also enough accounts by Aboriginal boxers which provided an important insight into the opportunities for Aboriginal men that were denied in the broader society.

Having made my decisions it was still very challenging to make the decisions about how to write in a way that captured the attitudes of the times, particularly around the use of racist language. The reference to all the boxers as 'the boys' was an acknowledgment of a paternalism based more on social status than race. My decision to use terms such as 'darky', 'Abo' and 'blackfella' to reflect the time the novel is set and the racist attitudes of those who went to the boxing matches, and to portray my character Barb as blatantly racist, was very difficult. I cannot claim that I have succeeded in my intentions, only that I have tried. In Hewett's autobiography *Wild card* (1990) she tells of an incident when she took her manuscript of her semi-autobiographical short story, 'The fences of

Jarrabin', to writer Mary Gilmore. Hewett recounts how Gilmore read a few pages, handed it back and said, 'Why do your characters refer to Aboriginal people as "niggers"? No Australian has ever referred to an Aborigine as a "nigger".' Hewett responds, 'They did where I come from' (253). I have also heard the term used many times in reference to Aboriginal people. Although I did not want to erase the issues of racist attitudes in writing back to the past, I needed to weigh up my own sensibilities. I chose not to use that particularly offensive term.

On my research trip to Western Australia, travelling through the Wheatbelt on the Great Southern Highway, I visited every museum and library from Northam to Albany. Every one of them had records of the colonial history, but none of the Aboriginal history. On my return trip to Perth on the Albany Highway I stopped at the Kojonup Visitors Centre, which incorporates Kodja Place, a regional museum that celebrates the Aboriginal and pastoral and cultural history of the South West. There I found a five-minute film interview with George Stewart and Aboriginal boxer Jack Cox, who had run Stewart's tent for a short period and this confirmed that at one time all the boxers in the troupe were Aboriginal.

Back in Melbourne and needing to confirm some facts regarding Jack Cox, I came across the following photograph and article:



Josephine Holliway went to school in Perth, and at about the time she finished school, she met Jack Cox, who was at that time one of WA's most successful boxers— Lightweight division. They fell in love, and soon after, married. Jack finally won a WA boxing title, and soon after, they came to Kojonup to live. Jack Cox took on a large variety of jobs, and Josie took on work at Kojonup's High School; cleaning, and doing whatever was needed. They had seven children, so Josie did not have much time for outside jobs.

Josie became a member of Jehovah's Witness, and was, through and through, a beautiful lady—quiet, totally trustworthy, hardworking, and along with all of this, she had the ability to write... articles, stories, poetry. In particular, this gem, which came to light only after Josie had died, early this year, and when Wendy Anderson (Wadjela,⁴ but good friend of all our Noongars here in Kojonup), discovered it, she was totally "blown away" by the message, the skilled words and the beauty of it.

WE MUST GO FORWARD

*Two hundred years have come and gone,
With racist taunts and great contempt.
Condemned to life without respect,
No rights to be respected, yet
They said we're hostile, full of hate,
Was this our destiny and our fate?
We cannot go back, must go forward.
To retrace our steps would be in vain.
Our brothers walk throughout this land
Respecting each other, hand in hand.
Come, let's face this world together,
We've only one, there is no other.
Knock down the barriers, put it right!
Together united we can win the fight.
Living together, black and white,
Existing in peace, working together.
Gone is the hatred that shackled our nation,
We'll look to the future without deprivation,
Integrating integrity for future generations!*

Josephine Cox (now deceased) written in 2001

Anderson (2009)

I include this in the exegesis because, despite the systematic dispossession of Aboriginal people and the ongoing pervasive and destructive racism in Australian culture, the story of Jack Cox and his wife, Josephine, illustrates there is also the space for alternatives to the dominant discourse.

⁴ The Nyungar word for white woman.

My decision to give Stan more of a voice than I gave the other male characters was based on the importance of the presence of Aboriginal boxers in sideshow alley. The extensive research done and the decisions I made I hope provided me with the means to capture the period and write in a manner that is not offensive to Aboriginal people. Understanding my own conflicted and ambiguous positionality as a settler woman, and my gendered European sensibility of the particular landscape of the Wheatbelt, was also integral to understanding my own authority and lack of it in taking on this task. In the end, as a creative writer I would rather my work provoke critical discussion about the tensions and collusions between sex, race and nation that Sheridan (1995: 169) articulates, than be met with indifference.

Chapter 3

By manipulating the stare-and-tell ritual so fundamental to disability experience, [performance artist, Mary] Duffy mounts a critique of the politics of appearance and an inquiry into what it means to be an embodied person. Her self-representation raises the issue of what is appropriate looking, queries what constitutes beauty, and asks what is the truth of the body. This autobiographical form unsettles cultural assumptions about humanity, femaleness, disability, and self by invoking and juxtaposing all of these categories... Unique to disability, this genre manipulates the stare in order to renarrate disability.

Rosemary Garland Thomson (2000: 237–8).

Writing my novel necessarily included writing about the so-called ‘freaks’ and novelty acts that were part of sideshow alley in the 1950s. Although none of the ‘freaks’ are main characters, I wanted to ensure that my representation of them reflected my concerns. In order to do this I had to first understand the experience for the participants and the audience in the historical context of the freak shows and second, find ways of writing about that experience in an ethical manner. The challenge was to write the characters in ways that reflect contemporary sensibilities around the representation of people with disabilities, while capturing the atmosphere of sideshow alley at the time the novel is set and the attraction of these types of shows. However, this presented a further challenge of writing minor characters in a way that was not stereotyped and objectified.

Changing public sensibilities and awareness of minority rights has meant that for the last fifty years or so these once popular forms of entertainment have come to be regarded, as American sociologist David Gerber (1992) has argued, as sites of exploitation, abuse and humiliation, with the public exposure for money of people with disabilities or disfigurements considered a shaming experience for the person and voyeuristic for the public who frequented these shows.

Although public tastes have changed with regard to these types of shows, both Broome (1999) and Bogdan (1988) also argue that the demise of the freak shows was due to a combination of new medicalised understanding of disabilities, which has spawned the popular medical documentary programs, and the accessibility of alternative forms of popular entertainment such as movies. I wanted to examine contemporary representations of people with disabilities so I could understand how they reflect the changes in social attitudes and perhaps offer ways for me to write back to the past while incorporating these changes.

The decisions and choices I made were informed by research into the history of the 'freak' shows to understand why these shows were so popular, including the changes in public attitudes and engagement with the debates around the display of people with disabilities and physical deformities, and current debates around contemporary representations of people with disabilities. So that my writing did not simply reinscribe the problematic historical representations of disability, I needed to understand how they are constructed and how they ascribe a patterned relationship between abled and disabled.

Alexandra Howson (2000) poses questions which I think are relevant to this notion of representing and writing ethically about the 'other' in the context of the body. She asks: 'In which circumstances and to what degree do individuals have control over their own bodies? What interest does the state (and I would add commerce) have over the human body? In what ways do images of the body influence people's experience of themselves and others?' (12).

Richard Broome (Broome & Jackomos 1998) writes that the popularity of freak shows in Australia can be traced back to the fairs and markets of England, and for centuries people with physical deformities, aberrations and disabilities earned something of a living. By the 1930s in Australia, sideshow alley was flourishing with all kinds of local and imported shows from England, Europe, Africa and the United States, promising wonders and illusions, including so-called 'freaks', animal acts,

magicians and often scantily-clad women performing a variety of feats and exotic dances.

Broome (Broome & Jackomos 1998: 9) argues that both class and age shaped the popularity of sideshow alley, and while anecdotal evidence suggests that the middle-class view was that it was tawdry and vulgar and a waste of money, the 'freak' and novelty shows nevertheless 'had that dreadful fascination that forbidden things had' and drew large crowds. He points out that parental anxiety about dangers to children was less acute forty or fifty years ago and Australian youth of both sexes roamed sideshow alley unattended. They experienced certain types of 'otherness', be it class, body or race, but the most fascination lay with the human 'oddities' or 'freaks'—the giants, dwarfs, the obese, hermaphrodites, microcephalics, conjoined twins, those with cranio-facial disorders and diseases, or any number of skin conditions.

According to American sociologist Robert Bogdan (1987) these early shows used imagery, steeped in racism and imperialism, to emphasise the inferiority of the 'human curiosity' (539). People were presented in two distinct modes, the exotic and the aggrandised. The exotic played on differences while the aggrandised played on ability despite disability, and many shows were presented as educational and scientific, often with the tent owner wearing a white coat, using information from science, exploration, medicine and current events. He argues that the 'pitches' used by the promoters contained the same appeals any entrepreneurs used to sell a product—the unique, the best, the tallest, the shortest, the only one or never seen before.

I tried to reflect this in the scene in which Tommy does the pitch for Shirley the Tattooed Lady, and claims 'So, ladies and gen'lemen, boys and girls, I present for you today, the amazin'... the one and only... Tattooed Lady! Feast your eyes on the only livin', breathin', walkin', talkin' work of art in the southern hemisphere!' (Allen: 61).

Bogdan (1988) writes that the people who worked in the 'freak' shows broke down the categories of 'freaks' into different types. The born freaks were those born with a disability, such as conjoined twins or those

born without limbs. Made freaks were those who did something to make themselves unusual enough to exhibit, such as tattooing. Novelty acts were those who did not rely on a physical characteristic but boasted an unusual performance or ability, such as sword swallowing or snake charming. The 'gaffed' freak was an American term for the fakes and phonies, such as the armless man who tucked his arms into a tight-fitting shirt. According to Bogdan the freak-show performers were disdainful of the 'gaff' and the born freak had status (1988: 8). Both Broome (1999) and Bogdan (1988) report that those who worked in the shows used the term 'freak' with some pride.

After closing during the World War II, sideshow alley was revived with the same popularity, although during the 1950s public tastes were changing and the display of people such as conjoined twins and people with microcephaly had all but ceased. Richard Broome, in his article 'Windows on other worlds: the rise and fall of sideshow alley' (1999: 1) reports that John Gilmore, who was born without legs and performed as 'Zandau the Quarter Boy', arrived at Essendon airport in Melbourne in 1947 and was met by Dennis Duffy, the Irish–Australian giant and 'Chang, the Pinhead Chinaman'. Gilmore continued performing until 1957, explaining to audiences how he lived without lower limbs. Broome quotes journalist, Eric Sapengro⁵, who claimed that the 'Quarter Boy' was probably the last of the 'freaks' allowed to be exhibited in Australia' (1999: 1). However, Maria Peters, a pygmy woman from Cape Province, continued to work as 'Ubangi' until the mid-1960s, along with a variety of novelty acts (Broome & Jackomos 1998: 91).

Broome & Jackomos (1998) reports that the term 'freak' was largely dropped by about 1950, possibly due to the general change in attitudes that began with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and the showies dropping the word was also 'a pointed business decision'. Terms such as 'Strange People', 'Novelties', and 'Weird Humans' remained in use (12). Anecdotal evidence I found was that a

⁵ Eric Sapengro, 'Behind the blare of sideshow alley', *People*, 17 April 1957.

half-man half-woman act, which continued in Western Australia until the late 1970s was still referred to as a 'freak' show.

I wrote about some of these changes in my novel. For example, when Joan tells Barb about Tommy's ambitions:

... when he'd made enough money he was going to bring lots of different acts over to Perth every year and have a proper freak show with pinheads, Siamese twins, an ape man and African pygmies, better than anything Perth had ever seen, like the shows they used to have before the war'. Barb responds, 'He's dreamin'. Those days are gone. People don't want to see that sort of thing now'. (Allen: 19)

I could not find any official records specifically about the freak shows in Western Australia. However, based on my research of eastern states' sideshows I imagined that by the time Tommy made enough money to have his 'freak' show in the 1950s, he was able to book a half-man half-woman act, a tattooed lady, an obese woman, a scantily-clad girl 'in a goldfish bowl', and a dwarf and giant act. The challenge for me as a contemporary writer was to write these characters as embodied, to give them an identity apart from their work as an 'act' in a freak show, but also to capture the atmosphere of a sideshow alley 'freak' show.

Both Broome (1998, 1999) and Bogdan (1987, 1988, 1993) have questioned the belief that all the participants in these shows were merely victims of exploitative operators. According to their accounts the participants had some power and control in their relationships with employers and audiences, and some managed and promoted their own careers. They argue that the very theatricality of the shows meant that the performers were to some extent involved in the fraudulence of their performance. I don't want to conflate the particular issues of agency for people with disabilities, but my research revealed that sideshow alley as an entity, with its games of chance and entertainment shows, was theatrical and geared to degrees of fraudulence to ensure its commercial success. Joan participates in a form of fraudulence when she dances after her first two pregnancies: 'Sure, her breasts weren't quite as full and firm as they had been but a bit of padding stitched into her top had fixed that'

(Allen: 14). The boxers fought staged fights with 'gees' and learned a repertoire of moves that were designed to make the matches appear genuine. And although the 'heelies' were eventually shut out of the alley with the formation of the associations, the games of chance were designed to ensure the showies made a profit.

In reflecting this idea of the fraudulence of the 'freak' shows I decided to write Joan telling Rose what happened to one of Jack and Dot Swift's acts:

'They'd booked the African Strong Man, but he never showed and when Jack rang Sydney, the agent reckoned the bloke had urgent family business in Africa and 'cause it was "unforeseen circumstances" their deposit wouldn't be returned. Dottie reckoned Jack was yelling down the phone, "He's not even a bloody African, he's a bloody Maori! Sharks, the bloody lot of ya", and she'd had to grab the phone off him and smooth things over. Then I find out from Shirley that the bloke'd run off with a girl from some outback town in New South Wales. I didn't tell Dot that, though', she laughed. (Allen: 60)

However, it is difficult to make a direct correlation between someone understanding the theatricality or fraudulence of their performance and concluding that this means they were not exploited. David Gerber (1992, 1993) does raise valid questions of consent, volition and valorisation in his critique of Bogdan's research, arguing that the freak show hardly emerges as a universe of free choices, and to treat the participants as performers rather than as exploited victims is highly problematic. Gerber (1992:60) uses two examples: a man who lost both hands in a military training accident and a woman born with foreshortened arms and without legs. Gerber writes that these two people were horrified by the idea of being thought of as a freak and had a fear of ending up in a sideshow, but both did. He does acknowledge, however, that if the only choices available are to participate in a freak show or be on welfare, it is not much of a choice but rather is about making the best of a bad situation.

Both Beloso's (2012) feminist critique of the choices available for sex workers discussed in chapter one and also Broome's (1995, 1996, 1998) descriptions of the options available to, and treatment of, Aboriginal

boxers discussed in chapter two, unlike Gerber (1992, 1993), offer more complex readings of what 'choice' means in their gender- and race-conscious analyses of people's economic positioning, and offer alternative accounts of the resourcefulness and resilience with which people do make the best of the situations they find themselves in. I made the choice to base my characters on the more nuanced accounts offered in the research, to give them some agency in the sideshow community rather than portray them as merely victims.

Christine Braunberger's (2000) feminist analysis with regard to agency, independence, money and opportunity to travel for the women who made a living off their tattoos, also offers more nuanced understandings of the freak show participants. According to Braunberger the most famous tattooed woman who worked the show circuit was American Betty Broadbent, who came to Australia in 1937. She argues that while there was a reckless kind of freedom in horrifying others, tattooed women played with social respectability. They were never tattooed on their faces, necks or hands and were always able to cover their tattoos in public, so that only on-stage were they dangerous, 'monster' bodies.

Betty Broadbent always wore long pants and long-sleeved shirts off-stage to hide the tattoos on her arms and legs. She was a single mother and a rodeo rider and had herself tattooed (465 different designs) so she could work during the rodeo off-season. Broome & Jackomos (1998) reports a rare interview Broadbent gave the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper in 1938 in which she said: 'Being tattooed has its advantages, but on the whole, it provides an interesting outdoor life travelling all over the world ... I don't make a million dollars, but I like it' (73–4).

Bogdan (1993:92) argues that the majority of people who worked in the freak shows were active participants in their own presentation and defined themselves as showmen and performers. Both Bogdan and Broome (1999) argue that within the subculture of the showie community, with its shared values and meanings, everybody looked down on the public (the 'mugs') as being the dupes.

According to Broome & Jackomos (1998: 82) people who worked in the freak shows attended parties, barbeques, gathered at the campfire and were defended by the showies, particularly against the Department of Immigration, which was quick to deport people whose visas had expired. Gail Magdziarz, the daughter of a showie family, recalled the freak show performers:

They were valued, respected, and in a lot of cases, loved members of our community. They were the same as anybody else... They might be called freaks, but that was for the show. Once everyone went home they had a cup of tea and talked with the rest of us... They were part of our social fabric. (Broome & Jackomos 1998: 82)

As I was writing from the point of view inside the alley, this account offered a way of writing my characters off-stage as part of the sideshow community, however, I still wanted to capture the atmosphere of sideshow alley and the attraction of the freak shows from the public's point of view.

Broome & Jackomos (1998) argued that the demise of the freak shows was due in part to new medicalised understandings of disability that challenge notions of racist and imperialist 'educational and scientific' representations of the 'inferior other' (Bogdan 1987) in the freak shows. Simon Chapman and Deborah Lupton (1988) report that repeated surveys show people from developing and developed countries use the mass media, particularly television, as their leading source of information about important health and medical issues, that they regard this information as credible, and it is their prime way of making sense of such issues, particularly those of which they have little or no personal experience.

I wanted to understand the popularity and attraction of these types of shows and whether they might offer ways to assist me to capture the 'scientific and educational' representation of a freak show from the public's point of view. I assumed these programs would reflect current sensibilities around the dignity and rights of people with disabilities.

I watched different genres of medical and health-related television shows, ranging from well-researched, scientific medical SBS documentaries to popular commercial programs on subjects such as

obesity. While there were different production qualities and different target markets including scientific, educational and human interest audiences, my response as a viewer was that all of them still raised troublesome issues of class, race and gender and also similar questions of volition and consent that Gerber raises in his analysis of the freak shows. I concluded that the representation of people in these shows did not address the fundamental issues of human rights that had led to the closure of the freak shows, and the spectacle of the 'other' remains as pervasive as perhaps it has always been.

In her article, 'Medical documentary: conjoined twins as mediated spectacle' (2002), Josie van Dijck argues for a similar conclusion; that the freak show didn't disappear, it just changed. She argues that now it is not just the person with the disability that draws the crowds, it is the filmed operation on that person, the televised recordings of their salvation by medical professionals. Van Dijck concludes that by and large the freak show functioned as a straightforward pay-per-view spectacle, whereas the documentary disguises its equivalent spectacle as medical information and human(ist) interest.

The representations of people with disabilities in contemporary mainstream movies are also problematic according to sociologist Fiona Whittington-Walsh (2002), who has researched the history of disability representation in mainstream film. Her research reveals that all the lead actors, apart from Marlee Matlin, a deaf actress, playing a deaf character in *Children of a lesser god* (1986), are not disabled, and she argues that a white actor blacking up to portray a black person in film would cause moral outrage, but no one is outraged that non-disabled actors play characters with a disability.

Regarding lead male characters in films such as *Rain man* (1988), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *My left foot* (1989), *Charly* (1968), *Sling blade* (1996), Whittington-Walsh (2002) examines the inaccuracy and stereotypicality of these characters using Bogdan's theory of aggrandised mode of presentation, and concludes that the term 'idiot savant' has been synonymously linked with disability and success. She argues that the

portrayal of characters with disabilities as savants, which is continually being used by the mainstream film industry, serves to diminish the abilities and lives of the general population of people with disabilities. As with all people, she says, some have talents that could be considered 'gifts', while the rest live day by day in 'ordinary' ways (700).

She also argues that there are very problematic issues with gender representation in the films with lead female disabled characters. All these characters have types of disabilities that don't interfere with their physical attractiveness. In *Benny & Joon* (1993) with Mary Stuart Masterson, *Molly* (1999) with Elisabeth Shue, *Frances* (1982) with Jessica Lange and *Girl, interrupted* (1999) with Winona Ryder, the female leads are young and conform to contemporary notions of physical beauty. Their fragility and dependence fulfil a particular male notion of feminine desirability and possess a certain erotic appeal.

This research challenged my preconceptions, as I had assumed that the contemporary concerns and sensibilities regarding disability rights, which had led to the closure of the freak shows, would be reflected in contemporary representations of people with disabilities. However, despite the rhetoric of rights, my research revealed troubling images of commercial exploitation and humiliation in popular television programs and problematic stereotypes ascribed to disabled characters in popular films. These representations did not help me in writing back to a sideshow alley freak show in a way that would reflect an ethical viewpoint. The economic pressures that might lead people to participate in medical and health-related television programs and the lack of diversity in disability representation in popular films illustrates that, although we now cringe at the idea of the freak shows, current forms of popular entertainment still offer highly problematic representations of people with disabilities.

In literary representations of disability, a number of contemporary writers have challenged the traditional literary representations of disability as metaphor for defective 'otherness' by giving their disabled characters evolving personalities and subjective viewpoints. However, in the fictional representations I researched, the characters still fall into difficult territory in

possessing the type of savant qualities of the disabled heroes in popular contemporary films.

Stephen Fox (2004:409) examines two contemporary literary representations of disability in Barbara Kingsolver's *The poisonwood Bible* (1999) and Kerrie Hulme's *The bone people* (1985), which both explore postcolonial issues— in Africa and New Zealand— and define the relationships of disability to the two cultures. Fox argues that Kingsolver writes as a form of political activism, so her literary structures aim to deconstruct traditional exploitations of disabled characters.

In her novel, the character Adah is rejected by the people in her American birthplace. She is crippled, electively mute and born with only half a brain, and yet is discovered by a sympathetic educator to have an extraordinary talent for languages. The family moves to Africa where she discovers her voice is not silent or crippled; her disability is a racial/cultural figment, it never really existed and so her disability is a metaphor for the cultural impoverishment of the West and her cure privileges the healing community of Africa.

In Hulme's *The bone people* (1985), the at times harrowing account of the character Simon, who is mute and traumatised, represents a spiritual and cultural wound. Simon has the special gift of seeing the auras or souls of others, and eventually is the conduit for healing the alcohol-fuelled domestic violence of Joe, a Maori man who has lost his wife and child, and Kerewin, an emotionally and physically isolated woman who is unable to express her talent as a painter, and bridging the two cultures of Maori and European.

In another literary representation of disability, Ursula Hegi's novel *Stones from the river* (1994), portrays the character Trudi, born with dwarfism in Germany. Trudi possesses an uncanny insight into her own condition and the idiosyncrasies, cruelties, and war-damaged bodies and psyches of the people in her town during the rise of Nazism and World War II. With her gift of insight, and in her role as the collector of the stories of the townsfolk, she symbolically conflates the notion of abled/disabled in exposing the Nazi eugenics policy.

It seems that in attempting to write against the traditional literary representation of disability as metaphor for defective 'other', these characters, although they are embodied and highly subjective, also possess a heightened symbolic function as a reflection of and salvation from contemporary social, cultural, racial and spiritual ills. As Whittington-Walsh (2002) has argued regarding the savant-like qualities of disabled film characters, this type of literary representation can also serve to diminish the abilities and lives of the general population of people with disabilities.

Even though the 'freak' characters in my novel are minor in terms of the narrative, it was important that they were embodied, and to present their lives as subjective and individual I tried to imagine them, not as the 'other' viewed as spectacle, or as symbolic, but as people with a lived experience in the sideshow community.

Whittington-Walsh (2002) refers to Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks* in her article, and says it is unusual in that it celebrates and stars actual performers from freak shows. According to her, it was a critical and box-office disaster and blamed for ending Browning's career, banished to the MGM vaults for twenty years and banned in England for over forty years. What truly offended and shocked audiences and critics, according to Whittington-Walsh (2002), was not only the visibility of the disabled actors, but also that Browning and his actors felt no shame in showcasing their diversity.

The disabled characters are not portrayed in the exotic or aggrandised mode; we only see them in their day-to-day lives, carrying out domestic chores, socialising and watching the non-disabled characters perform. Although I was warned it was confronting to watch people with severe physical disabilities, I felt more confronted by the story itself, as it reinscribes some disturbing patriarchal views on women with regard to the able-bodied and the beautiful female protagonist, who is blamed and deliberately disabled as punishment for her seductive scheming.

However, the female characters with disabilities are portrayed in their everyday lives as embodied and sexual women, without being eroticised.

Frances, a woman without arms, has several admirers, and Daisy and Violet (conjoined at the hip) are both engaged to be married. In real life Violet did become engaged but she and her partner were denied a marriage licence in twenty-one American states, with one city counsellor reported to have said, 'The very idea of such a marriage is quite immoral and indecent' (Bogdan 1988:172). She and her sister died unmarried at the age of sixty.

My intention was to try and write a representation of a freak show set in the 1950s. The equivalent spectacles of people with disabilities in modern medical reality documentaries and the representations of people with disabilities in popular films did not offer assistance in writing what I considered ethical representations. I made the decision that I would keep the writing of a freak-show performance to a minimum. I wrote Shirley's performance from Joan and Rose's points of view, only including some overheard comments from the audience to capture a little of the atmosphere of the show.

I decided to focus my writing on the characters off-stage in their day-to-day lives and tried to represent their lived experience as part of the sideshow community. When Joan is upset, after witnessing the fight between the men, she visits Shirley and Vera in their van:

Shirley tipped the bag of make-up onto the table. 'Show us how you did your face. Here, I've got a mirror.'

Joan took twenty minutes to put the make-up on, more time than she'd ever spent, and when she held the mirror away to look at the full effect, she smiled. 'Pretty gorgeous, don't you think?'

'Exotic! I love the eyes.'

'I usually use blue but this green is good. I like it.'

'Well, you've given Vera a few hints. Now, she's getting very hungry.'

'Oh, sorry. I should've said. We'll have a barbeque with everyone tonight. I should wash this off and then we'll go.'

'Leave it on. You look fabulous.'

(Allen: 76–7)

Carla and Johnny are married, and Carla, Mirna and Lelelie are friends involved in a playful banter that I imagined them having about a man Carla finds attractive:

'I should be on the television. With Desi Arnaz. Talk about gorgeous.'

'Carla Booth! I'm going to tell Johnny you want to run away with Desi!'

'I wish! Shame he prefers redheads.' (Allen: 92)

Broome & Jackomos (1998) records that performers in the freak shows gazed back at the audience and felt empowered by doing so. A reporter at the Sydney Show in 1938⁶ recorded one performer's view:

Did it ever strike you that whereas you pay to come in to see us we get a free show every performance, watching your antics and your peculiarities? That's why these first days bore us: there are not enough of you. (82)

And Maria Peters, when she performed as 'Ubangi', said her joy was 'watching people with spectacles and moustaches and lavish users of lipstick' (82).

I was interested in the empowerment of staring back that is denied to people with disabilities in the 'virtual' stare of privatised spectacle of television and film. Researching disability representation outside of mainstream entertainment, I found disability theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson (2000), who has examined disability performance art and the use of the stare-and-tell dynamic. In her account of the work of performance artist, Mary Duffy, she writes:

... this genre manipulates the stare in order to renarrate disability and by appropriating the social practice that constitutes her oppression in order to reimagine her identity, Duffy enacts a kind of communal renunciation of the objectification that she so commandingly rejects in her performance. (338)

Garland Thomson concludes that in re-imagining disability on behalf of the disabled community, Duffy empowers others for whom daily life is managing, deflecting and renouncing that stare.

It did not feel appropriate to write a 2014 rendering of a 1950s freak show performance where, like Duffy, my characters would directly 'upbraid the audience for their intrusive staring eyes and gaping mouths', but I did

⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 April 1938.

want to bring this understanding of the empowerment of 'staring back' in my writing. When Shirley and Vera are sitting outside the van with Rose and Joan, recounting the things they find amusing about audience members, they are staring back at the reader/audience:

'Did you see that woman standing in the front with that beehive, Shirl? She could've hidden the crown jewels in it.' Vera lifted her arms above her head, 'It was about that high! Vera couldn't stop staring'.

'I did! I had to stop myself laughing when the bloke behind had to keep bobbing his head round like a pigeon every time she moved.'

'Vera couldn't stop staring at that man with the big hoop earring either. She kept wondering if he was one of her type.' (Allen: 64)

The act of staring or gazing back, which is denied in contemporary health and medical reality television programs, challenges the way images of the body are used to create notions of 'other'. In non-mainstream media disabled people maintain agency in the way they are represented through accounts of subjective experience, community and sexuality. More positive stories are reaching the broader community through television programs in recent years with actors with disabilities playing in ensemble casts in shows such as *Private practice*, *Lie to me* and *Glee*. All these actors play characters that focus on their individual subjectivity rather than their disability.

Bogdan theorises that 'our reaction to freaks is the result of our socialisation, and of the way our social institutions managed these peoples' identities'. He argues that 'freak shows are not about isolated individuals, either on platforms or in an audience, they are about organisations and patterned relationships between them and us. "Freak" is not a quality that belongs to the person on display. It is something we created: a perspective, a set of practices—a social construction' (1998: xi). I wanted to reflect how this social construction operates on many different levels:

Joan watched the mugs trying to weave their way through the crowd to get to their tent, the men and women dressed in their Sunday best looking slightly sheepish, as if embarrassed to be seen partaking in such forms of entertainment, and the groups of teens dressed in their skin-tight black

jeans, studded leather jackets, and shoes with points long enough to be a weapon. They'd certainly be a spectacle in the towns down south. (Allen: 91).

She reflects back to the audience, the viewers, their own performance of the self in everyday life and the way images of the body influence people's experience of themselves and others.

Literature can show us something about ourselves. It can simultaneously reassure us and confront us: our assumptions, fears and prejudices. As a creative writer I need to be aware of how my assumptions, attitudes and beliefs inform my imagination. It is tempting to privilege the imagined, to forget its constructedness through culture, class, race, age, ability and gender, or in writing against certain stereotypes to create others.

My challenge as a writer was to understand the experience for the participants and the audience in the historical context of the freak shows while trying to write an ethical representation for a contemporary audience. I had thought that my examination of current sensibilities in the representation of people with disabilities would be reflected in the contemporary media of documentary and film that, Broome and Bogdan have argued, led to the demise of the freak shows as demeaning and exploitative practices. However, my research revealed some highly problematic representations that are arguably akin to sideshow alley freak shows, but without the mediating possibility of 'staring back'.

An understanding of feminist theory of the body as discursively constructed and therefore contingent allows for the possibility of more empowering representations, not to erase differences between disabled and non-disabled bodies, but to acknowledge them. Interrogating ethical concerns through the research, I was able to write an alternative representation of characters who participated in a 1950s freak show. By writing them off-stage, away from their 'performance', I have given the reader some sense of their lives as people with subjective identities. By incorporating an understanding of the empowering 'stare back' and writing

the characters in their day-to-day lives, I have tried to reflect on the social constructedness of images of the disabled body as 'other'.

Conclusion

When a writer presents a work, she is really saying: 'This is what I see. Can you see it too?' In this gesture there is a hope—not certainty—that perhaps others may come to share her vision, if only for a moment.

Toril Moi (2008: 268).

The central artistic aim of this doctoral thesis was to write a fictional representation of sideshow alley, a unique part of Australian culture not previously represented in Australian literature, which privileged the voices of the women who are missing from the historical records. The novel, *This town, last town, next town*, set in Western Australia in the 1950s, is a creative evocation of the lives of three women; Rose and Joan, who live and work in the alley, and Corrie, who is left alone for most of the year to raise the children.

The inspiration for my project came from several sources, outlined in the introduction to the exegetical component of this thesis: the story told to me by a young Nyungar man in prison, my childhood memories of strong women, and the creative urge to contribute ways of writing and representing women in Australian literature.

The central theoretical aims, in reflecting on the creative writing process, are written in three separate chapters that explore specific but related challenges of literary representation: writing women, the white settler gendered landscape, writing Aboriginal characters as a non-Aboriginal, and the ethics of writing characters who worked in the freak shows. While my specific concerns were the challenges of representation in writing back to the past, I believe my research and reflection can be connected to considerations of ways to write contemporary literary representations.

There are many possible literary representations of sideshow alley, but my purpose in writing the stories of the women missing from the

historical records, to imagine what their lives might have been like, was to represent their stories as being just as important as those of the men who owned and operated the businesses and formed the guilds and associations.

Lever's (2011) argument that the realist genre, despite its conventions of reinscribing masculinist assumptions, can be subverted to suit women's writing, offered the possibility to have three women characters with equal voice rather than one main protagonist, and to dispense with the traditional narrative arc and write a narrative in which many smaller events occur, which I imagined reflected the 'reality' of the women's lives as relational rather than as 'heroic' individual endeavours.

In writing back to the past I have reflected my own interests as a writer in exploring issues of gender, race and class, and engaged with feminist debates which support my writing in arguing for complexity and multiplicity and a more nuanced approach (Whitlock 1992; de Lauretis 1986; Tarrant 2005; Beloso 2012). These theorists argue that power and agency operate to different degrees and at different times, and support my writing of the women's lives as sites of multiple, complex and potentially contradictory sets of experience.

In the process of writing the novel, the women's stories unfolded, sometimes taking completely surprising directions. When I began writing the novel, I did not know that writing the body, exploring my characters' concerns with body image and ageing, would become central themes. As these themes emerged, I made my creative decisions on what to do with the material and these were often impacted on by the theoretical as well as historical research (Young 2005; Grosz 1994; Gillespie 1998). This project has given me an insight into the possibilities for multiple and individual representations of women when notions of the body are woven into the fabric of the larger categories of representations of gender, race and class.

In exploring the realities of women's lives, my concern was to write 'enfleshed' characters, with their own individual traits, needs and desires, as well as their fears and anxieties. In writing my metamorphosing female

subjects I explored their becoming, not as Braidotti (1993, 2002) offers, an alternative between enjoyment and anxiety, but as more complex and contradictory subjective positions that express degrees and shades and reflect the realities of women's lives. In this, I hoped to share some of my vision that while our differences make us individual, our connections make us human.

Writing the character of Corrie gave me the opportunity to write the landscape. My research had revealed the sideshow community had little response to the landscape and, as my decision was to write a realist fiction, I resisted my own urge to descriptively evoke it when writing their narratives. In rewriting the death of Herbie as a domestic accident, I chose to avoid the early settler masculine trope of the child dying in the bush, extensively discussed by historians Kim Torney (2005) and Peter Pierce (1999), and to write Corrie's story as an exploration of an individual experience of a young woman's loss and grief.

The research into the gendered landscape (Bird 1998; Hewett 1990, 2001; Jolley 1986; White 2013) both surprised and intrigued me. Hewett's description of the Wheatbelt flora in her autobiography *Wild card* (1990) and my description of Corrie's trip to the Stirling Ranges with Stan were so similar that I came to understand how my own response to the landscape was not simply a gendered European response, but could be seen as an alternative trope of female landscape writing, which placed Corrie in a tradition of writing the white woman in the Australian landscape.

My decision to use the motif of floral embroidery for Corrie to come to some acceptance of her loss I also found reflected in White's (2013) account of early settler Georgiana Molloy's interest in collecting specimens of the bush flora after the death of her son in a domestic accident, which seemed to reflect another aspect of a shared settler woman's response to landscape.

Integral to this project was engagement with the debates (Heiss 1999; Huggins 1994; Langton 1993) around the issues of appropriation and legitimisation in writing Aboriginal characters as a non-Aboriginal person. My research into the particular history of white colonisation of the

Nyungar peoples (Haebich 1985, 2000) and my understanding of the fundamental difference between my European sense of the Wheatbelt landscape and Indigenous belonging to the land led me to research the complex, layered, ambiguous and conflicted position of the white settler woman/writer as the 'other' in the dominant male discourse (Kossew 1997; Bird 1998; Hewett 1990, 2001).

Given the high participation of Aboriginal men in the boxing tents (Broome & Jackomos 1998; Broome 1995, 1996) I decided to make Stan's story more foregrounded than those of Maurie and Tommy to try to address Langton's (1993) concern that perhaps the greatest form of racism is to make Aboriginal representation absent. In writing from my ambiguous positionality of the settler woman writer, my complicity in and exclusion from the white male project of colonisation, my authority and lack of authority, and shifting sense of belonging and not belonging, I have responded to Sheridan's (1995) invitation for a postcolonial feminism that explores along the faultlines where sex, race and gender become visible. In this, I hope my choices and decisions will contribute to the debates around the ethics of representation, appropriation and legitimation.

Ethical concerns of representation of the 'other' were also considered when writing characters who worked in the 'freak' shows at a time when cultural notions of what may have been acceptable in this once-popular form of entertainment are very different from current notions of disability representation. Although these are minor characters in my novel, I felt it was important to do the research and write them with consideration for the issues of representing people with disabilities, just as I considered issues of gender, class and race in the writing of my other characters.

Research into the freak shows (Broome & Jackomos 1998; Broome 1999; Bogdan 1987, 1988, 1993; Gerber 1992, 1993) revealed varied debates around conditions and treatment of the participants in these shows. These related to debates around agency and choice with regard to class and gender issues for women's choices in the types of work available to them (Beloso 2012; Braunberger 2000) and race issues for

Aboriginal men who worked in the boxing tents (Broome 1995, 1996; Broome & Jackomos 1998).

My research revealed that contemporary representations of people with disabilities in popular medical documentaries (van Dijk 2002) and mainstream movies (Whittington-Walsh 2002) are highly problematic and arguably reinscribe similar representations of the disabled body that led to the closure of the freak shows as sites of humiliation, exploitation and stereotyped notions. Given this research, I made the decision that, to capture the atmosphere and the time of my writing, I would only write a short scene of a 'performance' with a tattooed woman, but I would write it from Rose and Joan's points of view and only include the audience as comments overheard by the women.

My research into non-mainstream disability representation (Garland Thomson 2000, 2007) revealed that performance artist Mary Duffy uses the empowering act of staring back at her audience to challenge their stare and upbraid them. Broome & Jackomos (1998) document that a similar sense of empowerment in the act of staring back was experienced by people who worked in the freak shows. Writing a 1950s freak show, I could not use a direct confrontation of the audience like Duffy, but I decided that I could incorporate an understanding of this in writing the scenes when the characters are off-stage and commenting about the appearance of some of their audience members. I also decided to use the technique used by Browning in *Freaks* (1932) and present disabled characters in their everyday life to reflect Bogdan's (1987) thesis that disability is a social construct.

This exegesis interrogates some of the challenges and complexities in both how women write and what they write. In choosing to write from the point of view of three women and give them equal voice, the realist convention of a central protagonist was challenged. However, in doing so, and consideration must be given to the restrictions on length allowed for this project, each character has essentially a novella-length story, which arguably challenges the reader to 'fill in the gaps' in a way not anticipated

in choosing to read a novel, and perhaps is a less satisfying reading experience.

In reflecting on this project I would argue that literary categories such as realism are problematic in women's writing. My decision to explore the relational dimension of women's lives led me to imagining a series of ongoing tensions and gradual 'becomings' rather than a central 'transformational' event that the conventional realist narrative arc demands.

Despite all the theorists I have sourced for this project, who encourage alternative representations of women in women's writing, it could be argued that the one realist convention Susan Lever (2000) might argue cannot be subverted is the narrative arc. It is so deeply ingrained in the literary tradition and in readers' expectations, its absence can be viewed as 'nothing much happens' and be categorised as 'experimental' fiction rather than as an alternative realist narrational strategy for women's stories.

The exegesis also reflects on the woman writer's 'place' in the physical landscape and her voice in Australian literary writing, and draws on some of the current feminist debates with regard to her gender, race and class. It examines how these larger themes are complex, shifting and ongoing issues and, when explored creatively with writing the body, contribute to ways of writing women, Aboriginal characters and those with disabilities in writing back to the past.

Thus the thesis as a whole gives voice to sideshow women, Aboriginal boxers, and those with disabilities whose lived experiences have previously been absent from the historical records.

It is the job of a creative writer to ask, 'yes, but what if ...' or 'but what about ...' and to take the risk of presenting her work in the hope, as Moi (2005: 268) writes, 'that perhaps others may come to share her vision, if only for a moment'.

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Part two: Exegesis

This town, last town, next town

By Delia Allen

Chapter 1

A flock of black cockatoos wheeled in from the west and landed on the only tree at the end of the yard, their 'wee-loo, wee-loo' gradually subsiding to a murmuring chatter, like girls whispering secrets to each other on the school bus. Corrie watched them from the window as she scraped the scum off the boiling rabbit and threw it into the sink. They were her favourite birds. She liked the way they took turns to keep watch. One would stay up in the tree as the rest foraged on the ground, then after a while it would flutter down and peck another bird, which would fly up into the tree to take its place.

The back of her left leg ached. The vein, curling up from her calf to her thigh like ivy, pulsed and throbbed at the end of the day fit to burst. There was a time when Stan had turned her over and kissed that part behind her knee, soft and ticklish, and she'd buried her face in the pillow and giggled.

Corrie ladled a spoon of gluggy potato into the bowls. The stink of the boiled rabbit made her gag. She put the spoon down, leant over the sink and dry retched, then opened the window, which let the stink out and a dozen or so blowies in. She waved her hand to keep them away while she spooned the small pieces of meat floating in gravy into each bowl, counting them out according to age—Bobby got five pieces, Dan four, Eric three and Herbie two. Mattie would get a bit of the leftover potato and gravy after he'd emptied her breasts.

'Me own boxing crew', Stan boasted to his mates. Stan was proud of his kids when he was in the tent.

Each time he left it took her about six weeks to sort them out and get them back into doing the chores without too much yelling and nagging. 'Dad wouldn't make me do that', Bobby would answer back, and the others would copy him until she got the stick out, chased them round the yard and smacked their legs. 'Well, yer dad's not bloody here is he, so get the bloody wood chopped before I chop

you.' The evenings eventually ran smoothly too. Eat, bed. That's it. No pussyfooting around.

Corrie pulled the sleeping baby off her nipple, carried him to the crib in the corner and put him down. She stepped over the clothes that had been discarded on the floor, pushed open the creaking flywire door and walked heavily to the end of the verandah. She sat, dangling her legs over the side, leaning back against the rough post. An almost-full moon hovered just above the line of trees, washing the undulating land in its silver light, making it look soft, even pretty. But it was not soft or pretty according to her mother. For Lily it was vast and hard and dry and in the harsh light of day it showed its true purpose—to make those who tried to make a living off it dry and shrivelled too.

Lily's favourite story was how, as a lass, she could walk from her house in Upton Grey, along the lanes that edged the fields, to visit her friend in Mapledurwell, be home for dinner, back again to play for the afternoon and home in time for tea. 'Not here', she'd say. 'You walk down a track here and all you get is more paddocks. You'd die of bloody thirst tryin' to get anywhere here.'

Just before Bobby was born Stan had taken Corrie to the Stirlings and they had camped for three days in the bush. At first she was frightened, remembering the warnings of snakes and spiders that would kill you as soon as look at you, which had made her and her sisters stay close to their house and always checking the dunny seat before they sat down. She'd curled her legs as close as she could to her big belly, eagle-eyed, scanning the perimeter of their campsite just in case. Stan'd had to cajole and eventually threaten to leave her on her own before she had agreed to walk with him.

He'd led her through the smoky green bush, stopping now and again to crush a leaf and hold it for her to smell the strong peppermint, or bend the branch of a wattle so when she'd lifted her face to the baubles of yellow to smell, it was vanilla. He'd picked a tiny orchid with mauve-blue fringed flowers and the delicious smell of

chocolate had filled her nostrils. She loved the orchids the best. She had marvelled that such beauty grew from this stony, barren ground and paraded such beautiful colours: pinks, reds, yellows, blues and purples. And the petals—like butterfly wings. Little miracles, she had called them. Her favourite was the one with five petals, alternating pink and white, and in its centre a tiny stemmed cup. When they got back to the house, the vivid green wheatfields had seemed lurid and out of place.

So when Stan had left her years ago and gone back to the tent, her anger was not, as her mother assumed, for being abandoned and left to fend for herself in this empty place that was full of danger—it was because she wanted see more of the country. She wanted to go with him.

Stan had tried to work for Hewie McDonald and do the right thing by her and settle down, but in the end he just couldn't help himself. Lily Gunn had sighed and said, 'Well, what you expect? Look at him, Corrie, all that black hair falling down his forehead, he's got the bloody gypsy in him'.

The first time she saw him he was standing up on the boards with the other boxers in his loose green shorts, that thick black curly hair falling into his eyes as he shadow-boxed the young men gathering in front and a smile on his face so's you couldn't tell if he was laughing at them or with them. While the bell rang and the drum beat and the spruiker cried, 'Pick a fighter, any fighter, your choice, one pound for three rounds, show the girls what yer made of, pick a fighter, any fighter', she watched the boys from the farms sizing him up and flexing their muscles under their best shirts. She listened to them boasting, 'I could lick that skinny bastard', until one of them believed his own dream so much that he stuck up his hand and shouted, 'I'll fight that one', and pointed at the one with the thick black curly hair falling over his eyes who was laughing at him personally and making him look like a chinless wonder in front of his mates.

‘Look at him! C’mon, let’s sneak in the back and watch’, Emmy’d said, grabbing Corrie’s arm. Emmy was just eighteen then, a year and a half older than Corrie, and starting to feel like she was getting old and soon she’d be left on the shelf and have to stay home and look after Mum and Dad and Nell, who was eleven going on six, until they carked it. ‘No way, Em. Dad’ll kill us’, she’d said, pulling her arm away and walking back towards the group of giggling boys gathered around the peep show and keeping a furtive eye out for their mothers who would storm over and drag them away and give them a clip over the ear.

‘What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. I won’t tell if you don’t’, Emmy had called after her, and she’d turned and said, ‘But what if someone sees us and tells’, and Em had said, ‘Don’t be stupid, Corr, they’re gonna be watching the bloody fight, not the crowd’.

They’d taken off their new straw hats with the bunch of cherries on the side and snuck under the tent flap after everyone had gone in. Inside, the floor was covered in sawdust and in the centre was a large square of canvas. The farm boy had already stripped off his shoes and shirt and was standing in the middle, the soft roll of flesh around his belly belying the strong muscle underneath. His mates were crowded around the edge, egging him on and telling him what a great time they were gonna have spending that pound at the pub.

Two women, standing to the side, had smiled at them as they had stood up and brushed the sawdust off their dresses. One had bright red lips and she winked at them and motioned with her hand for them to come and stand in front of her. The man standing next to her had his fingers clasped round the back of her neck, holding her like you hold up a chook just before you’re going to chop its head off. They had stood in front of the women and Emmy had taken her best hanky out of her pocket and put it over her nose to block out the smell of sweat and stale lavender scent and booze. They had both stared straight ahead, pretending not to hear the dirty comments the man was making about Em’s bum and her legs.

That big beefy farm boy had lasted two rounds, but the boxer was just playing with him, stringing him along so's people didn't feel cheated for paying good money to watch someone get knocked out on the first punch. True, he'd let the boy hit him a couple of times, even drew a bit of blood, but it was all show as far as she could see. And at the end when the Ref held up his hand as the winner, it was Corrie he was staring at through the dark curly hair and the blood, not Emmy. Mind you, Emmy had gone white as a sheet and like she was going to keel over and Corrie'd had to put her arm round her waist to stop her falling and drawing attention to them. Not her, though: she was excited. She loved it. She could see the sweat running down his chest and his back and flying off his hair all over the blokes in the front row. She wanted to be in that front row and get some of that sweat on her.

So when Stan went back to the tent, she couldn't blame him. Not really.

Chapter 2

It was stifling in the ticket box. Sweat trickled from Rose's armpits down the sides of her rib cage and the inside of her thighs stuck together. Her head was a long dull ache stretching from her eyes to the back of her neck. A lone blowfly whacked itself against the canvas wall, its frenzied buzzing an improvised solo against the noise of the drum and the bell and the spruikers and the tinny tunes coming from the other joints along the alley.

Up on the boards the boys, in their shiny new gowns, danced and shadow-boxed, staring the mugs down, throwing punches at them and laughing while Maurie rang the bell and cried, 'Welcome to Jackson's Boxing Troupe, ladies and gen'lemen! Come on now, who'll take the gloves, one pound for three rounds, pick a fighter, any fighter, your choice, one pound for three rounds! Who's goin' to put up their hand! Show the girls what yer made of, pick a fighter, any fighter!'

Rose watched their gees pushing and shoving their way into the crowd to put up their hands so Maurie could pick them first before choosing a couple of the mugs desperate to impress their mates or their girl with that pound they've already spent buying another round at the pub or winning a teddy bear on the hoopla.

When the house was set the mugs jostled and elbowed each other at the ticket box.

'Ow much, love?' they shouted into the window, breath hot with the smell of beer.

'Two shillings.'

She peeled the blue tickets off a long roll under the bench next to the money tin.

'Never leave the tickets on the counter,' Maurie'd said, 'the mugs'll nick anything not nailed down'.

When enough tickets had been sold to fill the tent, Rose signalled to Maurie and released the flap, closing the window on the remaining queue. They would have to wait for the next house. She pulled out the key attached to a chain round her neck, locked the tin and tucked the key back in, automatically patting her blouse where it sat between her breasts. She had to edge out of the ticket box sideways since she'd put on all that weight after having Katharine.

She opened the door of the truck, lifted the panel behind the passenger seat and slid the tin underneath. When Maurie'd first shown her where he hid it she'd laughed and said, 'A wonder I didn't get a sore backside sitting on all that money'.

'Why d'you think I chose a girl with a good lot of padding on her', he'd grinned, showing the gold back teeth.

Back at the tent, Rose collected the tickets from the mugs as they pushed and shoved through the narrow door to get in first and claim a place on the edge of the canvas. The pain behind her eyes ratched up a notch or two, pounding, keeping in time with the drum as the boys filed off the boards and climbed down the rickety steps.

'Hold a minute, will you. There's plenty of room for all', she shouted over the noise of the bell Maurie was ringing just above her head. The mugs were restless. They wanted some action. They wanted to see a good fight. They wanted to watch those cocky-as-all-hell blokes up on the boards get a good wallop.

She tied the flap closed and walked around the side of the tent. A couple of kids were trying to sneak in under the canvas.

'Here, you kids! Get out of there!'

They took off in opposite directions. Then one turned, put his hands on his hips and stuck his tongue out at her.

'I'll wash your mouth out if I catch you round here again!'

The boy looked at her for a second then laughed, turned and ran off in the direction of his mate. Normally she'd turn a blind eye if she saw a couple of kids sneaking in, but her throbbing head had made her irritable.

She collected the pile of threadbare towels and a jar of Vaseline from the back of the truck and entered the tent through the rear flap. She put them next to the stool Maurie had in the corner for her to sit on. It was hot inside the tent and the smell of beer and sweat churned her belly.

The first up was Big Bernie, who was in his forties and a bit the worse for wear because of the grog. Although he looked impressive with his broad chest and thick legs, Bernie was not as quick as he used to be. His days of fighting mugs were over. It was strictly with their gees now, an orchestrated show, but even that didn't help when Bernie couldn't raise his arm quickly enough and the gee's blow, instead of making a good slapping sound on the glove, landed on the side of his head.

Maurie had teamed him up with Bill today. He tied the gloves onto Bernie's hands then Bill's. He stood between them and held up their arms.

'Three rounds, ladies and gen'lemen. Each round is a minute unless it's a knock out. If the challenger wins 'e gets the pound, if it's a draw 'e doesn't. Now, move back a bit off the canvas. You too, young ladies. I know yer like to see a bit of muscle but we don't want no-one gettin' hurt. Now, shake 'ands you two.'

Maurie stepped back and blew the whistle.

Rose watched the boys, each with his own little specialities, his little tricks, his signature moves. She watched when they let a mug's punch land even though they could easily dodge it. And she watched when a punch came out of nowhere that sent them reeling or onto their knees. She handed out towels so they could mop their sweating bodies. She watched for when Maurie strapped the thinly padded 'razor blades' on a mug's eager fists. He reckoned there should be a bit of blood at least once in a show, so she kept the Vaseline jar in her hand ready for the boy on the receiving end of the punch that might land on the bony area just above his eye.

But it was always Stan who stole the show. A punch would send him flying backwards in an arc, into the crowd, knocking mugs over like skittles, and the crowd would erupt in cheers and whistles at the big bloke knocking the little darkie for a sixer.

Maurie'd done well with Stan. And he'd stayed all these years, except for a few months after he'd met that girl and got married. Must be five or six years back. She remembered seeing the girl once. She was standing next to the truck looking up at Stan and holding a little china ballerina in the palm of her hand. She was a skinny little thing with long red-blond hair and the sort of white skin that freckles up in summer. Rose had watched as the girl had put the ballerina into the pocket of her dress, then reached up and pulled Stan's head down to her mouth and kissed him, pressing her body against his. Stan had wrapped his arms around her and held her against him for a long time. When they'd finally parted Stan had seen Rose and he'd whispered something to the girl. She'd turned and looked at Rose and smiled, but Rose had been embarrassed at being caught watching them and hadn't smiled back.

When the final house of the day was over and the mugs had left, most to the bar next door, Rose collected the pile of sweaty towels, put them into a bucket and walked across to the shower block. She tipped the towels into a trough and filled a large enamel cup from the tap, drank it quickly and filled it again, this time drinking more slowly as she watched Barb and Joan approach with their buckets.

'That's better. Feel like my head's got a brass band going on inside it.'

'I've got some Bex in the truck if you need it', Joan offered, not looking at her.

'Thanks, but I should be right in a tick.'

'Where were you and Maurie last night? We had a good night at the fire.'

'He took me to the pub for dinner.'

‘You mean you didn’t cook for the mob? Blimey, so did they manage to look after themselves? No-one starved?’ Barb put her bucket under the tap and turned it on.

‘Leave it out, Barb’, Joan attempted lightly.

Not long after Rose had married Maurie, she’d overheard Barb talking to Pat Cochrane. ‘Those boys used to look after themselves and she comes along and cooks and cleans for ’em. She’s too friendly with the blacks, that one.’ Pat had said, ‘She treats them all the same, and you can’t say we haven’t all done better from the crowds’. Barb had said, ‘Some people just rub you up the wrong way and that’s all there is to it’.

Later she’d cried to Maurie, ‘You don’t know what it’s like, you don’t understand how women can be, measuring and weighing you up and judging you, when there’s no men around to keep things light and tell stories that make you laugh’.

‘You’ll get to know ’em soon enough’, he’d said. ‘We all look out for each other. We stick together. We’re family.’

She broke so many rules in those first months. Rules that no one told you about, you just learned by accidentally breaking them. The first time she and Maurie had joined the others round the campfire she’d called out to the boys to come sit with them too. A silence had fallen over the group so thick you could cut it. Maurie had got up and walked over to the truck to get some more beer and called her over to help him, ‘Look love, the boys got their own campfire goin’ and they prefer to stick with their own’.

She’d been so mortified she’d refused to go back and Maurie’d had to tell them she had a headache and had gone to lie down. Later he’d held her and told her not to worry, that she’d get the hang of things. And she had, more or less. Being at the top of the alley helped a lot. Their tent being next to the bar meant she overheard a lot of the men’s intrigues. And when the women went to the toilet

block they'd stop and chat, or she'd hear the latest goings-on as they passed.

'Hey, Joan', Rose shouted over the noise of clanking pipes, 'did you hear what Dot did to poor Jack?' And not waiting for an answer, 'You know how he loves his Devonshire tea. So Dot goes off to the CWA tent and they give her a couple of scones on a paper plate and tell her to help herself to the jam and cream in the bowls on the tables. She puts big dollops on and takes them back to Jack. He takes a mouthful, makes a face and says, "I reckon this cream's off, Dot". She takes the scones back and tells the ladies they shouldn't be selling cream that's off and she wants her money back. One of them dips her finger in the scone and has a taste and says, "That's not cream, it's mayonnaise!"'

Joan laughed her big throaty laugh as if it was the funniest thing in the world and after her coughing fit, which inevitably followed, wiped the tears from her eyes with her forearm.

Rose laughed too, as she bent over the steaming trough and started rubbing a large cake of yellow soap on the towels.

Barb lifted her full bucket onto the floor and winked at Joan, 'I hear Maurie had a couple of chats about ground yesterday?'

Rose turned to face her, her sudsy arms and hands dripping, 'I think you know your Joey did, Barb, so why're you even asking?'

'Just making sure you're all right. No hard feelings. Wouldn't like to think one of my family had upset someone.'

'No need to worry on that score, Barb. It's not likely anything your son'd have to say would upset Maurie.'

Barb picked up her bucket and turned to Joan, 'You coming?'

'Catch you up in a minute.' She had already heard Barb's version, but she wanted to hear Rose's.

'What was that all about?'

Rose gave up trying to wash the towels. She leaned against the trough and folded her arms across her chest.

‘I don’t know what she’s talking about, “a couple of chats”. Joe came over yesterday, shuffling his big feet in the dust how he does, and says “See you got here early and took top ground again”, so Maurie said, “Seems so, would you care for a cup, Joe? Got a billy on the boil.”

‘So I gave him a cup and I could see he was turning over in his mind whether to make an all-out row or back off. Maurie didn’t make any effort at polite conversation neither, just to drive his point home. So Joe finishes his tea and mumbles something about getting a fire going. And Maurie said, “You do that, Joe”. And that was it.’

She looked at Joan, ‘And that ought to be the end of it too’.

‘You don’t think Barb and Artie’s son’s got a right to say what he thinks?’

‘He could be the royal bloody family for all I care.’

Joan laughed, ‘He practically is’.

‘Just because he’s *their* son doesn’t give him the right to act like lord of the bloody manor. It’s first come first served. That’s how it’s always been. If they don’t like it then they ought to get here earlier.’

‘When your show starts it’s not just the pitch outside your tent gets full, the crowd blocks up the whole alley and stops the mugs getting through to the rest of the joints. That’s all my Tommy was saying.’

‘Tommy? Tommy had words with Maurie too?’ Rose scratched at the fabric of her blouse just below her neck. ‘Maurie never told me about that. Is that why you didn’t come by for cuppa yesterday?’

‘I was busy. And I didn’t bring this up. Barb did. Anyway, Rose, best leave it for the men to sort out. Got nothing to do with us.’

Rose looked at Joan and shook her head, and before she could say anything or even think of something to say, Joe’s wife, Stella, marched up and stood at the door with her basket of laundry.

Maurie never interfered in the women’s business. None of the men did. It was one of those unwritten rules. If there was an

argument between the women, the men ignored it and carried on business as usual. The women weren't meant to get involved in the men's business either. That rule didn't work quite so well. There'd been a few times when a couple of the men had had an almighty row and didn't speak to each other for months. And there had been more than a few times they'd settled their differences on the grass. At those times the women would get drawn in. Child-minding would abruptly cease, an unspoken roster for the wash troughs was implemented and monitored so that warring parties did not cross paths, and the evening gatherings around the fire became two groups, with some people firmly fixed in one and others nervously flitting from one to the other. Sometimes old hurts were dredged up and friendships tested and reconfigured, but eventually everyone got over it because you had to keep things going.

'I've left some towels behind', Rose nodded at the trough. She filled the bucket with clean water.

'Come by and get that Bex if you need it.'

'I'll be fine.'

Rose nodded to Stella and clambered down the steps.

'See you at the fire tonight then', Joan called.

She lugged the bucket across the potholed track, water sloshing over the rim. She didn't feel fine at all. It was Joan who had helped her with the ins and outs of Showie life living with the other women, made an effort to include her in the conversations, helped her understand the rules and told her about the plans and intrigues, ructions and even some spectacular blow-ups, and she had learned what not to say to some, what she could say to others and what not to say to anybody. They had spent hours sitting on their upturned buckets in the laundry, swapping their stories. They'd supported each other during their pregnancies when Joan had her second baby, Anna, and Rose was pregnant with Katharine.

By the time Rose got back to the truck the bucket was only half-full and her shoes were soaked and her head was throbbing twice as bad.

It wasn't until after she had fed the boys and Katharine and tucked her into bed that she had the opportunity to talk to Maurie.

'Why didn't you tell me it was Tommy you'd had words with too?'

'It's between me and him. We'll sort it out.'

'And the whole Banks clan it seems.'

'It's nothing for you to worry about, love. You women yak too much about stuff that doesn't concern ya.'

Maurie pulled his pouch of tobacco out of his pocket and rolled a cigarette, 'You coming to the fire?'

'I'm going to bed, I've got a splitting headache.'

Rose scooped up the pile of enamel plates and dropped them into the bucket. She would wash them in the morning.

'Orright, love. I'll have a beer. Won't be long.'

She lay on their mattress in the tent, the sound of the Showies singing 'Show me the way to go home, I'm tired and I wanna go to bed' drifting down the alley. What was Tommy's problem, anyway? Every Royal attracted more people, which meant everyone was making more money. So what if the mugs found it hard to get through the crowd that gathered before each of their shows. It wasn't as if it was all day. All this hoo-ha about ground. They were just jealous.

She turned onto her side and looked at the dark mound of her sleeping daughter. This was Katharine's last Royal. Next year she would start school and live with her grandparents full-time except for the Christmas holidays and the few weekends they were at home between the still-towning.

When she was pregnant Maurie had said, 'The child's goin' to have a proper education, not like some of the other Showie kids, in and out

of schools all over the place, or not even bothering to go. It's not right'.

Maurie had left her just before she was due to give birth and gone north. Rose had not felt that great rush of maternal love she was supposed to feel when Katharine was born. She had been exhausted from the crying and sleeplessness. All she'd wanted to do was get back to the tent, to look after Maurie and the boys and see Joan and the other Showies, not be stuck in a house all on her own. After Maurie returned she was happy when the boys passed her round and played with her so she could get on and plan for the Royal. And when Joan, or one of the other women, had looked after Katharine while she was busy in the tent, she was grateful. Rose's love for her daughter had come slowly, as she had grown into a bright, confident child, so different from the timid girl Rose had been.

The Royal was a special occasion and all the Showie kids came for the week, but Maurie had dug his heels in, 'She'll be staying at school. I won't have her gallavantin' all over the place. She's got to have a good education'.

Chapter 3

‘Ladies and gents, now get ready to feast your eyes on the beautiful, the exotic, the mysterious Fatima! She has danced in the tents of the Bedouin sheiks! In the palaces of Arab princes! And now she is here to perform for you!’ Tommy shouted above the mugs’ heads as they buzzed with anticipation at the thought of seeing a scantily dressed woman. Someone yelled, ‘Yeah, yeah, get on with it then!’

Joan watched Tommy from behind the curtain in his gold shirt, baggy black shiny pants and the specially made shoes with the curled toes and extra-thick soles. He looked very handsome as he strode up and down the creaking boards, throwing his arms out to emphasise the brilliance of Tommy Tiernan’s Entertainment.

‘Be amazed! Be dazzled! Be seduced by the mysteries of the Middle East! Ladies and gen’lemen, Tiernan’s Entertainment presents—the Dance of the Seven Veils!’

‘They just can’t get enough of you’, Tommy said as she climbed the rickety steps onto the stage. She flashed her leg at him and laughed, ‘Yeah, well, with pins like these’. He pinched her on the bum and she went to smack him but he grabbed her wrist and pulled her towards him for a kiss. She turned her face away, ‘Watch me make-up, you’ll smudge it, yer daft bugger’.

When she first started to dance she had spent ages looking at pictures in magazines. She wanted to look like the movie stars who played exotic femme fatales. She practised until she could draw the thick black lines around her eyes, carefully extending them at the outer edge, to colour the lids in with iridescent blue and use the eyebrow pencil to outline her mouth outside the natural shape, filling it with bright red lipstick to make her lips look voluptuous.

Joan looked down at the sea of faces and recognised some of the mugs from the day before. The catcalls and whistles almost drowned out the music even though she'd made sure to turn it up. Tommy was dead right, they couldn't get enough of her and she loved every minute of it. Even after having the girls, she still looked good. Her belly was firm and her legs still shapely. Sure, her breasts weren't quite as full and firm as they had been but a bit of padding stitched into her top had fixed that. And she smiled at the thought of what the wives and girlfriends would think if they could see their blokes now, their eyes popping out of their sockets and their hard-earned cash filling Tommy's leather satchel.

She pouted her bright lips, arched her back so her breasts stuck out and moved her hips in wide circles, left to right, right to left, then in figure eights, holding her rib cage high and her arms out to the side, then to the front, swaying to the sinuous sound of the pipes (her 'snake arms' Tommy called them), repeating the same movements over and over until the drum began its insistent beat. She began to turn, slowly at first, so her skirt and the seven veils started to fan out, then faster and faster until the layers of fabric undulated in an arc of colour around her hips, her shapely legs in full view and her long hair streaming out behind her. She was being careful because yesterday she'd got a splinter in her foot from the rough boards and Tommy hadn't got around to sanding them. As she spun, she caught glimpses of Tommy watching her and she winked at him.

Before she'd had the girls she would climb down the steps and they would make love there, behind the stage, and she would hear the mugs on the other side of the canvas, 'That sheila, she's a looker, ay', 'Yeah, wouldn't mind runnin' me hand over that pair of hocks' and, 'I'd swap me trouble for a bit of strife with 'er any day', and she'd grasp Tommy close against her and smile.

The drums reached a crescendo, then stopped. She could hear the needle scratching as it continued going round and round on the

record. She stood still for a moment, one hand next to her hip and the other next to her breast, before shimmying her hips and breasts just the way Tommy had taught her all those years ago. She stepped forward and took a deep bow. The flash of cleavage before she straightened up, and the veil held across her face always sent another frenzy of whistles and catcalls and foot-stomping through the tent as she stepped back, pulled the curtain across and disappeared down the steps.

Joan took the lid off the jar of Ponds on the upturned apple box, stood in front of the small mirror tied to the tent frame and smeared it over her face. With a piece of towel she wiped the greasy cream off, along with the powder, rouge, lipstick and black eyeliner. As she took off her costume she could hear Tommy arguing with a mug outside the tent, 'There ain't another show, mate, so go home to yer missus and tell her what a fine old time you 'ad with the kids on the carousel, orright. Show's over. Go on, bugger off'. Joan buttoned her blouse and stuck her head out, 'I heard that. Everything all right?' And Tommy shook his head, 'Bloody idiot. Fair dinkum, I was just about to give him one'. She blew him a kiss, 'That's me darling. I better get the girls then'.

Between the trucks and vans she could see the throng of mugs streaming through the alley. There were more joints this year than ever. Not only had the regular Showie families added games and rides, but more heelee whackers had shown up too, adding to the competition amongst the Showies to get as near to the bar as possible but not so close to the Jacksons' tent that you missed out on business when the crowds gathered. Arguments about ground had erupted and, what with the heeles, there was always someone thinking they were losing out. 'Not that we're not doin' better than ever', Tommy'd reassured her after he'd collared Maurie behind the truck that first morning.

She walked up the track behind the joints. Next to one of the Bank's knock-ems she could see a bloke with a shove 'apenny board

on the back of a small tray truck. On the ground next to him was an open suitcase with men's and ladies' watches pinned to black velvet boards. There was a peep show surrounded by group of boys pushing and shoving and elbowing each other out of the way so they could get a glimpse. Next to Joe's joint was a hoopla game with hoops that were too small to fit over the prizes, and further along a dart game Tommy said had bits of metal behind the felt so the darts would bounce off.

Joan patted her pocket, 'Damn, forgot me smokes'.

Inside the tent Tommy was attacking the stage boards with a piece of sandpaper. Joe was standing watching, one hand on his hip, the other waving away the fine dust floating up into his face.

'There's too many complaints, mugs saying they been conned. Taking them for a bigger ride than a Ferris wheel, I reckon. Something's gotta be done.'

'Yeah, I'm fit to bloody that bloke's nose who set up his dodgy hoopla right next to mine. Reckon I'll be lucky to break even this Royal what with that bastard undercutting me a shilling a game.'

'Did you talk to Maurie again today?' Joan interrupted.

'Not yet, I'll get to it.'

Joe sneezed. 'Well, I'll be off then.'

'Righto, mate. See ya later.'

Joan waited until she thought Joe was out of earshot.

'Bloody hell, Tommy, do it soon for goodness sake. I've been avoiding Rose. Me and her have barely talked all week and I wanted to tell her about our new house.'

'I dunno why yer gettin' yer knickers in a twist. It's nothing to do with you women. Just go and have a bloody cup of tea with her, aye. And keep yer big beautiful mouth shut about what's none of yer business. At least Rose doesn't hold a grudge, not like some people. She's a good sort and she works hard.'

Rose did work hard, looking after Maurie and Katharine and those boys, always looking out for them, sewing buttons back on

their shirts, washing their clothes and worrying over what she was cooking. And they looked good too, up on the boards with their matching shorts and gowns she'd made for them.

Joan rolled her eyes, 'Where's me smokes then?'

'I dunno, love. Here, take mine. And don't sit around jawing too long, ay, I'm fit to eat a horse.'

'Well, I might just get one of those nice-looking thoroughbreds from the floats and cook it up for you.'

'Like to see that. Go on, get off will you and let me get on with me work, or you'll get another splinter and I'll never hear the bloody end of it.'

'I'll give you splinters where the sun don't shine, you cheeky bugger.'

Tommy lunged for her, but she ducked, held up her top and shimmied her breasts as she stepped backwards out of the tent.

'Why, you ...' Tommy called.

And Joan stuck her head back in and laughed, 'Later, honey. If you're good'.

Joan was just fifteen when her mother died and her father said she'd have to leave school. She answered an ad in the paper and started work in Barb and Artie Bank's hoopla joint and she'd loved it. She had 'the gift of the gab', as Artie had said when he clapped her on the shoulder at the end of the first day and beamed to Barb, 'By jiminy, she's not just a pretty face, I've never seen someone build a bridge like this girl, she's got it all right, she ropes the mugs in better'n a cowboy lassoing a steer'. Joan had felt so proud and happy.

She had stood in front of the joint and called to the young men, many in uniform, with a girl on their arm, 'C'mon, boys, have a go, three tries to win a prize for your girl. Show her how good your aim is'. And when they missed all three she'd tease them with, 'You can't give up now, what's your girl gonna think, show her a bit of staying

power and win one of these pretty silver horses to put on the sideboard', and the girls would look all moony-eyed at them so they'd fork out another sixpence for three more hoops. And if they won she'd wink and say, 'Have another go and win something lovely for your mum, eh', and sometimes she'd even get them buying more hoops to win something for the girl's mum too.

By the end of the show, Artie, and especially Barb, realised that having a pretty young girl selling hoops to the mugs was much better for business. Joan had filled up that leather bag strung around her waist with coins so many times a day, Barb couldn't wipe the smile off her face. It was all too easy. And they were good to her. And it was through Barb and Artie that she'd met Tommy.

In her breaks she'd wandered round the alley trying the rides and playing the games. She'd stood in the crowd at the boxing tent, the bell ringing and the drum beating and Maurie shouting his spiel from the boards and stirring up the crowds and conning the mugs to put up their hands for a fight to win ten bob. Inside the tent she'd had to stand on tip-toes to see and she'd laughed as one after another the mugs had swaggered onto the canvas mat and after a few short minutes stumbled off, dazed and empty handed.

Best of all, she'd loved the magic show with Merlin. She'd pushed to the front of the crowd and stared at the young man dressed in a gold turban and black shiny pants with a black cape lined with shiny maroon. He was striding back and forth across the stage in front of the tent, swishing his cape back and forwards, and out of its folds came miles of coloured streamers that curled gently on a breeze over the crowd, even though there wasn't a breath of wind. Joan found out later there was a fan set up behind a bit of lattice. She was one of the first into the tent and had to brace herself against the surging crowd to stop being pushed against the stage every time the audience 'oohed' and 'aahed'.

Merlin had twisted his ropes into fantastic knots and with one flick of his wrist they unravelled, sending clouds of sparkling confetti

into the air. He produced bunches of flowers from thin air, a white rabbit from a hat and waved his magic wand over three ducks and made them dance. (Later she learned the ducks were standing on an electric hotplate). But her favourite was the egg trick. 'Ladies and gen'lemen, you've heard the one about the chicken and the egg, well, today we have the dove and the egg; which comes first, the dove or the egg', and on he'd talk while he placed three eggs, real ones, under the cones. She knew they were real, because the third time she went to the show he'd asked her up onto the stage and as he'd handed her an egg he accidentally dropped it. It smashed on the boards, spattering her new white sandals.

With a wave of his wand he lifted each cone and from under each one a white dove emerged and fluttered up into the tent, circled over the enthralled crowd a few times, then landed back on the table. He'd placed the cones over them, waved his wand and swished his cloak a few times, then lifted the cones and there were the three eggs again. She'd laughed and clapped and taken a bow and the audience loved it.

Later, he'd come by Artie's joint and introduced himself and apologised for making a mess on her shoes. He'd asked if she'd like a cup of tea and scone with jam and cream at the marquee. She didn't really like tea or scones, but she said yes because he was tall and very handsome with his fair hair and Clark Gable moustache and T-shirt that showed the tattoos on his arms. He hadn't let her get a word in edgeways. He told her about his war work, driving supplies between Kal and Darwin, and how after the Japs bombed it he helped build lookout towers. He told her he met some good blokes up there, some of the native boys, and he didn't hold with people who put the blacks down, like Barb, though he was quick to add, 'Barb and Artie are good people, don't get me wrong, I've got a lot of time for them'.

He told her he went to Sydney after the War and lived in a place called Kings Cross, and that's where he met all sorts of people who

worked at the Sydney Royal, in little nightclubs and sort of vaudeville shows and where he'd learnt magic from an Indian man. He told her that when he'd made enough money he was going to bring lots of different acts over to Perth every year and have a proper freak show with pinheads, Siamese twins, an ape man and African pygmies, better than anything Perth had ever seen, like the shows they used to have before the war. He told her how the freak shows were the best over in the east and there were so many of them all keen to work. Real freaks, not like Jack Swift's show with the armless man who wore a tight shirt to pin his arms down, or the midget who was just a very short woman sitting on an oversized chair, or the giant who wore platform shoes under his long pants. No, Tommy Tiernan's show was going to be the real deal.

She'd listened and watched how his eyes twinkled when he talked and how his mouth was all lop-sided when he smiled. She'd never met anyone who could talk more than she could, except Tommy Tiernan.

Later, when she told Barb all about him, Barb'd shaken her head, 'He's dreamin'. Those days are gone. People don't want to see that sort of thing now. And he's a bit too fond of a flutter, Joanie, there's other fish in the pond'.

Joan had smiled, said nothing, but thought 'more like a puddle where I come from'.

As Joan picked her way around the potholes on the track between the joints and the trucks, she felt excited about the deposit she and Tommy had just put on the two-bedroom fibro in the sand dunes, not far from Scarborough beach.

She had grown up in a terrace in East Perth. At the front, a narrow verandah had separated it from the footpath. The small backyard was a patchwork of brick and the only thing that grew were the weeds, pushing up defiantly through the cracks each spring and withering again in the baking summer heat. On those searing days, when she was sent outside so she didn't disturb her mother, she

would take her doll into the lean-to that was the laundry and pretend it was her garden. She'd spread a little blanket on the bricks, which became soft green grass, and she would lie down on the blanket and gaze up at the tin roof, which became beautiful blue sky with fluffy white clouds that looked like rabbits or butterflies.

She was going to have forget-me-not borders in her new garden, along with poppies and behind them, roses—pink and yellow and orange and red, as many different colours as she could get. Between the borders would be grass for the girls to play on and she'd get Tommy to make a frame so they could have a tyre swing—a big truck tyre so both girls could sit on it together.

Chapter 4

Corrie filled the three bottles with milk and squeezed the large teats over the tops. The lambs' plaintive bleating by the back porch made her call out, 'It's coming, it's coming' as if they would understand and stop. She handed a bottle each to Bobby, Dan and Eric.

'There, quick now, before they work out they can get up the steps and get inside', and she turned to Herbie, 'You get a turn next time. Go'n watch Bobby and see how he holds the bottle up. That's the way you have to do it too, otherwise it won't get the milk'.

Maureen had brought the three lambs over early that morning, 'Just a couple of weeks, until I finish helping Hew with the baling'. They were the last ones of the season, the stragglers. By the end of the season Corrie had usually looked after at least six or eight newborns whose mothers had either died, rejected them or didn't have enough milk. A few days of feeding up and they would be skitting around the yard with the boys.

She picked up the basket from the chair and, resting it on her belly, walked to the washing line at the back of the shed. She unpegged the nappies, dropping them into the basket, moving it along with her foot as she worked her way from one end to the other. She unpegged the sheets from Eric's bed and balanced them on top of the pile. 'He'll grow out of it', her mother had said when she'd complained he was still wetting his bed every night. That was nearly a year ago. She lugged the basket back to the verandah, sat down on the step and began to fold everything into piles.

After she and Emmy had left the boxing tent, Corrie developed a sudden interest in cakes and preserves. She had left Emmy at the hoopla, cycled into town and bought a box of apples—apples being the only fruit in plentiful supply and cheap at that time of year—and then gone to Maureen MacDonald's to borrow a recipe book. Her

mother had never felt the need to own such a thing, seeing that everyone should know how to cook meat and three veg and jam roly-poly.

Corrie sat in the kitchen reading apple recipes: apple jelly, apple roll, apple dumplings, apple pie, apple pudding, apple upside-down cake, and apple chutney (No. 2). When her mother walked into the kitchen that evening to make the tea, Corrie was stirring a large pot of chutney and fussing over the fact that the apple upside-down cake wasn't rising.

'Never mind, Pet, tell 'em it's apple roly-poly', her mother had said.

The next morning Corrie had put on her best dress, her hat with the cherries and her Sunday gloves and rode the twelve miles into town. She walked proudly into the tent with the sign 'For Home and Country' on the front and presented her creations, which were to be judged by the landowners' starched wives sitting behind the trestle table covered with plates of cream-filled sponges, rich dark fruit cakes iced with pink rosebuds and jars of preserves in all the colours of the autumn leaves that grew in their carefully manicured gardens.

She was unlucky when it came to the judging. Cakes with black edges or sagging middles, or preserves that had caught on the bottom of the saucepan and had an ever-so-slight burnt taste, did not win prizes. However, her enthusiasm for domestic endeavours did not go unnoticed and she received an honourable mention and a pink ribbon. Unfortunately, she had not been there to receive her consolation prize as she was busy enjoying her first prize from the boxing tent.

She and Stan had managed to spend a couple of hours together in the back of the old pick-up truck that was used to haul the tent from one town to the next. She loved his slender hips and legs and the way he straddled her, the way he held his hand over her mouth to stop her laughing when he hit his head on the metal frame

for the canvas covering or to muffle her moaning. She's pretty sure Bobby was conceived in the back of that truck.

After they'd made love Stan lay on his side, his arm supporting her head and his right foot tucked in between hers.

'I started as a gee. Maurie'd keep us hidden in the truck. We wasn't allowed out till the boys was lined up on the board, then we just mix in the crowd. It's all worked out, who fights who, so's the mugs think our boys was a pushover and Maurie gets his line-up for the house. Maurie taught me all the tricks, how to look like I'm landing a hard blow, how to fly back into the crowd. That's me special move, that one. Those mugs love that one. Then he paints on the canvas, 'The Great Ghan', that picture of a big bulky bloke. He puts me up on the boards and all the mugs laugh 'cause I'm a skinny bastard. So they'd all wanna fight me, ay. Maurie, he makes a good living off me', Stan laughed.

'Best thing is seeing places. Up north's best. Up Broome way. Different country up there. You should see them boob trees up there, they make me laugh. They got made upside down, I reckon. And people from all over, Chinamen and Island fellas. Staying places for a week, maybe longer, still-towning, you know, depending on crowds, if there's rodeos or carnivals. And since Rose it's better, much better. Rose always has a good stew on the boil. We sleep out under the stars. I like that.'

Stan told her about the Coolbaroo Club, where you could listen to music and dance and no one cared what colour you were and you didn't have to sneak around and hide and worry about getting a thumping for being with a white girl.

Corrie had daydreamed then, about travelling and seeing a big city like Perth and up north where there were funny boob trees and beaches with warm water to paddle in.

She'd turned to him and said, 'Take me with you when you go. I wanna go dancing at that club. I don't want you to go dancing there without me, promise me? And I wanna see all them other places too

and I want you to promise me'. And he'd laughed and said, 'I promise'.

Later, after they'd slipped under the side of the canvas and swung down to the ground, Stan had made her close her eyes and hold out her hand. He put a little china ballerina in her outstretched palm. She'd held it up and admired the pretty dress then put it into her pocket. Then she'd kissed him and pressed against him. No one had ever bought her pretty things before. When she got home Corrie put the ballerina in a cardboard box under her bed. When no one was around she'd take it out and lie on her bed, holding it tight in her palm, and she'd remember the heat of Stan's skin against hers and dream about a new life.

Mattie had whinged on and off all day, his cheeks were flushed and the spittle running down his chin had caused an angry rash. After the older children had been fed and washed, Corrie herded them into the bedroom and shut the door on them and their protests. She stacked the dishes in the sink, put the jam and bread in the cupboard, dragged the tin tub onto the back porch and upended it, the water splashing onto the dusty earth.

As she passed the thin door on her way to sit on the verandah, she could hear Bobby teasing Dan and him crying.

'Go to sleep! Or I'll come in there with the wooden spoon, then you'll both have somethin' to cry about!'

This was the time in the day she looked forward to. The precious minutes after the older children were in bed and before the baby awoke for his evening feed. The light from the moon came and went as clouds scudded across the night sky. A sudden gust of wind billowed her dress, exposing her swollen belly to the empty paddocks before dropping it onto her thighs.

Mattie stirred and started to whimper. Corrie lifted her legs and swung them round onto the verandah, rolled onto her hands and knees and used the post to help pull herself up. Soon, she'd have to

wean him like she had the others, to give herself a few weeks break before this next one arrived. She lifted Mattie out of the cot and carried him over to the chair by the window so she could watch the night sky while he emptied her breasts.

When the show ended and the boxing tent was packed up and moved on to the next town, Stan had stayed behind. Hew MacDonald gave him work grubbing and mending fences and doing some shearing. And with a bit of prompting from Maureen, Hew said he could move into the little four-roomed shack that was the original house his father had built. He had given Stan some canvas to stretch over the wall where the boards were missing until he had time to fix it.

It used to have a creek out the back, rapid flowing in winter and providing a couple of cool green swimming holes in summer, but that was before Hew finished what his father had started—clearing the trees to make way for endless wheatfields. Then, after heavy rain, great gushes of water would course through the culvert, taking more of the bank with it, gouging an ever-deepening ragged scar into the earth. But there'd been no rain like that for years.

In those first few months, when she snuck over to the shack they would pile the dusty blankets in the front room so they could hear if someone came up the track. It was then, after making love, Stan would tell her his story.

He had grown up in Albany with a foster family. He'd been told his mother had died. When he was thirteen one of the kids at school had got him behind the shelter shed and given him a wallop and told him he should stop acting like a snot-nosed whitey 'cause he was just a no-good darky bastard. Stan busted his nose and got expelled.

'I got sent away to a home. Me job was to cut the wood for the old people. They lived outside the fence. One old lady used to scare me. She'd just sit outside her hut and stare straight ahead and never

say nothing. She had watery eyes. Always running down her wrinkled old cheeks. I thought she was blind. Then one day she says, "You a Nyungar, from the Goreng people, from the south. Your mother, she's living in Mt Barker camp now".

'I didn't say nothing. Not to her, not to anyone. Two days later I was hitching a ride on a truck heading east. I got work clearing and anything I could get really. With all the young fellas off at the war there was work for us blackfellas.

'Some nights was good round the fire in the town camps. I remember one old bloke. Albert, that was his name, he played the accordion and people sang along and danced. They passed on news about so-and-so and what camp they was in. I always kept to meself pretty much and if anybody asked I'd just say I was from up north. If I saw one of those women looking at me funny I'd move off on me own for a bit and find a new town and a different mob. Then the soldiers come back and there was no work for the likes of me.

'Coupla years ago I was at the Albany show. I was working down that way then, collecting sandalwood. I put me hand up for a fight. I got belted by that bloke but the owner asked if I wanted to be a boxer. That was Maurie.'

Corrie would lie still listening to him, and feeling the baby moving inside her. She learned to know the differences in his silences too, the ones where he was just gathering his thoughts to continue and the ones that said he'd done enough talking. When he'd finished telling his story she had whispered, 'I love you, Stan. I don't care what you are'. Then after a few minutes, as if she had resolved something in her own mind to her satisfaction she'd said, 'If everyone thinks you're a Ghan we'll just let them keep on thinking it. Anyway, we'll save some money and then we'll leave here'.

They kept their relationship a secret from everyone except Emmy, who had willingly, but sometimes with a tinge of envy, provided alibis, excuses and downright lies to protect her sister.

When no one else seemed to notice her dress tightening around her waist, Maureen MacDonald's eyes would rest there just a few seconds too long and Corrie would feel the redness creep up her neck and flush her cheeks and she knew it was Maureen who had told her mother.

Lily Gunn got all formal when she told Corrie's father. She'd sat him down at the kitchen table and poured him a beer. Em reckoned she was scared of losing another daughter if she didn't handle it right, what with Nell being slow in the head and Junie being the outcast. 'Slut', Herb Gunn had called Junie. She was fourteen and found drunk wandering down the main street at night and crying rape but when the doctor examined her he told Herb, 'Well, it isn't the first time'. Junie'd left home not long after that and gone to Albany.

'Herbert,' her mother had said, 'Herbert, I've got something to tell you and I don't want you getting upset'.

She only called him Herbert when she was working at getting him out of a mood— 'he's got the knock' she would tell the girls as she'd shoo them into the bedroom—so he was looking confused, as he was still feeling chirpy after the two-up game at the pub.

'Coralyn is with child, and she needs to get married soon. Very soon.'

Emmy and Corrie, hiding behind the kitchen door, just about choked with laughter hearing her talk like that, even though they knew this might be Corrie's last night at home.

But her father hadn't made her pack a few clothes and driven her to the train station like he had with Junie. He had shrugged, 'I s'pose it's that black bastard', he'd said and skulled his glass of beer.

She and Stan had married in the church in town, with Lily, Em and Maureen as witnesses. Her father spent the day in the pub. Not only could Herb Gunn not stomach the thought of a 'black bastard' for a son-in-law, he couldn't abide Maureen or Hew MacDonald. Hew's offers of a tractor when his broke down were judged as Hew rubbing Herb's face in his failures as a farmer. Acts of friendship on

Maureen's part, like bringing over a bunch of silverbeet from her garden, were seen as unwelcome charity and pushed to the side of his plate.

After the brief ceremony, Maureen drove them back to the farm and waited while Corrie packed her few belongings into the apple box and her mother and Em made some sandwiches for them. Stan loaded the crate and Corrie's bicycle into the truck and Maureen drove them the four miles to the little timber shack.

Corrie had tied her hair up with a scarf, covered her dress with an apron and, with Maureen's help, scrubbed and swept the four rooms until the only dirt that had temporary residence was on the bottom of Stan's boots or blew in through the cracks in the walls or the gaps under the doors. Then she'd unpacked the apple box and put the little ballerina on the window sill beside their bed.

In the evenings she had sat under the lamp and tried to stitch the pink-and-white orchids she remembered from their trip to the Stirlings onto the borders of plain white matinee jackets.

'That's the funniest-looking flower I've ever seen!' Em had said. 'Anyway, what if it's a boy?'

'Ma never had boys and I can't see me having them either. I wouldn't know what to do with boys', she'd said.

Corrie hadn't seen Em for years now. She had eventually married Stu Johnson, one of those stocky farm boys with thighs like pork sausages and necks thick enough to harness into a bullock's yoke. He managed the Larkin place twenty-five miles the other side of town and it was well known he wasn't none too happy about having a blackfella for a brother-in-law. The joke around the schoolyard gate was that Em was as barren as the paddocks Stu ploughed and sowed every year. 'P'raps when the rain comes and we can get some wheat growing, Em's seeds'll finally sprout too', Brenda Davis, the secretary of the fundraising committee, sniggered.

Poor Emmy. Corrie would give her a couple of hers; at least, lend them to her on those days when they were all squabbling and

bawling and driving her crazy, except Stu wasn't none too happy about having a mob of black-haired mongrel nephews either.

Mattie had fallen asleep stuck fast to her nipple. She gently worked her finger at the corner of his mouth to release it, which startled him, his little hands flying into the air and shaking like he was sparring an imaginary opponent. He grizzled, somewhere between wake and sleep. 'Shush now, sshh now', she whispered, patting his back. She knew she should change him, but the thought of waking him and struggling out of the chair was too much, so she eased him down beside her onto the seat. 'Sssh now, sshh now.'

She leaned her head against the back of the chair. 'Maybe this one'll be a girl', she thought.

Chapter 5

While the men tied the smothers across the front of the joints, the women stood around the trestle tables buttering bread, chopping up cabbages and grating carrots. Rose filled a large tub with chunks of ice and bottles of beer. The heelies had packed up and gone as soon as the last mug had been herded through the gates.

“Ere, is that your Artie? Sounds worse than a sailor man!” Joan called in mock shock as a string of swearwords came from the front of the Banks’s dart joint.

‘Should I wash his mouth out?’

Rose laughed, imagining Barb, pint-sized, standing on a chair holding six-foot-four Artie by the scruff of his thick, red neck and vigorously rubbing a bar of soap on his tongue the same way she scrubbed her smalls.

Then Colleen piped up, ‘We made so much this Royal, next year we’ll have enough warbs so our men don’t have to do the smothers or pull-downs no more’. Colleen always said ‘our men’ and ‘her man’ like she’d won Artie jnr on the hoopla. In a way she had. Colleen had taken Joan’s place but she hadn’t had quite the same gift of the gab. By the time Artie had decided to let her go and find someone else, it was too late. Artie jnr had fallen for her and so she joined the Banks clan.

Barb shook her head, because discussing the Banks’ family finances was strictly forbidden. Colleen never quite got the family rules and was treated with the same indulgent embarrassment as children who say things adults would like to say but don’t.

‘It’s only ’cause Colleen’s married to Barb’s favourite she gets away with it’, Rose winked at Joan.

‘Foot-in-mouth disease I call it’, Joan laughed, as she watched Barb glaring at Colleen.

Rose wiped her hands on her dress and began to shovel the piles of cabbage Joan had shredded into bowls, 'This business about ground ... '

'Forget it. No hard feelings, right. Like I said, leave it to the men.'

'I've hardly seen you all week.'

'I know, I've been busy,' Joan looked at Rose and smiled, 'chasing Tommy to sign papers for our new house'.

'A house! That's wonderful! Where is it? Tell me all about it.'

'It's in Scarborough. Two bedrooms and a sort of room off the back Tommy's going to have for his office. And there's an old bungalow that'll need a few repairs. With a bit of luck we'll move in after Christmas.'

'You won't know yourself! I'm really happy for you.' Rose emptied a jar of mayonnaise into the bowl of cabbage and stirred it with a large wooden spoon. Joan would never usually have kept news like that to herself for a whole week. She looked at Joan's beaming smile, 'There's something else isn't there. What is it?'

'Bloody hell, not much gets past you, Rose Jackson,' Joan laughed. 'Well, next Royal there'll be the bigger and better Tiernans' Entertainment. A proper show – freaks, novelty acts – you name it, we'll have it. We'll be giving Jack and Dot a run for their money. I'll be doing the managing. Making sure everything runs smoothly.'

Rose emptied her glass. How could Tommy have a go at Maurie about ground when he's doing so well?

She smiled, 'So, Joan Tiernan, Manager, Tiernans' Entertainment. Has a ring to it. No more dancing then?'

'Oh yes, I'll still do that. We'll only have to bring over one act, maybe two, depending how much they are, if I'm still in the show.' Joan scooped up a pile of coleslaw with her fingers and shoved it into her mouth. She wanted to change the subject.

‘Big changes for you too, what with Katharine off to school. You’ll miss her. *We’ll* miss her too, me and the girls. She’s always got a kiss and a hug for her Auntie Joan.’

‘Maurie doesn’t want her going to different schools.’

‘You’ve said. At least we’ll see her at the Royal, that’s something.’

‘I can’t see Maurie agreeing to that.’ Rose scratched her chest.

‘I need a smoke. Want one?’ Rose was such a yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir. Joan’d never let Tommy tell her what to do with her girls.

Before Rose could answer, a mob of Showie kids came racing along the alley, laughing excitedly, and flopped down on the rugs. They’d finished their annual hunt for the coins, and if they were lucky, the notes that had been lost along the alley from pockets and sweaty palms. They emptied their booty and noisily divided up the spoils amongst themselves, under the watchful eyes of the women to make sure there was no cribbing of extra by the bigger kids. It was all strictly equal whether they were four or fourteen.

The women put sausages onto slices of bread with spoonfuls of coleslaw and a squeeze of tomato sauce and handed them out to the kids. The men arrived and the ritual was repeated and glasses were filled. Between mouthfuls of food and gulps of beer the men made cautious comments about their successes, without giving too much away. Nobody wanted to attract the old green-eyed monster.

Jack Swift drained his glass, handed it to Dot to refill, and cleared his throat.

‘Oi, Snowy! Good to see yer stickin’ to the beer, eh!’

Rose stifled a yawn. She’d heard Maurie’s version and Maurie telling Artie a different version of the latest story about Peg and Snowy Flannery. The Flannerys had decided they needed help this year for their darts and knock-em-downs and got Peg’s nephew Kev to be their warb. She poured herself another glass of beer and sat down on a blanket as Jack launched in on his version.

'Young Kev's been on the knock-ems about five hours and Snowy's off doing something or other and taking longer than he should've as usual, and poor Kev's got the call of nature bad. So he's holdin' on and holdin' on till he can't hold on no longer and does his business in one of the spare bottles and puts it under the counter. He figures as soon as Snowy gets back he'll slip off and empty it and put it back without Snowy noticin'.

'Snowy finally appears and by then the mugs are three deep with wailing nippers all wanting their turn right now, so Kev can't get away. Next minute Snowy's kicked the bottle over. 'Course he can tell by the smell what it is and he's cursing the boy and yelling at him to go get some water and a cloth and clean it up. Poor Kev's the colour of beetroot and trying to explain and Snowy's yelling, "If ya don't shut up and get that cleaned up in two secs I'm gonna rub yer nose in it just like I do when the bloody dog does his business where he shouldn't".

'Later we're havin' a few wooblies at the bar and the story gets round that old Snowy's seen this half-bottle of Passiona under the counter and taken a swig. We're having a bit of a laugh about it and Snowy comes storming over, yelling it's a filthy lie, so Harry pipes up, "C'mon, mate, it prob'ly tasted better'n this piss-weak beer Denny's serving."

Snowy shouted from the other end of the table, 'Oi, Swifty, wanna bit of cream on yer salad, seeings yer like the mayo on yer scones?' And everyone stopped laughing at Snowy and laughed at Jack.

Barb broke in, 'I heard a mug say to his missus, "Do ya want to go for Devonshire tea now, love?" And she says, "Well, all right, but just so long as I can have some scones and jam with me tea"'.

Pat told them about a woman on the chair-o-plane who'd used her hat to catch her kid's chunder, then had the nerve to blame Pat for making her kid throw up and wanted her money back. And soon all the stories of this Royal were told, then old stories were recounted

with new twists while the empty bottles piled up and kids dropped like flies onto any spare corner of rug to fall asleep with bellies full of snags and ice-cream.

Rose had stopped listening. She couldn't explain to Joan. She couldn't tell her why it was hard to go against Maurie. He was good to her. They made a good team. She wasn't beautiful like Joan.

The day Maurie had taken her to Luna Park, it had been late when he'd dropped her at home. She'd let herself in by the back door so not to wake her parents, but as she'd tiptoed down the hall, she saw the light on in the front room. She'd been about to open the door, to tell them Maurie had made a marriage proposal of sorts, to ask their advice, but something her mother was saying made her fingers close tight on the handle and she had stood in the dark listening.

'... I suppose him being an older man, he might not mind the scar.' Her scar. Rose had never known a time it wasn't there and she was never allowed to forget it, with her mother was always reminding her to do up the top button on her blouse.

She had tiptoed down the hall to her room and stood, pressed against the door, until she heard her parents' bedroom door close. She had taken off her clothes. Instead of slipping her nightie over her head she had flicked the switch on, stood in front of the mirror and examined the scar in the unkind yellow light. It started just below the base of her neck and fanned down across her left breast. She ran her fingers over the ropey skin. It felt hard and smooth and cool. She imagined Maurie tracing the ropey skin with his fingers and putting his lips against its coolness. She decided then that she was going to marry him.

On the Saturday afternoon after that night, when her parents thought she was visiting friends, Rose had gone to Maurie's gym in East Perth where he trained the new boxers. She had expected a big place filled with equipment and a boxing ring. She had opened the door and walked into a small, dingy room with a row of high, narrow,

dirty windows along the back wall, a concrete floor with a piece of canvas in the middle, and a couple of punching bags hanging from ropes attached to rusty metal hooks in the ceiling.

She had sat and watched, distracted and impatient, as Maurie showed a boy, who didn't look more than sixteen or seventeen, how to twist his head from a punch that didn't quite connect and slap his gloves together at the same time to make it appear as if he had been hit very hard. After a few minutes she had wandered into the small room at the side that Maurie used as an office. In the corner, streamers of dusty cobwebs floated in the draft of air that came through a triangle of missing window. Rose looked under the desk. The missing piece of glass was lying in the corner. The table was covered in papers and cups that needed to be washed. She wandered back into the gym and sat on the chair facing the grubby windows.

After the boy had left, Maurie made her a shandy and sat in a chair opposite her. She could see that he was about to tell her a story so she put her glass down on the floor and stood in front of him. She bent over and kissed him. It was a long, insistent kiss. Then she straightened up, undid the buttons on her blouse and let it fall to the floor. She slipped the straps of her petticoat off her arms, reached behind, unclasped her bra and let it drop.

She had stepped back a pace so she could see Maurie's face more clearly in the dull light. 'It's from a pot of boiling water. I don't remember it, but my mother told me I pulled the pot off the stove. She said I was in hospital for weeks. It got infected, that's why it looks like this.' He had reached out and run his hand gently across the ropey skin. 'It doesn't matter,' he'd said, 'I think you're a beautiful girl. You're my kind of girl'. Then something had made her turn and she'd seen a woman standing in the doorway. It was just a split second. Then the woman had stepped back and shut the door.

Maurie had made love to her and it had hurt and she was glad it hurt because it made her feel alive. Later, when she'd put her blouse back on, she did up all the buttons.

Chapter 6

As soon as they left Perth the weather became unpredictable. Clear sunny skies were punctuated by dark cloud, gusty winds and squalls of heavy rain. In every town Rose watched the mugs scurry home dragging tearful, empty-handed children by their coat sleeves while the Showies huddled, miserable, in their joints until closing time, then disappeared into their tents or trucks with little more than a cursory 'hello'. Some kept packing up early and leaving for the next town hoping to outrun the bad weather, but every town was the same as the last. Rose hadn't bothered to wash the towels, re-using the ones she could with the rest collecting in the truck in a smelly, damp pile.

A few miles outside Albany, their truck slid onto the soft shoulder of the road and sank into the mud. It took Maurie and the boys two hours of digging under the wheel and laying branches in the hole to get some traction before they could get it out. By then they were soaking wet, cold, covered in mud and Maurie was in a foul temper.

As they pulled into the showgrounds, the banks of clouds that had rolled in all morning had settled into a dove-grey blanket of steady rain. After erecting the tents, Maurie and the boys went to clean up and put on dry clothes while Rose, her jacket buttoned up and a scarf wedged around her neck, huddled in the tent with Katharine, until it was time to sell tickets. Her handkerchief was already sodden and her nose was sore and chafed. A summer cold, Maurie had said, when he'd got up in the night to get aspirin for her headache. 'It feels more like the bloody flu,' she said, when she had struggled out of bed that morning, her hips aching from the damp.

As she sat in the ticket box, Rose could hear the sound of indifferent spruiking and forlorn tunes falling into the puddles along with the rain. Maurie had kept the boys inside the tent, dispensed

with the drum and was ringing the bell, but even that was muffled by the rain. If it kept up like this those that reckoned they'd broken even would be lying.

Joan strode over to the booth just as Rose was locking the tin. Although she couldn't see her face, she knew it was Joan by her unmistakable red umbrella.

'You look like a dog's breakfast. How's this bloody weather? You wouldn't wish it on a blackfellas' camp. Tommy's in a foul mood and the girls are skulking around with their bloody chins dragging on the ground like it's the end of the world. You doing the house?'

'No, Maurie reckons my sneezing and coughing's putting everyone off.'

'I'll take Katharine so you can rest. She can stay with the girls while I do the show.'

'That'd be good. Got to get another hanky. This one's had it.'

They picked their way as quickly as they could across the muddy track.

'I've been thinking about Katharine and school and everything, and I was thinking that we can have her at our place some weekends while you're away. The girls'd love it and I'm sure Katharine would too. What do you think?'

Rose was nodding. Joan's words felt like balm.

'Would you really? You promise?'

'I just said so, didn't I. We'd love to have her. You just have to tell Maurie and your parents.'

'Yes, yes, of course. I'm sure they'll think it's a good thing.'

'Well, that's settled then', Joan smiled. 'Got some more good news. I'm pregnant! Finally! Tommy's over the moon. I haven't told the girls yet.'

'That is such good news! New house, new show, and a baby. You won't know yourself!'

'It's exciting, that's for bloody sure. I reckon it'll be a boy. I can feel it in me waters', Joan laughed.

‘The way things are going for you, I’m sure you’re right. What’s that saying, everything’s coming up roses?’

‘I dunno. Colleen’d prob’ly say I’m pushing up daisies’, Joan giggled.

It was as cold inside the tent as outside but at least it was dry. Katharine was sound asleep, a little mound of blankets on the mattress. Rose picked up a clean handkerchief from the stack beside the mattress just as a fit of sneezing got her.

‘You started packing?’

‘No. Spent most of the week helping Barb organise all the new plush. Artie got some good stuff from the customs sheds, some nice china dogs and little vases. I wouldn’t mind one of them. Maybe I’ll give Lou and Anna a bit of a hint. Tommy takes them Christmas shopping and every year I get hankies and bath salts. I hate baths’, she laughed.

‘I can come over next week and give you a hand.’

‘It’s okay. Barb, Nancy and Colleen are coming over. Payback for me helping them.’

Rose coughed. With her hand over her mouth she said, ‘Well, then maybe we’ll catch up in January’.

Joan moved over to the door of the tent and stood watching Rose grope for the handkerchief in her sleeve. She wanted to say, ‘You should have another baby, Rose. It’s not good for Katharine to be an only child’, but she said, ‘Wait and see. I better go. Calm Tommy down before he breaks something. Like some mug’s nose. You should get to bed and have a sleep. You look terrible’. Joan turned to go, looked back over her shoulder and grinned, ‘Send Katharine over when she wakes’.

As Rose watched her stride away, she knew Joan was right. From now on she would leave the arguments about ground to the men.

A sudden gust of wind blew the red umbrella inside out and she heard a loud ‘bloody hell’ as it sailed into the branches of a tree.

Even the lousy weather and just losing her favourite umbrella couldn't dampen Joan's spirits. She and Tommy finally had their own house, a new show starting next year, and new baby coming. Good things come in threes. Joan wondered if her wish for this baby to be a boy was part of the third good thing or whether it was a fourth good thing. She decided it was part of the third, that way it was guaranteed to be a boy. A son for Tommy, someone to hand the business on to. If it wasn't so muddy she'd skip back to the tent.

Artie had asked Joan to stay on after her first Royal and come on the south run. She'd been so excited, she'd said yes immediately. Artie had said, 'I think we ought to ask yer father first, don't you? Me and Barb'll have a talk with him, just so's he knows we're all above board'. It turned out her father thought it was a fine idea.

They'd set off south, travelling to the small towns tucked away in the misty forests and clinging to the wild coast. Tommy had been there too, with his magic show. Most of all she'd loved the evenings when they'd all gather round a fire and tell stories and Artie would bring out his accordion and they'd sing 'Waltzing Matilda' and Barb would be cajoled to sing, and after enough beers she would sing 'Sweet Molly Malone' and it would bring tears to Joan's eyes because she sang it so beautifully and who'd've thought Barb had the voice of an angel.

Later, when everyone else was getting ready for bed, she had moved in close to the fire and Tommy told her about the dances the girls did in the sideshows over east. 'I seen girls with snakes coiled around them and ones with beautiful jewelled costumes and veils. Dancers and freaks, that was what people want to see, and there's money to be made, lots of it.' He told her he could teach her to do the dance with the veils because he could see she had talent and she should use it, not waste her time on a hoopla.

When they got back to Perth she told Artie and Barb she wanted to work with Tommy. 'He's going to teach me to be a dancer', she'd said all breathless with excitement and eyes bright with ambition. 'Well, business is business I s'pose', Artie had said, looking at Barb, 'Can't say young Tommy doesn't know a good thing when he sees it, but just so yer know, Joanie, we'll always look out for yer'.

Artie had driven her home and she'd felt guilty, then, thinking her father was all alone and missing her. But she needn't have worried at all because he'd married the widow with four kids who lived across the street and they'd moved in. She didn't even have a room any more.

She'd collected her clothes, which had been put in a pile in the lean-to out the back, and moved in with Barb and Artie near Scarborough Beach, not far from the house she and Tommy were buying. 'It'll be the sleepout on the verandah. Stew and Joey can move in with Artie jnr and Billy.' Joan had been so grateful she'd wrapped her arms around Barb and given her the biggest hug.

Joan became like a second mother to Lorna and Susie and she loved them. She loved being in a big family with all its rough-and-tumble and laughter and rows. She had been like an only child. Her half-brother had left home to join the merchant navy when she was just a couple of years old, and her mother had been ill as long as she could remember. She liked Stewart the best. He was the peacemaker in the games of cricket or cards when the other children bickered and fought. He was very like his father. Artie was taciturn and calm in the storms that gathered around Barb and swept through the household, leaving broken china and slammed doors in their wake.

She loved that Barb and Artie looked out for her. She loved that because of them, she had met Tommy. Tommy had only told her months later that Artie had gone to see him and said if he did the wrong thing he'd shoot him. Tommy didn't tell her that he had teased Artie and said, 'So you're a bit in love with her too are ya?' and Artie

had given him a punch full in the belly and knocked the breath right out of him.

The wind had upped the ante and the side of the tent was blown so far into the centre Rose had bundled Katherine up and decamped to sit in the truck. The rain was blowing almost horizontally across the grounds. It was a relentless, freeze-you-to-the-bone kind of wind that no amount of scarves, woollen jumpers or jackets could stop the hunching of shoulders against. The few brave mugs who'd ventured forth were clearing out in the face of such meteorological opposition to having fun. Lucky bastards got to go home and get cosy.

She watched members of the Banks, Flannery and Cochrane families running after kewpie dolls that had detached from the walls of joints and were cartwheeling across the oval. Others were busily dismantling the chair-o-plane and swing boats, which were about to become airborne, and some were desperately trying to prop up the carousel, which was lurching drunkenly into the mud. Everyone else was securing tent ropes, tying down the canvas walls that had blown free from their frames and trying to lace the smothers on to the joints before what was left of their plush became a sodden mess.

Some, the smart ones, had already packed up before the worst of the weather had hit, and disappeared to their favourite pub for the afternoon to keep warm and drown their financial woes in numerous glasses of beer. By four o'clock Sideshow Alley was a ghost town.

The weather did not improve over the following days, and each day a few more sodden joints were packed away. On Thursday, Rose watched from the ticket box as the Tiernans' truck slipped and slid across the waterlogged grounds and out the gate. On Saturday, Maurie paid off the boys who would make their way home from Albany. The rest of them bundled into the back of the truck and they drove to Perth. Those Showies who had stuck it out to the end agreed it was the worst run they'd ever had, and everyone was

quietly calculating their losses against the profits they had made at the Perth show.

Chapter 7

After Bobby, Stan'd been on the road when all the other kids were born and this time was no different. Two weeks before Christmas a summer storm and Corrie's waters broke, deluging the dusty yard and the kitchen floor respectively. The contractions were strong and continuous as she stood on the verandah yelling to Bobby, 'Get to Granny's and tell 'er to come here quick', over the din of rain on the tin roof and squealing kids.

This baby was in a rush to start the business of living.

By the time her mother arrived, Corrie was on all fours on the bedroom floor with the baby's head already out; a sight Bobby would never forget, as his Gran pushed him out of the room and slammed the door.

'Jesus, Corrie, what you doin' on the floor? Never mind, never mind.'

She grabbed the head just as Corrie gave a great grunting push and a little girl slithered into the world.

'It's a girl, Corrie. You've got a little girl!'

Corrie craned her head around and smiled. The baby gave a half-hearted cry and then seemed to decide that bawling would not get her what she wanted, so she stuck her mucousy, bloody little fist into her mouth instead. Lily Gunn tied and cut the cord, wrapped her in a towel and put her on the bed just in time to see the placenta slide out and plop onto the sheet she'd shoved between her daughter's legs. She'd never got used to the stink of placenta and amniotic fluid. 'C'mon now, girly, get up on the bed and hold your baby while I clean up this mess', she said, holding a towel over her nose.

In an hour the boys were standing around the bed staring at the baby.

‘Wot’s a sister for?’ Herbie asked, his black curls dripping rain onto the baby’s head. ‘They don’t have willies’, Bobby said helpfully.

At morning recess the next day, Bobby told his best friend where babies came from. By lunchtime he had half a dozen boys standing in a circle behind the shelter shed while he was down on all fours demonstrating how babies come out of bottoms. The boys had laughed and elbowed each other. ‘So ’ow much poo did you ’ave on ya?’ ‘Aw, you was covered in shit an’ ya still are.’ ‘Shithead, shithead.’ ‘An’ you’re full o’ shit too, anyhow, my ma says babies come out yer tummy so there.’

At afternoon recess Bobby had avoided his friends by helping the teacher clean the sums off the blackboard. He’d felt guilty that perhaps he had betrayed something secret about his mother. Still, feeling guilty was better than the shock he’d felt when he saw her on the floor with that thing sticking out of her. Maybe Paddy McDermott was right and babies do come out of women’s stomachs and what he saw wasn’t a baby at all, but some bit of her guts that had squeezed out as she was trying to push the baby out. It sure as hell didn’t look like the little baby sister Granny Lil had shown them an hour or so later.

Bobby had breathed a secret sigh of relief when his Mum said he didn’t have to go to school before the summer holidays. Hopefully, by the time he saw his classmates again, they would have filed away or forgotten all about bums and babies and moved on to the next piece of the jigsaw that was their education. Anyway, whatever they learnt at lunchtime was far more interesting than anything Miss Flanagan had to teach them, that’s for sure.

The unseasonal rain settled into a steady thrumming on the tin roof, making it difficult to talk in a normal voice. Eric barely left the baby’s side. He sat and watched her while she slept, noting all wind smiles, attempts to put fists in mouth, stretches and twitches and reported them faithfully to Corrie in a running commentary and a never-ending series of ‘why’ questions.

Then the rain stopped as suddenly as it had started, and the heavy grey clouds retreated and milled around on the western horizon. By the time Stan opened the creaking flywire door and threw his bag on the floor three days later, Corrie's voice was hoarse.

'It's a girl! And girl's don't have willies!' Eric explained, climbing onto the bed and inserting himself between his parents.

Stan laughed, 'True, ay? What's her name then?'

Eric climbed onto his lap, 'Baby'.

Bobby said, in the same tone of voice that Miss Flanagan used when she was correcting one of her students, 'She's called a baby, but that's not her name, ya dill'.

Eric started to cry and said, 'She *is* called Baby, isn't she, Ma'.

Corrie, ignoring the brewing row, had husked, 'I haven't given her one yet, I was waitin' for you'.

Stan got up and bent over the crib. He looked at the baby with its milk-white skin and fuzz of blonde hair. 'What about Grace?' he said after a bit, 'after Lake Grace. I reckon them lakes'll be full after all this rain, and seein' she was born in it'.

So the baby was named Grace Lily Cooper.

When Corrie changed her and bathed her that evening, Eric was again standing up on the kitchen chair wanting to have a turn and repeating the same questions he'd asked five minutes ago.

In the other room Stan was wrestling with the older boys, ducking and weaving as they launched themselves at his legs and trying to pull him over. He grabbed each one in turn and tossed them into the air, catching them just before they hit the floor, until Corrie yelled from the kitchen, 'That's enough now, get to bed all of ya', and Bobby yelled, 'No! Not yet, we're playing,' and under his breath, 'spoilsport.'

'I heard that! And I'm getting the stick right now!'

Stan stood in the doorway, 'Let 'em be, Corr. I hardly see 'em'.

She snapped, 'Well, whose fault is that then?'

‘Geez, orright, no need to jump down me throat’, he snapped back and turned to the kids, ‘Go on, then. Get ta bed now, ay’. He remembered how moody she was every time she dropped another kid. There were choruses of, ‘Do we have to? It’s not fair’ and ‘We never have any fun’, until they were all piled into bed and the door was shut.

Stan fished around in his pocket for his tobacco and pulled out a china ballerina. He turned it over in his palm a couple of times and put it in the shadow box. He rolled a smoke, walked out onto the verandah and sat down on the step. He worked hard in the tent, and when the other blokes went to the pub or the dances and brought a girl back and he had to pretend he was asleep while they groaned and moaned on the swag next to him, he would think about Corrie in the truck all those years ago and he wanted that Corrie back. It was always the same. When he was home for Christmas she’d just had a kid so there were only the few days when the troupe was still-towning in March.

Sometimes he’d had a girl, but never near the tent and he never let on to the others. It was always just a quickie out the back of some toilet block on some footy oval in some dusty town. Except that one time he’d gone to the Coolbaroo Club with a couple of the other boys. The girls were so pretty, all dressed up in pretty frocks and high heels, with red lips and pearl earrings. He’d danced with a girl and afterwards they’d gone back to her house and he’d spent the night with her. He smiled, remembering how he’d hidden in the yard and climbed in her bedroom window. After they’d made love, she’d rolled a smoke and lit it for him. They’d laid back on the pillow sharing that smoke and flicking the ash out the window. Then she’d made him climb back out the window before dawn, before her family woke, and he’d tripped on the sill and fallen and laughed. A light had come on and a man’s voice had called, ‘Edith! You all right?’

When he’d got back to Maurie’s he told him outright he didn’t want to be ‘The Ghan’ any more. Maurie’d said, ‘I’ve got enough

blackfellas. You're a good drawcard as a Ghan, the mugs like it'. Stan said, 'They wouldn't know a Ghan if they fell over one. To them I'm a blackfella like all the others and I'm the best boxer you got and I want to fight as a blackfella'.

'I'll think about it, but it's gonna cost me a lot of money havin' a new canvas painted', Maurie said because he didn't like to let any of his boys tell him what to do.

Stan knew Maurie'd do it. He'd been around Maurie long enough to know how to work it so's Maurie'd end up thinking it was his idea.

'You're right about havin' a angle and I been meaning to say I could be a 'The Cannonball'. The way I fly into the crowd. I reckon the mugs'd love it and I reckon me and the boys can repaint that banner, no worries.'

Maurie had looked at him hard for a minute and then sort of half-smiled and said, 'You're a wily young coot, Stan Cooper.'

Later that evening, after Grace had been fed and was asleep in the crib and they were lying in bed, Stan raised himself on his elbow and looked at Corrie, 'Is she mine?'

Corrie stared past him, 'Course she's bloody yours. Do you think anybody'd want me with all these stretch marks?'

'Just askin'.'

She elbowed him in the ribs, 'You got no right! You got no right to say that to me!' Corrie pulled the blanket up to her chin and turned her face to the window.

Stan felt guilty then—for thinking about other girls and leaving Corrie on her own with all these kids. 'I got to go to Katanning and do some stuff for Maureen and Hew in a coupla days. I'll take Bobby and Dan with me'.

Corrie wanted to turn to him, to be held by him. She wanted to say she was sorry for being so cranky. She wanted to tell him how tired she was, how hard it was looking after all the kids on her own

and yes, it would be nice to have a day of not nagging Bobby and Dan to do the chores or have to threaten them with the stick when they teased the little ones. But instead of being grateful, all she said was, 'Well, for gawd's sake take Eric too, or I'm goin' to brain him'.

Chapter 8

Herb hadn't noticed what anybody else was doing until lunchtime of that day, when he and Mattie were sitting on the verandah with a plate of corned-beef sandwiches. When he asked where the others were and Corrie told him, he upended the plate into the dirt and stumped off round the back of the house.

Herb was desperate to be with the bigger boys and the idea of them having an outing without him was unbearable. 'Not fair!' he yelled at her, his face turning beetroot with rage and resentment.

Corrie watched him waddle down the back yard, crawl under the rickety barbwire fence, disappear into the dry creek culvert then appear on the other side. She frowned as she watched the baggy shorts flap around his skinny calves as he doggedly walked across the paddock towards the line of trees on the other side.

Mattie had crawled after him and got as far as the fence. Every time he tried to crawl underneath it scratched his head or gripped fast to his shirt with its sharp talons, so he eventually gave up and started to cry. Corrie walked down and picked him up. She cupped her hand around her mouth and called, 'Herbie! That's far enough! C'mon! I've got nice sultana scones with butter and jam!'

Herb could hear her voice but couldn't make out what she was saying. He turned around and put his arm across his forehead to shade his eyes, but his mother was just a strange, lumpy, black shape against the glare of the sun behind her. He sat down on the bare earth. It was a long way back to that lumpy black shape.

Corrie could hear Gracie in the bedroom working herself up into a frenzy. 'C'mon, Herbie! Come back now!' she called again, before turning and striding back to the house with Mattie. She put him in the cot and lifted Grace out of the crib. Mattie started to grizzle so she got him a scone from the kitchen, 'Mattie, you stay here an' be good. I have ta get Herb'.

Back at the fence she stopped and looked where Herb had been. She lifted the top wire with her free hand and ducked through, crossed the culvert and scanned the paddock across to the line of trees. 'Jesus, I'm an idiot', she muttered quietly as she turned and walked back to the house and in the back door. She walked into each room. Mattie, thankfully, had fallen asleep with his half-eaten scone. She walked out the front door and across the yard to the shed.

Gracie started to cry, arching herself backwards, her fists hitting her face as she tried to find her mouth. Corrie undid her dress and let her feed as she opened the door and stepped into the gloom, calling 'Herb? Herbie, I know you're here. You come out now', but the only response was a whistling sound the wind made in the clothesline wires behind the shed.

'Herb, you better come out now 'cause if you don't Daddy'll be very angry and you won't get the special surprise he went all the way to town to get for you. Now it's not a surprise any more 'cause I've had to tell you and ruin it. You're bein' silly. Come on out so Mummy can finish feedin' Gracie an' get the dinner on and the table set nice for when Daddy gets back. We won't tell you know about the surprise. We'll just pretend we didn' know and I won't tell ever, so come on out now please.'

The door slammed shut, making her jump and startling Gracie, who pulled away from her breast and started bawling. 'Jesus, Herb, I'm gonna tan your hide when I get hold of you', she hissed into the silent shed. She thumped back across the yard and put Gracie in her crib. Miffed at being put down with her belly half-empty, Gracie's bawling escalated into a full-scale scream, complete with red face and tears, waking Mattie who promptly started bawling too.

Corrie was systematic this time. She checked under the beds and in the cupboards. She went back to the shed and searched behind the benches, stacks of timber and in the old meat safe lying on its side under a pile of corrugated tin. A nest of frantic huntsmen

spiders scurried in all directions, including up her arm. She jumped back and fell over a pile of rusty tins, landing heavily on her left thigh. 'Jesus, Herbie, please come out, Mummy's not cross I promise, I just want you to come out now.'

Rubbing her thigh as she ran down the side of the house again, she could hear Grace and Mattie's screaming through the thin walls. She clambered through the fence, snagging her dress on the wire, its thin material offering no resistance and tearing away from her shoulder. Anger and fear were building in her, dry little sobs caught in her throat and her stomach turned into a solid knot; bloody Stan, asking her if he was the baby's father, never home, and when he was it's just like having another kid around, and telling her he's working at Hew's when she knew damn well he was just sitting round telling stories about all the places he'd been and all the fun he was having, and the bloody kids always hungry or thirsty or rowing with each other 'cause someone got something more than them.

The wind had swung around now, blowing the sound of Gracie and Mattie still screaming, at her, and across the sky, the clouds, thick blue-black banks, streaked purplish and dirty yellow that had been sitting on the horizon. As she stumbled up the other side of the culvert, it caught her, propelling her toward the thin line of trees, pressing her dress against the back of her legs and whipping her hair and dust into her eyes.

The rain started, great heavy drops that pitted the earth where they fell, just as she got to the trees. She gathered her tangled hair with her hand to hold it back and squinted again along the line of trees. She caught a glimpse of blue at the base of a tree at the far end. Herbie's shirt. The wind was hitting her side now and the rain, like paper cuts, stung her skin. She could only move forward if she kept her head down, so she almost tripped over him before she saw him. He was cowering amongst the stripped bark and twigs on the ground. She grabbed his hand and lifted him to his feet, too angry to register her relief.

‘Jesus, Herb, I’m gonna smack you so hard.’

He tried to pull his hand away, but she held it tight, ‘Don’t you dare! I don’t care if it hurts’, she shouted and the wind took those words and spread them across the sky with the dirty clouds.

As she turned back towards the house, Herb was almost blown off his feet. He was sobbing now. The rain hit them full in the face as they struggled across the paddock. She had gone about fifty yards when she realised the only way she would get back to the house was to carry him. She lifted him onto her hip. She bent into the wind and rain and stumbled back towards the house, Herb’s foot knocking against the part of her thigh that hurt from where she’d fallen.

She eventually slid into the culvert. The water, now coursing through it, almost knocked her feet from under her. She waded across, put Herb down and scrabbled up the other side, her wet dress dragging in the mud. She grabbed his arm, hoisted him up and back onto her hip in one sweeping movement.

Holding him close against her chest she crawled through the strands of fence wire and across the yard to the back door. Inside she put him on the kitchen floor. The house was quiet. She kicked off her shoes, peeled off the sodden, filthy dress and tiptoed into the bedroom. She rolled her wet knickers down and kicked them off while she bent over the crib to check Grace. Her face was covered with red angry blotches, but at least she was asleep. As she pulled on a clean pair of underpants, she noticed the dark bruise spreading across the top of her thigh. She tiptoed into the other room to check Mattie. He was sitting in his cot; snot, tears, scone crumbs and sultanas stuck to his face and smeared across the mattress. He started to whimper as soon as he saw her. She lifted him up and shushed him and walked back into the kitchen. Herb was pressed up against the wall in the corner under the table.

She dragged the tin tub from the back verandah into the kitchen with her free hand. ‘Get you clothes off’, she ordered. She poured the kettles of hot water into the tub then filled it with cold water until there

were a few inches in the bottom. She pulled Herb out from under the table, stripped off his wet shirt and shorts and put him into the tepid water.

‘Cold’, he snivelled.

‘I don’t care if it’s bloody freezin’.’

She dropped a cloth and a half-cake of yellow soap into the tub.

‘Just wash yourself’, she said, too loudly.

Grace, woken by the noise, started to cry. Corrie strode into the bedroom, put Mattie down on the bed, picked Grace up and put her on her breast as she sat down next to Mattie. Goose bumps covered her arms and legs and she started to shiver. Grace sucked on her greedily, but her milk would not come down. She leaned over and picked up the rug from the end of the bed and manoeuvred it around her shoulders. ‘Come on’, she thought. She closed her eyes and rocked back and forth gently until she felt the familiar tingling of milk releasing and engorging her breasts.

The next moment Grace, pulling back off her nipple, roused her. She jumped, remembering Herb in the tub. She put Grace back in the crib and ran to the kitchen. Herb was lying in the tub, the water just covering his face, lapping at his nose. Then she was shaking him, thumping his back, rubbing him, and shaking him again. She knew she should be doing something else to make him breathe but she could not think what it was. Her mouth was open and it would not close and there were sounds coming out of it that she did not recognise and then she was kneeling on the floor clasping his small limp body tight against her and the sounds were louder and filling her ears and the house. And the sound went on and on until finally her throat contracted and she was whimpering like a dog left on the chain too long.

It was late in the afternoon when Stan pulled up in front of the house. He hesitated before turning off the ignition, expecting Corrie to come onto the verandah. It took him a few seconds to register that

although it was still afternoon, the rain clouds had cut the light down to evening and yet there were no lamps on in the house.

‘C’mon, out ya get. Let’s go get your mum. She’s prob’ly asleep with Gracie.’

The older boys had already slammed open the front door when Stan reached the verandah. Bobby and Dan were standing in the kitchen doorway when Stan leant over them and poked his head into the kitchen.

‘Corr? Jesus, what the ...

‘Take Mattie and git to the bedroom an’ look after the babies an’ stay there’, he ordered as he pushed the boys out of the way and sunk onto the floor beside Corrie.

‘What happened? Tell me what happened!’

Stan could see the boy was dead, his body tinged blue.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know. He was in the bath. His face was under the water. He wouldn’t breathe. I couldn’t get him to breathe. I shook him an’ he wouldn’t breathe. I was feedin’ the baby. He ran away. It was rainin’. Spiders crawled all over me. I fell over. The wind. I couldn’t walk. I couldn’t make him breathe. I killed him. I killed him.’

‘Oh, Jesus. Jesus.’

Stan knelt behind Corrie and the dead boy and wrapped his arms around her and rocked wildly, squeezing her against him. ‘Jesus, Jesus’, he said, over and over.

It was dark when Stan became aware of Bobby standing in the doorway holding Mattie. He was staring at his parents and his little brother, naked and still, gripped in his mother’s arms. His child instinct knew something very bad had happened but he could not ask what it was.

‘Git back to yer bedroom and take Mattie with ya and shut the door and don’t come out til I tell ya’, Stan ordered.

He released Corrie and stood slowly, his legs buckling with pins and needles, his feet numb. He steadied himself, then bent over and lifted Corrie to her feet. Leaning her against him, he wrapped his arm tightly under hers and shuffled into the bedroom. He yanked the blanket back and laid her down with Herb and covered her.

‘I’ve got to see to the kids, Corr, okay.’

She didn’t answer him, but curled herself around her boy as if her body would warm him and bring life back to him.

Stan opened the bedroom door, ‘Bobby, bring Grace an’ we’ll all go into the kitchen an’ I’ll light the lamp an’ make us a sandwich an’ a drink, ay’.

When Grace started to cry he put the jar of jam on the table and showed Bobby how to bend his finger and dip his knuckle in and let the baby suck it off. He remembered the women in the camps doing that with their babies when they ran out of milk.

He lit the lamp and made jam sandwiches for the boys. He wet the tea towel and washed off the snot and crumbs crusted on Mattie’s face. He got some wood from the box on the back porch and opened up the stove to get the fire going, then put the kettle on.

The wind had dropped but the rain was steady now and he could hear thunder in the distance and see the sky lighting up through the window.

‘I have to git the truck back to Hew’s. You’re in charge, Bobby, an’ I expect ya ta do as ya told. I’ll take Gracie with me. An’ stay out of the bedroom.’

Bobby nodded. He wanted to ask what happened but he knew he could not—not now. The boys cast furtive glances at each other across the table and Bobby glared at them, but they did not look at their father.

That night Hew and Maureen looked after the children and kept Grace as satisfied as best they could with bottles of sugary water. It was just before sunrise that Maureen managed to pry Herb’s stiff body from Corrie and wrap him in a blanket. Hew took the body and

put it in the back of the truck. He and Stan drove into town to get the doctor and then to Lily and Herb Gunn's.

News of the tragedy spread rapidly through the small community. The women dropped in with casseroles and cakes and condolences, speaking in hushed voices at the front door to Lily and Maureen. They left quickly, not with news about the loss of poor little Herbie, but of the white baby cradled in Lily's arms. They whispered to each other in the dusty main street and outside the church on Sunday. Even the station owners' wives, who sent food over with their domestic girls with kind notes written on embossed paper attached to pretty cloths that the girls were instructed not to insist on retrieving 'at a time like this', discussed the situation at their monthly Country Women's Association meeting.

Herbie was buried in the small graveyard on the other side of town, not far from the Baptist church. Only Stan, Lily, Herb Gunn and Hew McDonald were there. Maureen had stayed at the house to look after the children and make a plate of sandwiches and a pot of tea for when they returned.

When Stan got back from the funeral he went into the bedroom for the first time since that terrible night and leant over Corrie, who was staring at the grubby ceiling.

'Well, girl, it's over.'

She didn't look at him, but whispered, 'It'll never be over'.

Corrie woke the next morning burning with milk fever, her breasts rock hard and marked with angry red lines tracking from her nipples like the red highways on a map. Every cell in her body was in pain and any movement was excruciating, even the vibration of people walking across the floor in the other rooms made her wince. She lapsed in and out of feverish sleep filled with dreams of a little girl playing with her doll in the shallows of a swimming hole, who doesn't notice the water rising until suddenly she can't put her feet on the bottom. She tries to dog paddle, holding onto the doll, but the

current is too strong and she lets it go to save herself. She gets to the bank and crawls out in time to see the doll as it is swept out of the swimming hole, to disappear in the swirling, muddy creek.

Lily brought Grace in to feed to relieve the engorgement, which caused Corrie's nipples to crack and weep blood and clear fluid mixed with the milk. She cried with the pain of it until Lily decided Grace must be weaned.

She and Maureen washed and fed the children and got them to bed each night, boiled bottles and diluted cows' milk and proceeded to wean the reluctant and fractious baby. Stan refused their offers to take the children away, although he spent most of the day sitting on the verandah ignoring them. Herb Gunn and Hew had excused themselves days before, claiming ploughing must be done now they'd had all that rain.

At night Maureen and Lily slept on the lounge room floor with Grace in her crib beside them, taking turns to feed her. Stan would creep into the boys' room long after they were asleep, wrap himself in a blanket and lie on the narrow space between the beds. But he didn't sleep. He thought about when he and Corrie lay on those dusty blankets in that room after making love, in that comfortable silence where he had told her who he was and where he'd come from, and he wished more than anything now that he had a father who would tell him what to do, how to fix things and make everything all right again.

Chapter 9

Rose and Maurie took Katharine prawning at least once a week through January, sometimes meeting up with the Tiernans. They waded through the shallow water with their nets and when they had caught enough Maurie made a small fire and put a billy of water on. Rose cut thick slabs of white bread and laid them out on a board for Katharine to butter.

When the water came to a boil Maurie said, 'Come on, love, time to cook these little beauties'. Katharine plonked each one carefully into the water and watched as they turned pinky-orange, then held the dish while Maurie scooped them out.

After they'd eaten Katharine took her bucket and spade down to the water where other children were busily filling theirs with sand and upending them to make castles. They dug moats and filled them with water and then hunted along the shore to find bottle tops and stones and other detritus to decorate the towers.

Rose watched the way her daughter joined in with this group of children she didn't know as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

'Katharine'll be orright at school, I reckon. Look at the way she just fits in.' Maurie refilled her glass.

Rose had never had any 'best' friends in primary school and didn't go to other children's houses to play or have them over to her house. She watched the children in single file walking around their creation in the water-filled channels. She didn't want to only see Katharine on weekends and the Christmas break, or to miss out on the Royal and the south run, but she could not find the words to tell Maurie. Not now. Not yet. Instead she said, 'Joan said she'd have Katharine over on the weekends while we're away'.

'We'll see. Katharine'll be making her own friends soon enough and she'll be wanting to spend her weekends with them, I reckon.'

‘Mum and Dad are getting on, I’m not sure they’d want other people’s kids running around the house.’

‘She needs other friends besides Showie kids.’

Rose looked at all the little fires along the bank twinkling in the evening light and listened to the sounds of family laughter and chatter.

The Christmas break seemed to fly. Rose sat on the back verandah, a pile of the boys’ shirts on the table next to her sewing kit. She sewed on missing buttons, stitched frayed cuffs and darned rips or patched them if they were too far gone. She told Katharine how exciting it was going to be to go to school. Together they made a list of things she would need: books, pencils and a pencil case, a rubber, a ruler, lunch box, a school bag and uniforms. Maurie drove them into town and left them to get on with the shopping, and after it was done, a special lunch at the Coles cafeteria.

When the school term started Rose was able to wave Katharine good-bye without tears, her mind already focussing on all the things needed to be done to get ready for still-towning the wheatbelt.

The morning they left, Maurie was like a bear with a sore head when Stan hadn’t shown up.

‘Wait ’til I see him. I’ll give him a piece of advice he won’t forget’, he ranted as he threw the truck into reverse and backed out the driveway so fast he nearly overshot the road and ended up in the ditch.

‘Maybe he got sick or something.’

‘There’s such a thing as a telephone.’

‘He lives out in the middle of nowhere, Maurie. He’s not likely to have a phone.’

‘Yeah, well. That’s no bloody excuse.’

‘I’m sure there’s a good reason. He’ll probably meet up with us at that little town he lives near.’

Stan didn't meet up with them. Maurie decided he must've left for good and got angry when Rose or one of the other boxers mentioned him, so they were very surprised to see him in the headlights sitting on their front step as they pulled into the drive on their return.

There was no more than a mumbled 'sorry' and no response when Maurie berated him for a good five minutes before handing him a blanket and ordering him to the shed 'before I change me mind'.

They unpacked the car in silence, until Rose said, 'For goodness sake, Maurie, cheer up will you? He's back.'

'I've a good mind to tell him I don't need him for the north run, that'd teach him a lesson.'

'That'd be cutting off your nose to spite your face, wouldn't it. At least he got here. Something must be up, I'm sure. I'll have a talk to him. Leave it to me.'

'He'll prob'ly spin some cock-and-bull story. I wouldn't bother.'

The first thing next morning, Rose rang her parents. Katharine prattled about all the things she'd done at school and her new friends, Sally and Annette and Pamela. Rose's probing about how it was, living with her grandparents, was met with excited accounts of sleepovers, picnics in Kings Park and trips to the zoo.

When she told Maurie, he laughed, 'See, I said she'd be fine'.

While she washed, dried and folded clothes, ordered the supplies and packed everything for the north run, she couldn't help the feelings of resentment. A part of her wished that Katharine was miserable and her parents would say it was all too much having their granddaughter living with them.

The following week, as the truck wheezed up Greenmount, Rose got her knitting out of the bag beside her feet. She'd decided to make a matinee jacket for Joan's baby.

'You'll make yerself sick. Looking down like that. Same as seasickness. Something to do with your ear or something.'

'I want to get this finished.'

'Don't complain then, 'cause I've warned yer', he grinned.

'I'll just lean my head out the window.'

'Very ladylike I must say. You been hangin' round Showies too long.'

'Whose fault is that, then? You tricked me into this life', Rose laughed.

'You really think that?' He said, after a bit.

Rose looked at him. Several times she'd heard herself make a backhanded comment and she kicked herself.

'I was joking, Maurie Jackson. I have a good life and I wouldn't want to live it with anyone else.'

Maurie was watching the road. The lines were deep between his nose and mouth and at the corners of his eyes. He had just turned forty-eight. She would be twenty-seven soon. She put her hand on his thigh, rubbed gently against the hard muscle, then slid her palm up until it rested on the curve of the inside of his leg. She left it there for a few moments, then lifted it to his face and stroked the back of her hand up his cheek, feeling the stubble that had already sprouted since he'd shaved early that morning.

Maurie grinned, 'That's my girl'.

They travelled on in silence, with just the soft click of the knitting needles and the rumble of the motor.

They were now in open country. The sky was deep blue and Rose could see the few trees that had been left for summer shade bending in the wind. When they got to the turnoff for the Brand Highway, Maurie said in a cheery voice, 'Here we go, a turn out. I'll let the boys know it's a pit stop. Time for a cuppa and cake'.

While she got the basket with the tea things from behind her seat, the boys collected enough kindling to get a fire going for the billy. She set the enamel cups and a plate of cake out on the backboard of the truck, out of the wind. Maurie squatted by the fire, rolling a smoke. She could feel him looking at her. She walked over

to him, squatted awkwardly next to him and put her arm around his waist, 'I'm going to sit in the truck, that wind's freezing'.

She liked still-towning. They always camped out of town, so she could pretty much avoid the other Showies if she wanted to. It was every Showie for themselves for these months of the year. People moved on or stayed according to local fairs and rodeos and their own preferences, not the Agricultural Society's timetable. As they travelled north, the road became rougher and a fine pinkish coating of dust covered them and everything in the truck. The days fell into an easy rhythm of driving in the cool morning hours, camping, cooking and washing, punctuated by shows in what seemed like empty god-forsaken towns. But always from somewhere people came and filled the tent and they stayed until the crowds thinned and profit turned to loss.

They pulled into a campsite just outside of the town late in the afternoon. Rose busied herself with unpacking and setting up while Maurie, Stan and four of the boys drove into the grounds. She knew that, after dropping the boys off to set up the tent, Maurie's first job was to pay a visit to the local constabulary. The boxing tent was a popular addition to the local rodeos, but with so many young men coming in from stations who hadn't had a drink for months, punch-ups and all-out brawls were common. A small donation ensured their support if things got out of hand. Then he'd drive to the port to buy fresh fish for tea and a few bottles of beer before collecting the boys.

The fire was going and there was a good stack of wood for the evening when Maurie pulled in under the trees. The boys were lounging on their swags on one side of the fire and Rose was sitting on a rug on the other side with her knitting. The smell of fresh damper mixed with wood smoke hung in the air.

'Ah, real tucker', Maurie called as he walked towards them with the large parcel of fish, wrapped in newspaper tucked under his arm, and the bottles clinking together, their thin necks wedged between

his fingers. They ate the fish with thick slabs of steaming buttery damper and Maurie dispensed a mug of beer each to the boys.

‘Did I tell you about the time I used to lay carpets?’ Maurie said with a mouthful. ‘Me and me partner were layin’ new carpet in a house in Peppermint Grove. Huge room it was. We had to empty all the fancy antique furniture out first. We finished and me mate noticed a bit of a lump right in the middle of the room. We couldn’t figure out what it was. Anyway, he wanted a smoke so he goes to get the packet out of his pocket and they’re not there. “Bugger”, he says, “That must be me smokes in the middle of the bloody floor. Gives us the mallet will ya”. So, I give him the mallet and he bangs away at the lump till it’s flat as a pancake and the lady of the house’ll never know. Just then, in she comes carryin’ a tray, “I’ve made you a nice cup of tea”, she says, “And here’s your cigarettes, you left them in the kitchen ... oh, and have either of you seen my little Chihuahua, Pinky?”’

‘Maurie, that joke’s as old as the hills! You’ve never laid a carpet in your life!’ Rose laughed.

‘Least I made yer laugh.’

‘I laughed because you’ve got the cheek to tell me some old joke and pass it off as a true story. You’re impossible!’

She half-listened as stories of past victories, defeats and questionable exploits, suspended in the pungent smoke, drifted over her. The heat of the day had gone with the sun. Rose wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and lay down. Above her, in the clear moonless sky, the Milky Way was a glowing canopy of white, and the shooting stars, threads pulled from its gauzy fabric. She thought about Joan. She would ask at the ground tomorrow if anyone had heard if she’d had the baby yet. There would be at least a couple of families from the Banks clan who would have left Perth well after her and Maurie. Then she remembered she’d forgotten to ask Stan about his new baby. Maurie’s voice startled her, ‘C’mon, love, time for bed’.

‘You go. I want to stay here for a bit longer.’

When breakfast was done and dishes washed and dried, Rose watched Maurie and Stan go over the moves again with the newest gees. A couple of them had not quite got the hang of timing. It was no good if the slap of their gloves for the sound effect happened three seconds after the supposed right hook to the jaw. The crowd, especially if fuelled by grog, could get very nasty and start making accusations of fakery and demanding their money back. With Tommy's magic or Jack's dancing ducks they'd just laugh, but the boxing was different. They needed to believe it was real even when they knew it wasn't.

Rose hung the shorts over bushes to get some of the creases out and shook dust out of the towels before folding and stacking them back in the truck. The boys who weren't practising were sitting in the shade of a banksia, playing cards. She could hear them arguing. She put the billy on. Tea and cake would settle them down, or at least stop the swearing they thought she couldn't hear.

After lunch, they drove to the oval and parked behind the tent. Rose could see Colleen's head above the crowd in front of the chair-o-plane. She whispered 'damn' under her breath as Colleen spied her, waved, and made a beeline for her at the same moment Maurie came out of the tent.

'Oh-oh, here comes trouble', he grinned.

'Don't you leave me!'

'Sorry, love, but things to do, places to go, people to see and I'll be gone for at least as long as Colleen happens to be here', he grinned and patted Rose on the shoulder.

'You better not! You come back here in about two minutes and tell me you need me to help you with something.'

'Wouldn't dream of it. You girls gotta have at least a half-hour to catch up on the news. Shh, here she comes', he laughed, and called, 'Colleen, good to see yer! Got a few things to do but might catch yer later. Rose was just sayin' how nice it was to see a friendly face'.

Rose muttered under her breath, 'You're a bugger, Maurie Jackson, you wait!' because Colleen was only five steps away with arms out. Colleen liked to hug everyone when they were on the north run, as if welcoming a long-lost friend.

'Rosie! How are you? I'm up a snake and down a ladder, I tell you, I haven't had time to scratch meself since we opened, I feel like a washed-out rag already and it's only two o'clock, and my poor Artie's been going like the clappers 'cause we didn't get in till sparrow's and then had a bit of a run-in with plod first thing, I tell you, I could pack it all in already and go home!'

'I'm good thanks, Colleen, but I can't really stop now, we're going to open as soon as I get the boys' things to them, so maybe catch up later.'

'But you must want to hear Joan's news.'

'Yes, of course ... '

'Well, you'll never guess! She went into labour and you know Joan, she didn't have anything ready and so she had to get Tommy to ring Barb and ask her to bring in a bag with her things, which she hadn't even packed yet, and Barb said it took her ages to find her nighties because half their stuff is still in boxes. Anyway, she got to the hospital but it was all a false alarm and Joan was about to go home, but then the doctor decided she should stay in because she was so big and he reckoned it was going to be a big baby and she might have a long labour so she should rest up. Well, the next day she went into real labour and Tommy told us later the doctor told him it was all so quick, she just popped them out.'

'Them?'

'Yes! Them! She had twins! Two boys! Tommy's like the cat that got the cream. I never seen a prouder man. You should of seen him, cooing over those two little bundles in the nursery. Even the nurses was laughing at him. I said to my Artie later, I said, well Artie jnr, that's it, we got to have a baby now 'cause I just want to see a look on your face like what Tommy had. It made me cry, I swear. So

now I'm clucky as a rooster and I told my Artie, I said, I don't want to wait any longer, even though he reckons we got to wait till we get our own place, but I said to him, I said, well Stew and Nancy lived in the bungalow with little Robbie, so there's no reason why we can't do it too and maybe it'd be good to have grandma Barb and grandpa Artie nearby to help us out.'

'Twins! Well, no one was expecting that. What are they called?'

'Patrick and Michael. Patrick is ten minutes older. I think it's Patrick who's the oldest. Maybe it's Michael. I can't remember now. No, I'm definite, I think it's Patrick. They look exactly the same, anyway. I don't know how poor Joan is going to tell them apart. I suppose it doesn't really matter if they get mixed up, does it, I mean, they're only babies, it's not as if they'd know or anything.'

Rose looked across the ground. She wondered how Joan was managing with two babies and a house they had just moved into, that they'd now outgrown. Artie jnr was waving his arms wildly in their direction.

'I think you're needed.' And she waved back.

'Oh, I better go. Shame. It's nice to have a chat. Well, I better be off or I'll be in trouble from the boss and can't have that. No worries. See you later for a quiet one then, Rosie. You and Maurie.'

Rose stepped back to avoid Colleen's outstretched arms, 'We'll see how we go.'

Colleen turned and scurried towards Artie jnr, who was standing in front of the chair-o-plane with his hands on his hips.

Rose laughed at the idea of a quiet one. Joan reckoned Colleen was like a balloon that's been untied and blows around the room until it runs out of air. She'd better find Maurie and tell him the news.

She settled herself into the ticket box as the drum beat and the bell signalled the start of the first house of the day. She watched as men, women and kids made a beeline for the tent while the boys climbed onto the boards and the gees ambled into the gathering crowd.

Before Maurie got a chance to pick the first gee, a bloke shoved and lurched his way to the front of the crowd and peered up at Maurie, swaying, his hands on his hips, 'Oi! I jush wanna fi' tha' one, tha' one see', and the act of removing his hand from his hip to point at Eddie upset his balance so that he staggered sideways, was pushed away by the bloke he'd collided with, and stumbled forward. Before he landed face-first in the dust he managed, 'Jush watch 'im go flyin', which caused spontaneous applause and even Maurie cracked a smile. The mugs had no inkling of how much a part of the show they were, and it was a good job, too. Imagine having to pay for all the comic entertainment they inadvertently provided.

Just as Maurie had finished picking their gees and matching them to each boxer for the first house, a mug up the back yelled out, 'Ere, what about me, mate, I wanna have me turn in the ring!'

'C'mon then, mate. Come up the front here and let's have a look at yer. Let him through, ladies and gen'lemen, please!'

The crowd parted and a skinny little bloke, who didn't look more than sixteen judging by the acne, made his way to the front.

Maurie looked him up and down and said loudly, 'Ya still look a bit wet behind the ears, mate, why'n't come back next year when ya dried off a bit, ay!'

The mugs guffawed and elbowed each other to get in the queue in front of the ticket box, leaving the pimply lad standing alone. Everyone wanted a spot close to the canvas. They didn't want to miss seeing the blackfellas get a bit of a hiding and the blackfellas didn't want to miss seeing the whitefellas get one too. And, despite all the blustering and swaggering, the house ran without incident and at the end the mugs tumbled out the door feeling satisfied, their money well spent.

In-between the houses Rose sat in the shade behind the truck and took out her knitting. She held up the tiny lemon-coloured front section and noticed she'd dropped a stitch about halfway up. She folded it and stuck it onto the knitting needles. There didn't seem to

be much point in one jacket anyway now, which felt like a bit of a relief. Rose had never liked knitting.

She must have been lost in her thoughts because she jumped slightly when Stan squatted next to her.

‘Oh, I didn’t see you. I’ve been meaning to ask after your new baby. Is your wife well?’

And it was then he told her what happened to Herbie. Rose listened without interrupting as Stan told how Corrie had had to get him from the paddock in a wild storm and how the creek had filled up and how she’d got him back to the house safe and then put him in the tub while she fed the baby and he’d drowned.

When he finished, he did not raise his eyes from the ground where they had been fixed. She moved and knelt in front of him and put her arm around his shoulders. She did not know what to say. Everything that came into her head to say seemed too little, too inadequate. So she said nothing. They stayed like that for a time. Then Stan raised his eyes and looked at her. He reached behind her neck and undid the clasp that tied her hair. He took a handful of it, gently, and fanned it out across her shoulder and left his fingers there, entwined with the tight curls. Rose saw, over his shoulder, across the track, Colleen watching her. She moved her head and Stan’s hand fell to his lap and his eyes back to the ground.

‘I left her, Rose. I told her I had to do the south run, but I knew I couldn’t do it. I just had ta get away. I was camping out in Perth, hanging out with the blackfellas. I didn’t want to see her. She never spoke to me after my boy died. We never spoke. I couldn’t help her. She didn’t care when I left.’

Rose rocked back onto her feet and stood up. Looking down at him she saw the terrible sadness in the stoop of his shoulders and the hang of his hands and she heard the inadequate little words coming out of her mouth, ‘Try to think of your other children and your wife. You will get over it. It just takes time. You’ll see’. She watched her hand reach down and pat his shoulder. Colleen was standing

with her arms folded across her chest, staring at her. 'Bugger her', Rose thought. She squatted again and took Stan's hand and held it between her own, 'I'm so sorry, Stan. I want to say something to help. But I don't know. This is such a terrible thing'. She stayed there until she heard the bell ringing. As she turned and walked towards the tent, she reassured herself, 'I don't care. Anyway, she's too far away to see anything, I could've been fixing a cut on his face for all she'd know'.

Rose tried to put the thought of Colleen out of her mind. She told herself she didn't care what Colleen saw or what she'd say, but then a lingering anxiety that she would tell Barb, who would make more snide remarks about Rose being too friendly with blacks, would rise to the surface and she found herself making up conversations to have with Colleen when they crossed paths again. She would mention casually that a lot of the boys had problems with grit in their eyes from the dust and sand and gravel.

Chapter 10

The clear blue Western Australian sky had delivered another hot day. Joan was sitting at a small table with Peg Flannery, taking advantage of the cooling Fremantle Doctor, which had arrived a half-hour or so ago. Mick and Paddy were asleep on the bed inside the van.

‘Bloody hell, where was I? Think me brain’s gone to mush.’

Joan had to raise her voice against the amplified cries of spruikers.

‘ ... pigs ... fly ... open doors ... up ladders ... ’

‘ ... break chains ... ’ands ... ’is bare chest ... ’

‘ ... two shillings ... teddy ... four ... ’

‘You were telling me about Vera, the half-man half-woman.’

Joan lit a cigarette, and leaned back, the smoke curling out of her nostrils and drifting away on the breeze. It had taken a while, but Rose had finally taught her how to do that.

‘Oh, yeah, that’s right. She always says things like “Vera wants a drink” or something instead of saying “I want a drink”.’

‘I remember that, I was there when you were telling Barb.’

‘She fills the tent, that’s for sure.’

‘There she is!’ Joan waved at Rose. ‘Thanks for watching the babies while me and Rose see the show. I owe you one. See you later.’

‘Where were you? Come on! Vera’ll be finished, but you got to see Shirley’s tattoos.’

They crossed the alley, weaving through the crowd gathered in front of the tent with ‘Tiernans’ Nature’s Wonders’ painted in gaudy colours across the front banner. Pictures of a giant, a dwarf, a tattooed lady, a girl in a goldfish bowl and a half-man half-woman, painted down each side, promised a spectacle of freaks and oddities. The Tiernans had Vera, a half-man half-woman, and Shirley, the tattooed lady.

‘Did I tell you what happened to Jack and Dot’s act? They’d booked the African Strong Man, but he never showed and when Jack rang Sydney, the agent reckoned the bloke had urgent family business in Africa and ’cause it was “unforeseen circumstances” they wouldn’t get their deposit back. Dottie reckoned Jack was yelling down the phone, “He’s not even a bloody African, he’s a bloody Maori! Sharks, the bloody lot of ya”, and she’d had to grab the phone off him and smooth things over. Then I find out from Shirley that the bloke’d run off with a girl from some outback town in New South Wales. I didn’t tell Dot that, though’, she laughed.

Joan opened the flap at the back of the tent and a wave of Old Spice aftershave mixed with Yardley Lavender Water hit them. Vera was standing in the small space behind the stage, dabbing her neck with a tea towel.

‘Hi, Vera, how you going?’

‘It’s so hot in there, Vera thought her makeup was going to slide down her neck and make a mess of her décolletage!’

‘Her ... Your what?’

Vera rolled her eyes, ‘Vera’s chest, dear’. She flicked her long blonde hair back and dabbed at the smooth skin and the soft mound of breast revealed by the deep v-neckline of the evening gown she wore on the female side. As she turned to put the towel down, her face transformed from a red-lipped vamp to a handsome man with short dark slicked-back hair and a five-o’clock shadow on his cheek.

Joan and Rose ducked under the stage scaffolding and found a spot at the side of the crowd just as Tommy was finishing his spiel for Shirley, ‘So, ladies and gen’lemen, boys and girls, I present for you today, the amazin’ ... the one and only ... Tattooed Lady! Feast your eyes on the only livin’, breathin’, walkin’, talkin’ work of art in the southern hemisphere!’

Tommy drew the curtain and Shirley, wearing a green satin cloak, was sitting on a bench facing the audience.

‘So is Vera a man or a woman?’ Rose leant into Joan’s ear.

‘No idea. She always talks about herself as ‘Vera’, so I call her ‘she’. Anyway, doesn’t matter so long as she puts on a good show.’

Shirley moved the cloak off her shoulders to reveal each arm, covered from elbow to shoulder and across her chest with swirls and spirals, leaf patterns and floral designs. The tent filled with gasps and ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’. ‘Looks like me grandmother’s wallpaper’, someone called out. ‘Got a orright shape on ’er. I’d put up with a few pictures ta snuggle up’, someone at the back of the tent yelled. Shirley turned side on and slid the cloak away to reveal her leg. From her thigh to ankle the suit of hearts tumbled like a fifty-two card pick-up, and on the other leg, the suit of diamonds. ‘Nice pins!’ A man next to Rose said. ‘Not as nice as that sheila’s who’s half a bloke’, the man next to him said. ‘Yeah, if yer don’t mind one hairy one’, the fellow behind chimed in. ‘That’s disgustin’!’ Someone else said.

Shirley turned, and with her back to the crowd, she dropped the cloak. Someone yelled, ‘Ere, mate, tell us where this southern ’emishere place is, I wanna go there!’

With her arms folded across her chest all the audience could see was her back. A tree, with the trunk extending up her spine and branches spreading across, covered most of her back. Curled around the trunk and branches was a climbing rose with its pink flowers cascading through the leaves. Amongst the foliage were butterflies, birds, animal heads, snakes, hearts and what looked like a naked man and woman – Adam and Eve, Rose guessed – and surrounding the tree were swallows, stars, and a sun and a moon.

‘It *is* amazing, I have to say.’

‘I know. We can’t lose. Perth’s never had anything like it. Not since the war, anyway.’

Tommy stood to the side with a long stick like the ones schoolmasters use. He pointed out various designs and told the stories behind them. Above the ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’, those who were shocked and outraged put in their tuppence worth.

‘Children shouldn’t be allowed to see this sort of thing!’

'Ya wouldn't lose 'er in a crowd any rate.'

'She ought ta scrub that rubbish off and get a proper job!'

'Fancy bein' married to it.'

Tommy let the mugs continue. It was a matter of timing it right to pad the length of the show out just enough to allow the mugs to feel like they got their money's worth.

'Can I 'ave a big round for the Tattooed Lady, ladies and gen'lemen! The most amazin' lady you'll ever see in your life and for the first time here at the Perth Royal! A big round, please, show your appreciation for the livin', breathin' work of art you've 'ad the priv'lege of seein' here today!'

The crowd clapped and whistled. Shirley pulled the cloak around her shoulders, stood up and turned to the crowd, curtsied and left the stage.

As they began to spill out of the stifling tent, the wonder of the tattooed lady continued to ignite comment.

'I'd lock me daughter up if she did that to 'erself.'

'Bloody unbelievable!'

'She looks like a bleedin' freak.'

'Really, mate, an' I thought I was in the tent for lookin' at stud heifers.'

'Smart-arse.'

'Wha'd ya say, mate?'

Rose and Joan escaped to the back of the tent.

'Well, what do you think? Great show, isn't it?'

'She was really good. Must be nice not having to dance, with the boys I mean. So how's it going being a manager?'

Joan sighed. 'It's fun.'

She had assumed that after having the twins her body would go back into shape as it had after she'd had the girls. But her boobs had gone south and the skin on her belly was stretched and sagging. She didn't tell Rose how she missed the mugs whistling and making comments. Or how she cried when she looked in the mirror at the

stretch marks and loose skin. Or how she'd felt jealous of the two pretty local girls Tommy'd lined up to do a South Sea Island dance. She was glad when those girls had gone to the Snake Pit one afternoon to watch the dancing. They had come round the following day with a couple of men and told Tommy they'd decided not to do the show, 'We're going over east. We're going to be chorus girls on the real stage and these gentlemen know people over there'. Tommy laughed after they left, 'Reckon they'll get as far as Kalgoorlie'.

Joan opened the tent flap and stood aside to let Rose pass. The bright light blinded her momentarily. She put her hand across her brow and waited while Joan tied the flap. Shirley, sitting outside Joan's truck with, waved them over.

'Has Tommy ever thought about getting another business as well as this?'

'Heavens, yes. This's his dream and next year it'll be bigger and better. He wants to knock out the competition and have two shows running.'

'I was thinking a food van or something. They make good money.'

'I'd kill meself first. Bloody hell, could you imagine me sweating over a pot of hot-dogs or spinning fairy floss onto sticks all day? Couldn't think of anything worse!'

Joan looked at Rose and laughed, 'Anyway, people'll never get sick of looking at freaks. That's where the money is. They can have their bloody food vans and their rides. I'll tell you what my plans are. After me and Tommy've made a pile of money, the boys can take over the businesses and we'll retire to a nice little house near Rockingham and go fishing. That's the plan, but don't you breathe a bloody word, Rose Jackson, or I'll be dead meat. Tommy's yet to be sold on the idea of Rockingham.'

Rose looked at Joan and crossed herself, 'God's honour', she smiled, 'and the girls?'

‘They’ll be up on the boards, like their Mum. Then they’ll get married to a couple of nice Showies. What about you? You ever thought of doing something else?’

‘Never. I can’t see people ever not wanting to see the boxing, either. I’ll be handing out towels until I keel over.’

‘What about Katharine?’

‘Over Maurie’s dead body.’

‘True? He that dead set, is he?’

‘Always has been.’

‘Well, if she’s anything like her mother she’ll make up her own bloody mind.’

‘That must be an interesting conversation. I’ve never seen two people walk so slowly’, Shirley interrupted.

Rose looked at her watch. ‘I should really be getting back.’

‘Sit down and have a smoke with us.’ Shirley pushed her packet across the table.

‘Did you see that woman standing in the front with that beehive, Shirl? She could’ve hidden the crown jewels in it.’ Vera lifted her arms above her head, ‘It was about that high! Vera couldn’t stop staring’.

‘I did! I had to stop myself laughing when the bloke behind had to keep bobbing his head round like a pigeon every time she moved.’

‘Vera couldn’t stop staring at that man with the big hoop earring, either. She kept wondering if he was one of her type.’ Vera batted her eyelids and fanned herself with a *Women’s Weekly* she’d been flicking through and sighed, ‘Well, Vera needs a sherry and a good lie down before the next show’.

‘I put a jug of cordial in your van.’

‘Cordial! Well, I suppose Vera will just have to make do.’

‘Sorry, I’d like to stay, but Maurie’ll be wondering where I am’, Rose interrupted.

‘Here, a cigarette for the road, honey. Or save it for when you come back’, Shirley took one from the packet and waved it at Rose.

‘Thanks’, she smiled and tucked it behind her ear.

‘I’ll see you later. We’ll get a bloody good sing-a-long going round the fire’, Joan laughed.

Chapter 11

Corrie could not remember Stan leaving. She tried to recall words he might have said, or hugs he may have given, but there was nothing. She stopped sleeping in their bed and sat in the chair next to the window. She would doze for an hour or so and wake with a sore neck and feet numbed from lack of blood. In the long dark hours when she was not reliving the events of that day and wanting to die, she turned on Stan. He had promised her they would leave this place. He had promised she would see the city and the ocean and palm trees and every year he had given her a china ballerina instead. Over and over she imagined screaming and throwing every one of those stupid china ballerinas at him. But Stan had not come home when the show was in town.

Lily Gunn folded the clothes. She watched her daughter staring out of the window and sighed. Eric tugged on the hem of her skirt and pointed to the kitchen. He had lost what few words he'd had and reverted to sign language. She got him a cup of milk. Yesterday she had confiscated a magnifying glass Bobby and Dan were using to try and set fire to a mouse they said they'd found dead in the shed. Then there were all Mattie's and Grace's nappies and Eric's sheets to wash and bottles of milk to make and dinners to cook. Lily was tired.

The farmers had taken the heavy rain that had fallen around the time Grace was born and Herbie died as a good sign. They had ploughed and sowed when the time came. But there had been no rain since. They had watched their crops shrivel and dry before the wheat was three inches tall.

Many of the smaller farms like theirs, the little parcels of the least productive land that had been carved off the large holdings, were folding under mortgage debts. A few men had already packed up their families and headed for Perth, others took labouring work

and some had got jobs on the railway. Herb Gunn struggled with mounting debts, prayed for rain and watched his dreams wither like the wheat. He burnt the letters from the bank behind the shed and watched as the wind scattered the ashes across the empty paddocks. Lily had found out anyway and cried and turned her back on him in bed. Then the only comfort to be had was going to the pub and getting blind and visiting the blacks' camp. He was not the only one.

Those with large farms who could survive felt obliged to help out and give the men whatever work they had going, so jobs for the blackfellas dried up and town camps swelled with frustration and resentment, which troubled the white folks. Women complained to their husbands about having to cross the road rather than walk past the large groups of blacks hanging around in the main street.

Somehow all this got mixed up in people's minds with the fact that Corrie Cooper was married to one of them, and while they felt powerless to control the weather or the price of wheat or the number of blacks living at the camp and hanging around the dusty street, they could have some say over having black kids in their school. After all, they reasoned, if they let the Cooper kids come to the school what would stop all those kids from the camp coming too? And even though they knew many of the Aboriginal families – the women had worked as domestics for them and the men had cleared the land and built fences and shifted bags of wheat – that didn't make it right. So they plotted and wrote letters and had meetings to decide what they would say to Corrie when those kids of hers did eventually try and come back. And some who knew Corrie, had grown up with her and liked her, felt guilty but could not bring themselves to speak up.

Lily put the pile of clothes away and sat down on the arm of the chair. She took Corrie's hand and held it between hers.

'I'm goin' to tell you something and you have to listen to me.

'I got rid of some babies. I couldn't cope after Junie was born. Three of you under three, and all the chores to be done, and your father wanting his supper at six on the dot. And at me all the time, badgering and pestering and saying it was his right.

'And after each one of you was born he hated it 'cause you were girls and he never took a blind bit of notice of you. So after Junie, I used a knitting needle and got rid of them. I got rid of four before Nell. I tried to get rid of her too but she was a stubborn bugger and look what I did to her. Made her stupid in the head.

'Sometimes I think about those babies and wonder if I didn't make everything worse 'cause I probably got rid of boys and your father could've had some help and I took it away from him. So, I can't keep coming every day. I have to get back and help him and look after Nell.

'And poor Maureen. All those pregnancies and not a thing to show for them. Not even a grave to visit.

'You've just got to get on, Corr, and not let it take you over.'

'I didn't know.'

'No one knows, do they? We all just keep quiet and get on. It's more of a bloody shame in this world when a lamb dies 'cause it's worth money. That's how it is. So, you get up off that chair and look after the ones you do have and stop feeling sorry for yourself. And when you're ready, pack your things and get out of here, you hear me. You go somewhere else and make a fresh start.'

Corrie eventually did get out of the chair. She took the tin tub off the hook behind the door and threw it out the back. She asked Hew to stack the wood on the front verandah for the winter and she hung a piece of sheet over the window that looked out onto the shed. She made bottles of milk and fed Grace, cooked stews and baked cakes with the supplies that Maureen or Lily dropped over each week. She washed the dishes as soon as the children had finished

eating, or if they had a drink, she would hover and take the empty cup immediately to the tap.

She swept and mopped the floors and stirred clothes in the kitchen sink. She strung a line across the kitchen and hung the clothes there to dry. When they were dry she folded them and put them in neat piles on her bed. Once a week she boiled kettles of water and emptied them into the bucket, made the kids strip off in turn and washed them down with a flannel in front of the fire. When Bobby and Dan wanted to go outside to play she said it was too cold. It did not occur to her to send Bobby back to school or get Dan started in grade one. She did not leave the house except to collect an armload of wood for the fire from the verandah. She did not look at the sky or the paddocks. Corrie got through the days and each night she sat in the chair.

When her mother or Maureen came by she met them at the door, smiling, and invited them in to sit by the fire in the house that was neat as a pin. She made them a cup of tea, put a slice of cake on the saucers and arranged them on a tray with a tea towel to stop them slipping.

It was late spring when Lily took the piece of sheet off the window, moved the chair onto the verandah, steered Corrie outside and said, 'There, you come and sit out here in the sun with Grace and we'll watch the kids'.

She heard their laughter and squabbling and remembered that she had been angry with Stan, had wanted to hurt him and make him pay for Herbie dying because it was his fault, he should never have left her alone that day. She remembered what her mother said and was ashamed that she had only lost one child and Maureen had lost all of hers and her mother had lost four and had Nell to look after as well. She promised God that when Stan came home she would make it up to him. She would tell him how sorry she was for being angry, that she hadn't meant it, that it was her fault, not his.

She had sat in the chair and felt impatient then for the days to pass, irritated by the sun taking so long to move across the sky so night would come and then the next day, so that soon Stan would be home.

The time finally arrived. Any day now, depending on how far he'd had to walk or if a local who knew him had given him a lift. Corrie watched the dust clouds on the road that signalled a passing car, waiting for the car to stop at the end of the drive and a figure get out. The figure would walk up the long drive and she would watch as it slung a bag over its shoulder and then she would know it was Stan.

But Stan didn't come home and the anniversary of Herbie's death came and went. And each night Corrie crawled into their bed and wept. She was a fool to think that he would come back after the way she had treated him. She didn't deserve Stan like she hadn't deserved Herbie and now they were both gone. She didn't deserve the others, either. She tried to remember when Grace had learned to sit up and when she had learned to crawl, but there was nothing. She should give them to Maureen. Maureen would be a good mother. She buried her face into the pillow until her body demanded air and forced her to take great gulping breaths.

Chapter 12

Rose sat on a blanket, her back resting against the wheel of the truck, a pile of odd socks beside her and one stretched over a darning mushroom. She would get a few done at least before having to go and look after Paddy and Mick. They had grown from demanding babies into little terrors who could not be left for two seconds without getting into mischief.

She watched as two small groups of girls collected at the back of the tent. The native girls stood close, in a huddle, giggling shyly, their hands covering their mouths and their eyes darting to the boys then back to the ground. One of them, a tall girl with long slim calves, made a gesture with her hand, a small flick, and directed an almost imperceptible jut of her chin to one of the boys sitting on the ground. He got up and strolled over. She could not hear what he said to them, but she saw the girls look from him back to the others. Eventually a few more got up, strolled over, and pairing off, they wandered into the noise of the spruikers and tinny tunes.

Rose knew the boys would take the girls on the dodgems or the octopus or any of the rides that would thrill and scare their girl enough to make her cling to him and if he was lucky he'd feel her breasts pressing against him. Then he'd demonstrate his expertise on the hoopla or knock-ems and win a prize for her and hope that would be enough to get him a kiss and later, perhaps more.

The white girls were not so shy. After some whispered discussion amongst themselves they marched over to the group and each stood in front of the boy they had picked.

'You need a hand then?' One of the girls said loudly. She reached down, took the boy's hand and pulled him up towards her. His feet slipped on the sand and he stumbled into her, knocking her back a couple of steps, which made the others still sitting on the ground guffaw and snigger.

‘Watch out for him, love’, one of them called, ‘That’s his favourite move in the ring ta get a mug onta the dirt’.

She ignored the comment and the sniggers with the single-mindedness of someone who already knew the moves. ‘Can you win me one of them crystal vases I seen at the darts game, then?’

Without subtlety or shame the rest of the girls were looked up and down and if the shape of her legs or the size of her breasts or the sheen of her hair appealed, the boy stood up, slowly, as if he was doing her a favour.

And Rose supposed they were. The rule among Showies was whoever works in the alley goes for free, so the girls knew that to team up with a boy from the tent would get them a couple of rides, a hotdog and ice-cream and at least one pretty memento to put on their dressing table. The boys knew that the more trinkets they could win, the more they might get lucky and the girls might be more than willing to spend the evening with them.

Rose had celebrated her eighteenth birthday with her two friends, twins Irene and Iris, at the trots. They’d left her to go to the Ladies and freshen up and do a circuit, because as Irene said, ‘You never know when you’re going to bump into *him*’. Irene was convinced the racetrack was the place to meet eligible men.

She had been standing on her own for a few minutes when a man had sidled up and asked if she had any tips for the next race. She’d smiled, ‘I haven’t a clue, my friends’d know, they’ll be back soon’.

Maurie had introduced himself. He was shortish, broad-shouldered, with heavily greased dark hair and was wearing a light-grey suit with a blue pin-stripe. From the back he looked younger than his tanned face betrayed, with the lines from his nose to his mouth and, when she watched him laugh, the crows’ feet which fanned from the corners of his eyes.

When Irene and Iris returned, Irene had given Rose a look and whispered, 'Jeez, Rosie, he'll scare off the beaux, they'll think he's our dad or something, can't you get rid of him'. Irene's favourite film was *Gone with the wind*.

But Maurie didn't go. He'd studied the form for a bit and given the girls some tips. He'd placed bets on horses for them that won or got a place, bought them champagne and told stories that made them laugh. Lying in bed that night, Rose felt happy.

The next day a large bouquet of flowers, red roses and white carnations, had arrived at her house with a card thanking her for her most enjoyable company and inviting her to go dancing. The following Friday night he'd led her onto the dance floor, even though she told him she'd never done the 'swing' or the 'lindy hop' or the 'jive' before. He'd held her close, around her waist, and shown her how to twist and turn and spin round and back again. She'd laughed and they'd danced until her feet hurt and bits of her hair had sprung out of the bun her mother had made at the nape of her neck. Maurie'd said, 'You have beautiful hair, too beautiful to be tied up', and she'd laughed again and undid the clip and let out the thick, wiry curls.

On the way home he'd told her he would be away for a few weeks but hoped to see her again when he returned. Rose had agreed. Maurie wasn't polite and careful like the young men she and Irene and Iris and their friends went out with. They would never have held her round the waist like Maurie had. And Maurie was funny; he made her laugh. He made her feel grown up.

But today not all the girls got their boy. Rose watched as one of the boys, leaning back on his elbow and shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand, looked the girl up and down several times, then turned to the others who hadn't been singled out and said something. They laughed. The girl stood there, unsure, wondering if he was just taking his time getting up, shifting her feet nervously and twisting the strap of her bag in her sweating palm. Finally it dawned on her she

wasn't wanted. She turned away, wearing her humiliation hot and red on her cheeks, walked past her friends who had been waiting by the corner of the tent and slipped into the chaotic anonymity of the alley.

Rose put the needle down and watched the Showie kids playing skippy and chanting 'my mother said, I never should, play with the gypsies, in the wood ...' Katharine had cried when she realised that she would be missing the Royal again, and Maurie had become impatient with her. While they were packing her bag to go back to her grandparents, Rose had soothed her, 'We'll see next year'.

'Not just next year, every year', Katharine had insisted.

Rose had laughed, sat on the edge of the bed and hugged her. She had been foolish to think that the love that had taken its time to be felt would fade when Katharine was away from her.

'Penny for them.' Joan stood on the edge of the blanket. 'The boys are asleep. I bribed the girls to stay with them so you're not on terror-watch after all.'

'Good, I can get a bit more of this darning done. And they're worth more than a penny.'

Joan laughed. She eased herself down, pulled two cigarettes out of the packet, lit her own and handed the box of matches to Rose.

'Anybody else would say that's too much or something, but not you.' Joan watched Rose scratch absently at her chest. 'I should get you some worry beads', Joan laughed.

Rose felt the redness creep up her neck. She picked up her darning, 'I think it's going to be a good year for everyone. I already heard Jack and Dot talking about getting swing boats for next year. And Bull and Pat adding a shooting gallery and more dodgems. What's the bet Barb and Artie show up next year with a new ride too'.

Joan laughed her throaty laugh, 'Yeah, and despite that Barb'll swear blind they haven't done as good as last year. Every year she says the same. Still, got to keep all their kids in work, I s'pose'.

'She's after Artie to get her a new van.'

‘Really? I didn’t know that. Well, that’ll make her Mrs. Kerfoops, won’t it.’

They both laughed at the thought of Barb yelling at Artie for not putting something away properly in a nice new van. She had the neatest, cleanest truck, which was good because all the women knew they could always duck over to Barb’s and borrow a cup of sugar or a few spuds when theirs had gotten temporarily misplaced in the increasing disorganisation that happened after weeks on the road.

Joan sighed. It was much easier to say something that made someone laugh. She did not feel the slightest guilt at having a dig at Barb to get a laugh out of Rose. They’d had plenty of laughs about Rose over the years.

‘The girls miss Katharine. How is she?’

‘She was upset about missing the Royal again. Then Maurie forgot to take Mumps. She still won’t go to sleep without that teddy bear. He had to drive all the way home to pick him up and take him back to her.’

‘And what about you?’

‘I asked him and got the same answer I get every year.’

Joan wanted to say, ‘Rose, why don’t you just *tell* him’. Instead she said, ‘Well, one day it won’t be a teddy bear, it’ll be a bloke’, and laughed.

Suddenly, loud voices nearby made them turn.

‘That’s Vern, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah, sounds like Bull Cochrane too. Bloody hell, they’re rowing. C’mon, help me up.’

Rose and Joan ran to the grassed area behind the trucks and vans. By the time they got there a group of Showies had already gathered, including Vern’s wife, Helen, and Bull’s wife Pat, who were both yelling at the two men slugging it out on the grass. Blood was streaming from both their noses, down their shirts and dripping onto the ground.

‘Yer mongrel bastard’, Vern snarled, taking another swing at Bull, who stumbled back a few paces and landed on his backside. He stood up, wiped his nose on his sleeve and went in swinging.

‘You bloody called me a mongrel bastard for the last time, yer lily-livered son of a bee. I’ve ’ad enough of yer snivelling. Every bloody year it’s the same “poor me, oh I didn’ get the ground I deserve ’cause I’m special, boo-hoo-hoo”. Whyn’t yer go ’ome and bawl on yer mammy’s shoulder, yer ...’

‘That’s enough, you two!’ Artie grabbed Bull’s arm and swung him away from Vern just as one of his punches was about to connect. At the same time, Vern’s brother Harry grabbed his arms, pinning them to his side. The two men struggled to free themselves, but they were held fast and led away in opposite directions. Pat, crying loudly, with Barb gripping her arm, followed Bull. Harry’s wife, Judy, was kneeling beside Helen, who’d slumped to the ground. Some of the other women had already herded the children away as soon as the language had gone past the acceptable level for young ears.

‘Bloody hell, that was a bad one.’ Joan tugged Dot’s sleeve, ‘What started that off?’

Dot, red-faced, said, ‘I dunno, Joan. Vern always has a go at whoever he reckons got the ground he wants, but who knows. Poor Helen. I better go see how she is’.

Joan lit a cigarette. Rose saw her hand shaking as she tried to light it.

‘C’mon, let’s go. Do you want me to make you a cup of tea or something?’

‘Bloody hell, I feel like I need a good stiff drink.’

‘It’ll blow over. You heard Dot. It’s not the first time. You’ll see, by tomorrow they’ll be down the bar having a few wooblies together and making jokes about it.’

‘For heaven’s sake, Rose, it’s just getting worse every Royal. Can’t you get your bloody head out of the sand and see it!’

Joan threw her cigarette down and ground it into the dirt with the heel of her shoe.

‘What do you mean, get my head out of the sand?’

Joan faced Rose and crossed her arms over her chest, ‘No one talks about the rows with you anymore, Rose, and you know why? I’ll tell you why. It’s because you just start on about all that first come first served business like a broken bloody record.’

Joan turned and marched off, calling over her shoulder, ‘I better see how the girls are going’.

Rose stood at the edge of the now empty patch of grass. She could hear the boys at the back of their tent. Some of those who had left with girls had returned already. They were talking and laughing, recounting their deliberate failures to win a prize to get rid of a girl who may have looked good but turned out prudish when it came to kissing and having her breasts fondled.

Chapter 13

Joan stomped back to her van, stumbling in the potholes along the track. Bloody ground. Bloody men. She knew this fight was going to interfere with the women. The thought of bloody rosters for the troughs and two camps with their own get-togethers in the evenings, and people not speaking to each other for bloody weeks or maybe even months until they got over it. And now she'd gone and got angry with Rose. She especially didn't want this to interfere with her and Rose. With Katharine at school now there was no expectation that Rose should help with childcare, and yet she was always more than happy to look out for Lou and Anna, and mind the twins. She was more patient with the boys than any of the other women. Even Barb made excuses about being busy when asked to mind them.

Between the joints she could see the mugs streaming through the alley, oblivious to the drama she had just witnessed. Next to their tent was a new heelie, Madame Ouish. Joan had watched the woman tie her little sign to the leg of the table—'Madame Ouish for Good Fortune 1/-', written in large gold curly lettering on a purple painted square of cardboard.

Joan poked her head round the tent flap. Tommy was nowhere to be seen. 'I s'pose the bugger's in the bar as usual', she muttered. She was just about to open the door of the van when the woman sitting across from Madame Ouish caught her attention. She sat, hunched, watching the cards like a child from a large family watches her food.

'Pleaze shuffle zee cards, Madamoiselle', Madame Ouish said in her ridiculous accent, sliding the pack across the table then flicking her black gypsy shawl with its red tassels across her shoulders.

'Conscentrate on zee qvestion you vish to seek for zee answer vile you shuffle zee cards, Madamoiselle. Zis qvestion you do not need to tell to me.'

She watched the woman shuffle enthusiastically and, with expertise, cut and splice the deck. She probably spent most of the housekeeping on getting people like this Ouish woman to tell her she was going to be happy and rich one day. She had a thin gold band on the third finger of her right hand. Poor thing. Not a happy marriage then, Joan decided. Happily married women didn't go to fortune tellers.

The woman cut the pack into three piles on the left side of the table. Then Ouish picked up the deck, keeping the cards face down.

'You're meant to pick them up with your left hand', the woman said.

'Mademoiselle, zis depends on vezzer you are from zee norzern 'emispere or zee souzern. I am from zee nors and in zee nors vee pick up zee cards vis zee right hand.'

Joan had to put her hand over her mouth to stop from laughing out loud.

The woman opened her mouth as if to say something, seemed to think better of it and instead wriggled, trying unsuccessfully to sit a bit further back in the rickety folding chair, while Ouish placed the cards in the shape of the Celtic cross.

Ouish turned over the cards in succession and read each one slowly, then paused for a bit of dramatic effect before turning over the final card.

'Zee Sree off Cups. Mademoiselle, you haff had zee serious doubt about zee happiness in zee future based on vaht you and your frients and family haff sought is flightiness and, er, zee selfishness. But due to zee effort from your part to overcome ziss and certain factors off zee chance in your favour, including zee 'elp off a man 'oo could be a frient or adviser.'

Ouish leant back in her chair and smiled at the woman.

'And so zere vill be a 'appy answer to your qvestion, Mademoiselle.'

She leaned forward then, her elbows resting on the table, her face close to the woman's, and smiled.

'Ziss iss a ferry goot reading. You are fortunate to be my last customer off today and so I giff you some magic dust to put under zee pillow to 'elp you efen more to get zee 'appy life, no?'

The woman pocketed the little package and pushed down on the arms of the chair to lever herself up, but the chair came with her. Madame Ouish ran round behind her, pulled the chair off the woman's broad hips then held out her hand. The woman put a shilling into her palm.

'Sank you, Mademoiselle. Everysink vill be much better, you mark my vords.'

'Thank you', the woman smiled, her mouth suddenly generous and happy.

Then, 'Shoost a moment, Mademoiselle,' Madame Ouish said.

She took a handkerchief from the band of her skirt, pointed to her own mouth and parted her lips, held the woman's chin in one hand and wiped something with the hanky.

'Zere, zee lipstick on zee lips goot, on zee teeth not so goot. Zat is beautiful smile now.'

'Thank you. Thank you very much.'

Ouish gave a little bow and the woman padded into the din of the dusty alley and was soon swallowed up by the hordes shoving from one game or ride to the next in case they missed out before the show closed.

Madame Ouish flopped into the chair and tugged the scarf away from her neck. The material must have been coarse and, with the heat, it had left a spotty rash. She looked up and saw Joan and smiled.

At least the heeilies didn't give each other blood noses and black eyes.

She was just about to open the door of her van, but changed her mind. The kids'd be right for a bit longer. She headed back up

the track to Barb's. She knew there'd be a group of women in her van, all giving their opinion on the fight and what ought to be done. Barb was a good friend with both Pat and Helen, so any division between them over this business would be hard. It would be hard for all the women. The men never understood that.

Joan got halfway to Barb's van and turned round again. The Tiernan's tent was down the end of the alley this year and she was glad. It was nice and quiet down there. You could choose when you wanted to talk to people.

She could hear Shirley and Vera laughing as she passed their trailer. She knocked on the door.

'Who is it?'

'Me. Joan.'

'Come in, come in. Make yourself comfortable. Shirl's just giving Vera some make-up hints, aren't you, love?'

'Thank the Lord. I need a bit of talk about make up.'

'Don't thank the Lord, dear', Vera laughed. 'Vera doesn't think He'd approve at all.'

'There's plenty'd say the alley is generally lacking in His presence so I wouldn't worry', Shirley grinned.

Vera pulled a lipstick out of the bag on the table and opened it.

'Ooh, now that's a lovely colour.'

Joan watched as she filled in half her lips with the pretty orange.

'How do you do that without a mirror? I'd have it all over my face.'

'Hmm, well, you probably haven't had as much practice as Vera.'

'I was a dancer.'

'Really, what sort?'

'I did the Dance of the Seven Veils.'

Shirley tipped the bag of make-up onto the table. 'Show us how you did your face. Here, I've got a mirror.'

Joan took twenty minutes to put the make-up on, more time than she'd ever spent, and when she held the mirror away to look at the full effect, she smiled.

'Pretty gorgeous, don't you think?'

'Exotic! I love the eyes.'

'I usually use blue but this green is good. I like it.'

'Well, you've given Vera a few hints. Now, she's getting very thirsty. Might have to slip up to the bar for a nice cold one. Coming, Shirl?'

'I should go and wash this off.'

'Leave it on. You look fabulous.'

It was sombre round the fire that evening. The Cochrane's and Pickles were missing and even though Barb had her guitar and Artie his accordion, the songs were not sung with their usual gusto. Rose was the only one, after a few beers, who was chatty as if nothing had happened. When it came to the perennial favourite 'Show me the way to go home', quite a few people decided to call it a night and those who were left to sing struggled to get their thin voices even halfway down the alley.

Joan waited until everyone had cleared out of the toilet block before she slipped out in her pyjamas and dressing gown. She crept past the other vans with sounds of muffled talk and snoring. The only lamp still on was in the Jacksons' van. She could see Rose's shadow brushing her hair behind the thin curtain. As she passed she could hear the brush tearing through Rose's thick curls and the anxiety in her voice.

'What's going on, Maurie? Joan said there's fights all the time, not just today. Why haven't you told me about them?'

Joan stopped. It wasn't difficult to hear, as Rose wasn't being very successful in keeping her voice down. She was usually very careful to keep her night-talk quiet.

‘Joan’s exaggerating. Don’t take any notice. We’ll sort it out’, she heard Maurie say.

Rose stopped brushing her hair, ‘Well, if it’s not as bad as she says, you should tell them to stop acting like little kids and just get on with it’.

‘It’s not that simple. We got to get rid of the heelies. And we’re all agreed on that. The other thing is ground. But no one can agree on that. Some of them reckon the boxing tent should go down the end of the alley so it doesn’t clog up every show. And if we’re down the end the mugs’ll have to walk past all the joints and they’ll spend more money.’

‘They’ll spend it all before they get to us, that’s what’ll happen, and we’ll be the ones loosing out. You said it’s always been first come first served and it should stay that way.’

‘The best thing you can do is not worry about it. I’ll sort it out.’

Rose began ripping the brush through her hair again. Joan watched Maurie’s shadow reach for her, but she leaned away and kept brushing. Her hair now looked like a thick black halo encircling the shadow of her head.

‘You better stop that, love. You look like someone’s plugged you into a socket.’

Joan almost laughed out loud. She covered her mouth with her hand.

Then she heard Rose, ‘Everybody knows what’s going on except me’.

‘They don’t know anything. Nothing’s settled and you don’t need to worry about it.’

‘Well I’m not going to let them steamroller us into going down the end. They all show up every Royal with a new ride, or a new food van and then they have the nerve to complain about business. It’s not fair.’

‘Enough now. I said I’ll see to it. Come on, turn the light out and come to bed.’

Joan let out a deep breath and walked across the track. She'd never heard Rose get that close to having a row with Maurie. Not like her and Tommy. She didn't give a damn who heard them argue because she always knew she was right and Tommy was wrong. Pity Rose had to pick the bloody ground business to start digging her heels in. She ought to be bloody standing up to him about Katharine.

In the toilets she looked at her face in the chipped mirror. Vera and Shirley were right; she did look good. She undid her dressing gown, lifted her top, pulled the elastic waist of her pyjama pants down and ran her hand over her the loose skin. She turned to the side, lifted her ribcage and breathed in. The skin stayed, a soft apron of flesh folded over her belly.

Chapter 14

Corrie picked up her hospital uniform from the top of the pile of clean clothes and had almost finished ironing it when there was a knock at the door.

‘I’ve just seen your Dan steal four of my empty bottles.’

‘And how do you know it was him?’

Mrs. Vujevic’d put her hands on her hips, ‘I saw him climbing over the fence. There’s no mistaking your boys, Mrs Cooper, you should keep a closer eye on them, you should, they’re up to mischief all the time and no one to keep them in check, they need taking in hand if you ask me’.

Mrs. Vujevic made exactly the same speech at least once a week. Corrie got a shilling from her purse, dropped it into her neighbour’s apron pocket, shut the door and went back to the ironing.

At first she’d been rude to the woman, telling her to lock her empty bottles in the laundry if they were so damn precious. Now she had her work and enough money it was easier for Corrie to give her the cash. Besides, Mrs. Vujevic wouldn’t be living next door if she didn’t need the money from those bottles.

Corrie sprinkled water from the old tomato sauce bottle with holes in the lid onto her uniform and finished ironing it. She hung it over the chair, switched off the iron and put the basket of unironed clothes back on top of the copper.

‘Holly Vujevic thinks she is better than us’, the woman across the street had told her not long after she’d moved in. The story was that Holly came from a well-to-do farming family up Busselton way, but had been caught in the stables with one of the Yugoslav migrants who had come out after the war to work on the farms. She’d been banished by her family and shunned by the rest of the landed gentry, which is how they liked to think of themselves, even though they

were just ordinary people whose great grandparents had taken up land when it was being given away. So Holly Vujevic lived, like the rest of them, in government housing on a potholed, dusty road on the edge of town.

On the days when Corrie wished she'd never left the country, when the pettiness and gossip of living in a street in a town got too much, she would knock on Sylvana Panozzo's door and spend a couple of hours sitting at the green Formica table in the kitchen, drinking tea and listening to stories about Rimini, the town where Sylvana had grown up. Sylvana and her husband, a baker, had migrated after the First War, but the type of bread Roberto baked was not what the locals thought bread should be, so he worked at the petrol station filling tanks, washing windscreens and doing the grease and oil changes.

She washed the breakfast dishes, made herself a cup of tea and sat at the kitchen table next to the window. She took her embroidery out of the sewing basket and held the placemat up to the light so she could examine the spray of cream wattle flowers on one corner. It was not right. The stitches were too even, which made the blossoms and leaves look unnatural, too stiff and perfect.

As she put the fine needle in and out of the fabric she hummed along to the song on the radio, ... *make one lonely week ... seven lonely nights ... I cried and cried for you ...*

When Stan still hadn't come home over a year after Herbie's death, Corrie continued to sit on the verandah, one moment hoping a car would stop and he would get out and walk up the track, and the next thinking he was dead. She imagined him lying somewhere with maggots crawling out of his eyes like the dead sheep in the paddocks. Then she imagined him with a girl, a lovely girl with red lips and curled hair and a pretty dress. And then she'd hear a car in the distance and would hope again.

These thoughts were repeating themselves as she'd sat absently watching Dan make a new ging one afternoon in the late summer. He had found a branch, about two inches around, with a nice fork in it and rummaged in the drawer in the kitchen—the one that collected all the flotsam and jetsam—bits of string, pencil stubs, an empty tin of tobacco with papers that had stuck to themselves, a pair of scissors, and elastic bands. He'd picked out three of the longest and thickest, looped them together and secured each end around the forks.

She watched as he'd pulled the bands tight and let them go, testing their strength. He'd filled his pockets with stones and practised with tin cans balanced on the pile of scrap timber behind the shed.

She watched him standing there when a flock of black cockatoos came wheeling in and settled on the ground, and when he took a stone from his pocket and held it against the elastic. He'd held the ging out straight and pulled the elastic back as far as he could stretch it, then let it go. The squawking flock had risen in a noisy flapping of wings. The cockatoo that kept watch while the others fed was on the ground.

Corrie had meant to leap out of the chair and run to Dan, grab the ging and slap him hard but her legs were fused to the grubby fabric. She felt the hot angry cry in her throat gurgle and bubble like boiling jam. She wanted to close her eyes but they would not. She had sat, silent, staring as Dan walked over to the dead bird and kicked it with his bare foot. It was soft and floppy, like a rag doll. He'd bent down and poked it, then stood up and got a piece of wood, held it above the dead bird and dropped it. Corrie had watched as the guts had spilled out onto the dirt, and Dan squatting next to the dead, squashed bird, picking it up by its silky black tail feathers, which had fanned out revealing the splash of bright red, and throwing it behind the pile of scrap timber.

The following morning, Corrie was standing on the verandah when Lily pulled up in the truck. Lined up on the verandah were a few boxes.

‘I want you to take us to the railway station.’

‘Lord, Corrie. What? Now? What for?’

‘I’m going to live somewhere else. I’m going to get one of them goverment houses.’

‘Live! I thought you meant for the day! Is that what the boxes are? Oh Lord, have you gone silly? You can’t just up’n go like that! They don’t just give over a house when you turn up on their doorstep.’

‘I don’t care. We’re going today. We’ll sleep in the waiting room on the station if I have to. I’m not staying here. Not one second longer!’

Lily had sat down on the dusty step, ‘I know once you get your mind set there’s no shifting it. You always were a stubborn little mite, but this needs a bit more planning than just upping and offing.’

‘I have to go, Ma. I can’t explain, but I have to.’

Lily sighed, ‘Tell you what. Let me go and see Maureen. She knows people in the town. P’raps there’s someone you can stay with till you get sorted out’.

Corrie sat and put her arm around her mother’s thick waist and rested her head on her broad shoulder.

‘Come with me. Come and live with me, Ma.’

For a second Lily considered the idea.

‘I can’t do that, love. You know I can’t. For what it’s worth, I married your father and I’ve been in it so long now. I can’t leave. And anyway, there’s Nell.’

‘Bring her with us. She’d be all right.’

‘No. No, she wouldn’t. She’s best out here. She’d get in strife in town. She’s safer out here. I can keep me eye on her.’

Lily stood. She looked down at the young, worn face of her daughter.

‘What about Stan? You have to tell him. You can’t just up and go without telling him where you’ve gone.’

‘He’s not coming back.’

Corrie had looked up, shading her eyes with her arm so she could see her mother’s face.

‘I know what’s been happening in town. I sent Bobby back to school and he told me what they’ve been saying about us. I went to school with those people and now they let their kids tell my boy he’s a black bastard. The thing is, I told him to take no notice. Then yesterday I hear him rowing with Dan and calling him a black bastard.’

Corrie folded her arms across her chest and rocked her thin body.

‘And then Dan killed a bird.’

Lily sighed. She squinted against the glare of the sun as she stared across the bare paddock to the dirt road that led to the main road that went to the town.

‘Well, I can’t say I understand what killing a bird’s got to do with it, Corr. And I’m not saying you’re not doing the right thing, but I’m not sure you can leave today.’

She turned, leant over and kissed her daughter on the head, ‘I’ll go and talk to Maureen’.

For the first couple of months after she’d moved to town, she’d lived in the back two rooms of a friend of Maureen’s in exchange for some cooking and cleaning. Then she’d got the cleaning job at the hospital and moved into the house.

Maureen MacDonald drove all the way to see her every Saturday. She’d sit in the old chair, stitching away at little doilies and hankies and telling Corrie the latest news about her mother, the farm and Hew and anything else she could think of that might interest her.

One day, when they had been sitting in silence for a while, Maureen said, 'I've got plenty of spare thread, why don't you have a go?'

Corrie had refused at first, 'I tried to do it before Bobby was born but it looked terrible. I'm no good at it'.

Eventually she'd taken the needle and thread to please Maureen, and even though what she made looked terrible, Maureen had said, 'It's practice, and when you make something you're happy with, you feel better'.

Corrie had kept practising and Maureen had been right; she had started to feel better. As she concentrated on trying to get the stitches right, she didn't hate herself as much for what happened, or feel so angry with Stan for leaving her alone. She found, after a long time, when she had learned to make something she was happy with, that she could keep her thoughts of Herbie to when she was stitching and they didn't crowd her when she was meant to be answering somebody's question or getting dinner on the table. When all the children were in bed, she would get out her embroidery and stitch her memories of Herbie into placemats and doilies and pillowcases.

It was nearing the second anniversary of his death when Bobby and Dan had come home from school and Bobby'd crashed open the front door, shouting 'Mum, your ballerinas are on the porch!'

Corrie had picked them up and set them along the windowsill in the lounge room. She'd left the light on all night. The next morning, after Bobby and Dan left for school, she had taken Eric, Mattie and Grace to Sylvana's and waited for the knock on the door.

After he'd left her, Stan had drifted around Perth, sleeping down by the river with the other blackfellas until it was time to head north with the tent. The following Christmas he had stayed in Perth again, going to the Coolbaroo and finding girls who were beautiful and smelled sweet.

One night he'd been with a girl in the bush in Kings Park. He'd lain looking at the stars, thinking of Corrie. He thought about how

he'd been cruel to her, questioning if the baby was his, and now Grace would be walking and he didn't know her, how he missed his boys, and he had known then, on that blanket with that girl curled against him, that he did not want to be away from Corrie and his children, that he would make it up to her, he would make everything all right.

When the tent had returned from up north, Rose had persuaded Maurie to let Stan take the truck. He had driven to the shack. It was empty except for the little china ballerinas in the shadow box on the wall. He had scooped them up and driven over to Maureen and Hew's and paced the verandah until they'd come in for lunch.

He had driven to the town and parked outside the ugly fibro house and sat there. He had not thought until then that Corrie might not want him. He had sat for a long time, then taken the ballerinas and put them in a line at the front door. He would come back the next day and if they were still there he would drive back to Perth.

Stan had told her all this as they lay together in their bed, Corrie lying still and straight, Stan curled beside her, his foot tucked between hers.

The sound of the ball thudding against the bin in the backyard roused her. Corrie left the needle in the leaf she was working on, put the piece of fabric on the table, and stared out the window.

She hadn't seen Grace for a bit. She got up and went to the back door. From behind the shed Grace appeared with the dog, both of them soaking wet and covered in soapsuds.

'I gave Gruffie a bath. I'm making him nice and clean.'

'Making an almighty mess more like. Look at you, you're soaked to the skin.' Corrie tried to keep the anxiety out of her voice.

The dog wriggled out of Grace's grasp, shook itself and rolled around in the dirt.

'Oh, Gruffie! Naughty dog! I'll have to start all over.'

But the dog was having none of it and scarpered round the corner of the house as fast as he could.

Corrie lifted her daughter up. 'Next time Gruffie needs a wash, you tell me first and I'll help. Come on and get those wet clothes off.'

Chapter 15

Rose could never explain still-towning when Joan said, 'I don't know how you put up with all that dust and the heat and all that emptiness. It'd scare the bloody hell out of me, being out there'. She couldn't explain how, after living so closely with the others at the Royal and on the south run, she felt ready to go, wanted to go, but by the end of it she was always ready to get back; she was tired of camping out and missed the chats over the troughs and the sing-a-longs round the fire. She could never explain it, this wanting to go and wanting to return and needing the space in between.

If Joan had said something to her this year, she would have said, 'I'd take the dust and the heat and emptiness any day and I'd just do still-towning forever if I could. I'd go right round the country, and when I got back to Perth I'd start all over again'. But Joan hadn't asked her. They talked, but it was polite. Each made sure of that, and each made sure they did what they'd always done to help out, but the laughter and the fun had gone. It was business.

They had been in Broome for a few days when three of the boys didn't show up. There were plenty of locals keen to join, but Maurie refused to put in the time to train them because they never stayed once they got down south. It was too cold.

'We'll just have a shorter house', he grumbled. 'Not much point hangin' round anyway with that bloody heemie's troupe here. Bloody raggle-taggle lot they are, too.'

Maurie always took Rose to the Sun cinema on the last night before they left Broome. It didn't matter what movie was showing, it was having sandwiches and a beer under the stars that was special.

Tonight an old Tarzan movie was playing. Just before eight, Rose packed a straw basket; they walked to the cinema and joined the queue at the front reserved for whites and 'other' whites, the

Chinese and Japanese and those of mixed heritage whose skin was honey-coloured. To the right was a queue for the Aborigines, Malays, Filipinos and Koepangers.

Maurie paid for the tickets and they filed in and took seats near the front. An hour into the film, the tide crept in and feet had to be lifted onto the wooden bars of the seats in front. Rose's empty basket floated towards the screen and bobbed there until Maurie sloshed over to retrieve it. He was promptly told not very politely to sit down. Rose laughed. He'd happened to block a particularly ravishing close-up of Maureen O'Sullivan in a very skimpy costume.

They set off early the next morning, driving south to the junction where the coast road and the inland road met. Heading inland on the corrugated road, barely more than a track, the flat country occasionally broken by a rocky outcrop in the distance, they set up on dusty reserves on the edge of towns and from somewhere people came to watch the boxing shows. It was hard to imagine what the towns had been like in their heyday, when they had been home to so many people mining for gold and precious gems, or the hubs for flourishing sheep stations. In some, the only reminders were boarded-up grand hotels or town halls, while others were just a wide main street of empty shopfronts and sagging verandahs, so that you didn't know which town was which.

As they travelled further south the red earth was sometimes hidden by carpets of pink, yellow and white paper daisies. When they stopped for a cup of tea and to stretch their cramped legs, Rose picked a small posy and kept it on her lap until the little flowers became coated in dust and lost their sheen.

The nights became colder. Not like the damp cold down south. This was the sort of cold that made her breath a thick cloud of steam in the crystal early morning air and left cracks in her skin as she stirred the pot of porridge on the fire before anyone else had left the warmth of their blankets.

In the mid-morning sun, as Maurie drove along the wide, dusty main street of the last town for the run, when her fingers had finally thawed, Rose discovered she'd burnt her thumb on the hot mug of tea she'd clasped that morning.

There was not a soul anywhere.

'The races are on. Everybody's at the track.'

They set up camp, swatting at the flies that crawled into the corners of their eyes and settling in swarms on their backs. When the boys'd finished pegging the tent, Maurie grinned, 'Come on, love, get yer glad rags on and we'll hob nob with the town toffs over at the races'.

'And just what glad rags do you think I've got', Rose laughed.

'And just what town toffs do you think they've got?' Maurie grinned. 'Tell ya what, put yer apron on and we'll join the hoi polloi instead.'

'What about the boys?'

'Afternoon off. Everyone from a hundred mile radius'll be there.' Maurie rubbed his hands together in anticipation, 'I could do with a bit of a flutter on the gee-gees'.

A marquee had been set up at the edge of the red dust bowl that served as the town's oval and racetrack. Inside, the men were crowded round the makeshift bar and the women were sitting at tables dressed in their Sunday best; pillbox hats, matching two-piece suits and white sandals now stained pink.

Rose stood at the entrance while Maurie lined up at the bar to buy the beer. She watched the women giving her the once over; the ones who knew the boxing tent whispering to the others, who nodded and turned their eyes to more interesting things, like the station hands, scrubbed and dressed in their tight pants and R. M. Williams boots. She turned and scanned the people outside the tent. To the left families had set up on blankets along the railing with their picnic baskets. As the men lounged with their beers, the women kept up a steady but futile wave over the plates of food to try and stop the

swarms of flies settling on sandwiches with curling crusts and jam sponges with cream already soured by the heat.

On other side, their boys had divided into two groups. The white boys were chatting with a few white girls near the tent and the Aboriginal boys had joined a large group of blacks sitting in the dappled shade of the only trees, about a hundred yards away. Kids were running around, shouting and laughing and dogs were yapping and growling over scraps of food dropped in the dirt.

Suddenly, a man was calling a race over a microphone and Rose could see on the far side of the track a large cloud of dust preceded by three horses. As she watched them come round the bend into the final straight, a pinky-red horse, which had probably been white this morning, pulled into the lead as it galloped past the tent. A plume of red dust drifted over the picnickers and into the tent, soon followed by a thick cloud as the other two horses passed. Rose watched as it settled onto the froth of her beer like a dusting of pink icing sugar. She drank it down quickly.

'Think I'll have a bet on the next race.' She handed Maurie her empty glass, 'And another one of those too. Can you put five shillings for me on the next pink horse that runs? This is fun'.

'That's my girl. Place or win?'

'Win, of course. Pink horses always win, didn't you know that?'

'No, I didn't. I'll be darned. I better put a few bob on too then.'

'You better. I know she's going to win.'

'Ah, it's a she is it, yer pink horse. I thought it was a stallion.'

'Who ever heard of a pink stallion?'

'Yer right. There's no such thing.'

Rose leant over and kissed him on the mouth.

It was a good half an hour and another beer before the next race and it looked to Rose like it was the same three horses. There was definitely a pink horse, only this time it came a distant third.

'I don't want to wait for the next race. Anyway, it'll probably be the same horses and I think my pink horse is tired out.'

‘Just stay for the next one. I put a bet on. The boys’ll be disappointed if I drag ‘em away so soon.’

‘You can come back in a while and pick them up.’

‘Not a good idea. Sure as aces there’ll be trouble over some girl if I leave ‘em. Hard enough for the local boys as it is. I mean it’s not like they’ve got much of a choice. They don’t need outside competition and I don’t want a free match on the dirt when they can pay to watch one on the canvas.’

Rose shrugged, ‘I need to find the loo’.

Instead she walked over to Stan, who was standing a little apart from the group under the trees. A very loud exchange suddenly broke out between about eight people at the edge of the group. They were shouting, waving their arms and gesticulating. One old woman got up and paced around the group, shouting and beating her palm against her thin chest.

‘They sound like you boys, spoiling for a row.’

Stan looked at her, confused for a few seconds, then laughed, ‘You mean that?’ He gestured with his chin to the group, ‘They’re just havin’ a good yarn, ay’.

‘How do you know?’

‘I don’t know what they’re saying, but I know they’re just having a good old joke about something or other.’ He laughed, ‘So all them times you thought us boys was rowin’, we was just havin’ a gammon. That’s funny. That’s how blackfellas are. We talk loud’.

Rose remembered when she was a girl, the Greek family who lived next door. She would hear them over the back fence talking loudly, over the top of each other.

‘We’re leaving after the next race. Can you get the others to meet at the truck?’

‘No worries.’

Rose watched him walk over and sit down at the edge of the group under the tree. The old woman who had been pacing and beating her chest said something and there was raucous laughter.

They may as well have stayed at the races and then gone to the dance for whites at the local hall afterwards, because it was very slow in the tent the following day. All the drum beating and bell ringing sold a few dozen tickets, at most.

'I reckon between the legal grog and the sly grog everyone's got a stinking hangover. I won't bother using the gees 'cause this lot couldn't throw a decent punch to save 'emselves', Maurie said as the boys filed off the boards. Rose wasn't going to own up, but she was feeling a bit seedy herself.

She had to admit she was looking forward to getting home now. She was looking forward to a hot bath and scrubbing the red dust out of the pores and creases, and especially to seeing Katharine. She tried not to think about the Royal.

Chapter 16

Joan stood at the door of their tent, looking down the alley. Tunes competed with the Showies spruiking their games on loud hailers. Opposite were a couple of heelies, including Madame Ouish, her little table tucked between the Flannerys' hotdog van and the Banks's clowns.

This year she and Tommy had the only freak show: Carla and Johnny, a dwarf and giant; Mirna, the 'Girl in the Goldfish Bowl'; and Queen Lelelie, the 'Fattest Lady in the World'. Jack and Dot had decided to steer clear of human exhibits this year after booking acts that hadn't turned out to be quite what they'd hoped.

'That's what happens when yer scrimp on costs', Tommy had smirked, 'Yer get what yer pay for I reckon'.

Instead they had a 'Man Eaters' show: advertising a giant sixteen-foot shark, which the mugs found once they'd paid up and got inside was a ten-foot stuffed one mounted on a piece of blue painted board. Near its gaping mouth was a rather smaller than life-size picture of a skindiver to add a bit of drama. In a tank they had three two-foot long crocodiles, and the 'Hound of the Baskerville', Jack and Dot's own bedraggled, but unfriendly to mugs Alsatian. Jack had the poor thing in a cage with an elastic band round its snout to pull its lips back from its teeth and Dot had sprayed generous amounts of hairspray along its spine to make the hair stand on end.

Above her head, pacing the boards, Tommy began his spiel, 'Ladies and gen'lemen, welcome to *Tiernan's Entertainment*, the *best*, the *only* show, Ladies and Gen'lemen, at the Royal this year where you can see the most *amazing* sights, experience the *wonders* nature has to offer. Nowhere else in *Australia* will you see anything to rival it, ladies and gen'lemen ... '

Joan watched Maurie climb up onto the boards, followed by the boxers. She and Tommy had got to the grounds late because Mick

had fallen off the swing and sprained his wrist. By the time they'd waited over an hour to see a doctor, the only space left was next to the Jacksons' tent. As Maurie rang the bell and one of the boys beat the drum the pitch in front of his tent quickly filled.

'Come on now, who'll take the gloves, put up yer hand, two pounds for three rounds, who'll take the gloves ... '

She watched the mugs trying to weave their way through the crowd to get to their tent, the men and women dressed in their Sunday best, looking slightly sheepish as if embarrassed to be seen partaking in such forms of entertainment, and the groups of teens dressed in their skin-tight black jeans, studded leather jackets, and shoes with points long enough to be a weapon. They'd certainly be a spectacle in the towns down south.

Joan tightened the straps on the leather satchel around her waist while she waited for Tommy to finish his spiel, ' ... What you are about to see here today, ladies and gen'lemen, are *marvels of science! Wonders of nature! Truly amazing sights* you've never seen before in your life and I can guarantee you will never see again!'

As the last of the mugs handed over their money and filed into the tent, Joan released the flaps and zipped the door closed.

Joan looked at her watch, 'I've got time for one more before the next show'.

She tilted her glass as Barb opened another bottle and filled it with ice-cold beer.

'Poor Judy, I found her in the laundry crying her heart out', Barb said through the cigarette smoke. 'I feel for her, I do.'

'They were a good family. And so were the Cochranes. It's left a bloody big hole', Joan sighed. 'Still, who can blame them?'

The fight between Bull and Vern had caused a split in the community that had not been resolved. Some had sided with the Pickles and some with the Cochranes. A few, like Rose, who refused to take sides were treated coolly by both camps. When the

Cochranes hadn't shown up for the south run, the men had been grim and stony-faced and the women had kept to their vans. Someone—no one had owned up to it—had pasted up a roster at the troughs, which the women had stuck to even if it meant wearing the same dirty clothes. Those who were in the Cochrane camp reassured each other that Bull'd get over it and they'd be back for the next Royal. Those in the Pickles camp reckoned Bull Cochrane was a gutless wonder and if he couldn't put the past in the past then he wasn't much of a Showie anyway, although some of the women did own up on the quiet that they missed Helen. The Cochranes never did come back and the roster had remained in place since. Then Vern and Helen Pickles had called it quits too.

Their leaving did not resolve anything amongst the Showies. If anything, it was causing more disagreements and further divisions.

'The men have been talking about this bloody guild for years and years and nothing's got done. I'm sick of it. They couldn't form a bloody line to save themselves, much less a guild.'

'I'll be honest with you, Joan, as far as I'm concerned we need to move this along. To my way of thinking it means we have to be united. The men talk and talk and it just goes round in circles and nothing gets done.'

'I'm as sick of it as you are.'

'And what's Rose got to say for herself about all this?' Barb sniffed. 'Does she care two families've left?'

'Course she does. She's as upset as all of us.'

'But she'll hang onto their spot at the top of the alley anyway.'

'You can't blame her for all this, Barb. I mean, I know she gets on your goat, but it's the men who aren't doing anything to sort it out.'

As soon as she and Tommy had set up, Joan had gone to see Rose. Despite the coolness that was now between them, their attachment to each other's children had remained.

'So, Katharine here this year then?' she'd said, hoping Rose would've had the gumption to finally stand up to Maurie, but Rose

had got all prickly and said, 'Maurie won't budge, so stop asking me every year'.

Joan had blurted, 'Just bloody *tell* him'.

'Leave it, all right.'

But Joan didn't leave it. 'Come off it, Rose. She could come to the Royal at least. It's only a week. What do you think he's going to do, divorce you just 'cause you disagree with him? Bloody hell, Tommy would've walked out on me twenty thousand times by now all the rows we've had.' And she would have gone on, but Rose was scratching away at her chest like she always did when she was upset.

'She's so busy running round after those boys like she's their mother she doesn't think about what's really important', Barb interrupted Joan's thoughts.

'Bloody hell, don't start on that again, Barb.'

Barb sniffed, 'Ooh, someone's got the hump. What's more important than sorting this out I'd like to know.'

'So you've talked to Artie and your boys, have you?'

'Not yet. But I will. We need to all do it together.'

'Yeah, well, people in glass houses, Barb.' Joan emptied her glass, 'Anyway, I'll be off then'.

Joan strode back to their van and flopped at the table under the annex. Bloody Barb. What the hell did she think they were going to do, get a posse of women to ride up to the OK Corral and have it out with the men? She was sick of it.

'Can I join you?' Rose waited until Joan nodded before she sat down and lit a cigarette. She had just escaped from the laundry, which was all talk about how much some missed Pat and others missed Helen and now some were not talking to poor Judy, Helen's sister-in-law, as if she had something to do with it.

'Honestly, I'm sick of the talk around the place. You wouldn't want to be dead around some of this lot. I've heard them swearing undying loyalty to Vern and Helen in one breath, and with the next

wondering if they'll sell off their vans and rides at reduced cost, seeing's they won't be needing them any more.'

'I think Judy and Harry'd have something to say about that.'

'I hope so. Mind you, Barb and Artie did quite well out of the Cochranes.'

'Not just them. The Flannerys got a couple more joints.'

Joan looked at Rose, 'That's Showie business! As Artie said to me years ago, business is business'.

'That's funny. Maurie always said to me, "We're like a big family, everyone looks out for each other".'

Joan sighed, 'Well, they're both bloody right when you think about it'.

A piercing whistle made them jump. Carla, sitting next to the Tiernans' truck with Johnny, Mirna and Queen Lelelie, was waving at them, yelling, 'Come over here!'

'That must've been an interesting conversation. We've been trying to get your attention for about ten minutes', Mirna grinned, 'good job Carla's got a whistle loud enough to wake the dead'.

'How's tricks, Rose? Haven't seen much of you.'

'Busy as usual.'

'Like that is it. Joan's lucky. Having the likes of us, so reliable, so professional, she hardly has to lift a finger.'

'Gee, thanks, Carla, you've just ruined my reputation. It'll be all over the alley by tomorrow', she laughed.

Johnny stood up and patted his pockets. 'Well, ladies, I've got to go do a couple of things. See you later.' He bent and kissed Carla on her cheek.

Rose watched him stride along the track behind the joints. He didn't look that much taller than Artie when he wasn't next to Carla and without the thick-soled shoes he wore on stage.

'Wonder what he's up to', Carla sighed.

'No good, I'd say', Mirna laughed.

“Ere, you casting nasturtiums on my ’usband?” Carla reached across the table and pretended to slap her hand.

‘Most people do, honey’, Lelelie grinned, ‘naughty Johnny, off for a flutter’.

‘No! Heaven forbid. Why, ah think ah maht faint. Mah Johnny would do no such thang!’ Carla dabbed her forehead with a paper napkin.

‘That’s a fine southern drawl. You should be in the movies.’

‘I should be on the television. With Desi Arnaz. Talk about gorgeous.’

‘Carla Booth! I’m going to tell Johnny you want to run away with Desi!’

‘I wish! Shame he prefers redheads.’

‘Thank God you lot’re here. I needed a bloody good laugh.’
Joan looked at Rose, but she was watching the warbs dodging the kids playing tiggy as they dashed between trucks and joints with boxes of plush.

‘Well, we better get ready for the next show.’

Rose looked at her watch. ‘Yes, I should really be getting back. Maurie’ll be wondering where I am.’

Chapter 17

Rose brought out the tray of cake and coffee and put it on the table. She poured the coffee and put a slice of cake onto a plate and handed it to Maurie, then sat down. Her parents had left soon after lunch, and Katharine and the boys had disappeared into the shed. Rose had rehearsed everything she wanted to say a hundred times.

All through the south run she had thought about Katharine sitting at a desk writing out sums and reading aloud to the teacher. Joan just didn't understand. The Tiernan children would be Showies, but Maurie was determined Katharine would not be, and Rose could not go against him on it.

She had also thought about their place at the top of the alley and what Maurie had said to her years ago about getting a guild and and all the trouble amongst the Showies. She could talk to Maurie about that. She had thought of a way to keep their tent where it was and then he could sit down with the other men and sort out the rest of the ground. They could have their guild, get rid of the heelies, and everyone would be happy.

'I've been thinking about ground and this guild and I've worked out a way we can keep our tent at the top of the alley ... ' and that's as far as she got.

Maurie banged the table so hard his coffee cup bounced off and smashed on the concrete. He stood up, knocking the chair over, 'Don't you start! I've had enough of bloody people tellin' me what I should be doin' and I expect a bit of peace and quiet in me own home, not you stickin' your bib in as well!'

Rose sat, rooted to the chair. She heard the sound of their car door slamming and then accelerating away from the house. She felt the hairs on her arms rise. She got the dustpan and brush, swept up the broken china and put it in the bin. She scraped the cake into the

bin. She collected up her cup and saucer and the plates from the table and put them in the bin too.

She picked up the chair Maurie had knocked over and sat down in it. She reached over and picked up her cigarettes. When she tried to get one from the packet her hands were shaking so much she gave up and pulled it out with her lips. It took ten matches to light it. With each cigarette she counted the number of matches it took to light it until it was one for one and then she smoked until there were no more cigarettes in the packet.

Late that night the sound of the flywire door opening woke her and then Maurie was standing in the door of the sitting room. He flicked the switch on and looked at her. She heard him walk down the passage and shut the door to the spare bedroom.

Maurie spent the next morning in the shed and ate his lunch on the back verandah with Katharine and the boys. His stories and their laughter spilled through the window into the kitchen.

She found herself wondering what her life might have been if she had married someone younger, someone like the men Irene and Iris had married. Like them, she imagined, she would get that husband ready for his day every morning and wave him good-bye. She'd keep the house clean and cook and wash and welcome him home at the end of the day. She thought about how she cooked and cleaned and washed for Maurie and the boys. Then she remembered how alone she'd felt when Katharine was born.

She went to the bathroom and got the tube of cream from the cupboard. She sat on the edge of the bath, undid her blouse and rubbed the cream into the red, itchy skin on her chest.

She and Maurie had spent the summer going to dances, picnics in Kings Park and movies. One Sunday after he'd returned from a trip they had driven out to Scarborough. Maurie had taken her arm as they'd walked towards the face with the large mouth that was the entrance of Luna Park. It was a strange face, she'd thought, not at all

attractive, but rather grotesque, with its pointed ears, cross-eyes, bulbous nose and teeth with big gaps between them. She'd said, 'Look at those awful eyes, why did they make them like that?' But Maurie was distracted by the group of young men and girls standing around the entrance.

They were about her own age, she guessed. The boys were wearing suits that looked ten sizes too big. The pants were wide and baggy with tight cuffs and the jackets came almost to their knees. Maurie had laughed, 'Got more padding in them shoulders than a lunatic's cell'. The girls were wearing denim jeans and little flat shoes, like ballet slippers, and their hair was long and loose around their faces.

Loud music spilled out of the mouth. It hit Rose in bursts as the wind swept it up and blew it away across the sand dunes. She saw one of the girls, in her tight blue jeans, grab a boy and kiss him on the lips. Another boy grabbed the girl from behind and began tickling her until she collapsed onto the footpath, laughing and rolling around with him on top.

As they'd walked through the gawping lips, one of the boys, his thumbs jammed into his pockets, had whistled and yelled, 'Hey sexy, why don't you give your Pop the slip and come with me. C'mon, baby, I'll teach ya how to have a bit of fun'. She had felt embarrassed, just for a few seconds, and had wanted to pull her arm away but the mouth had swallowed them and she had been swept into a lurid world of flashing lights and a cacophony of amplified tunes and screaming that bounced around the walls.

The rides formed a T-section stretching in a line in front of them and down the centre: a carousel, dodgem track, a Ferris wheel, barrel roll, go-karts, a chair-o-plane, a gee whiz, a rocket ship and pulling boats. Along the far side, with their backs to the beach, were tents offering all sorts of games of chance and skill, and promising grand prizes.

They had wandered along Penny Arcade, eating hot dogs and watching the young men show off their skills in the shooting gallery and the knock-em-downs, and the young women squealing with delight when they were handed a glass trinket or a stuffed teddy bear. Maurie had winked and said, 'I know you want me to win one of those pretty ornaments'. She'd laughed and imagined what her mother would say if she brought home one of those trinkets and put it in the cabinet with the imitation Royal Doulton. It turned out Maurie was a lousy shot with a popgun.

They had a go on all the rides except the barrel roll and that was only because Rose was wearing a dress and she'd seen what happened to the girls' dresses. She liked the Ferris wheel the best. From the top she could see for miles—the ocean on one side, Perth, sand dunes stretching to the Darling escarpment dotted with dolls' houses, tiny ant-people and matchbox-sized cars.

As they were leaving, Maurie asked if she could wait for a minute while he attended to something. He'd left her sitting near the entrance. A young couple had sat on the seat opposite her. The boy was teasing the girl for being a scaredy-cat. The girl leaned forward and vomited. He swore and jumped up as if he'd sat on a drawing pin, grabbed a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the spatters of vomit off his pants. The girl groaned, her head still between her knees and a line of lumpy dribble hanging off her bottom lip. He paced up and down in front of her, his hands behind his head, every so often flinging his arms into the air, his fists clenched as if he was railing at the universe for the injustice that had befallen him. Suddenly, he turned and walked away. The girl stood up and stumbled after him, calling 'sorry' to his retreating back.

As Maurie had steered her out of the strange mouth through the growing crowd milling around on the footpath, Rose had stared at the smart aleck-boy, as if daring him to make another comment, but he didn't even glance at her.

While they'd sat on the curved verandah of the Scarborough hotel opposite the entrance sipping beer, Rose noticed the bumble bee on the bulbous nose and said, 'Oh, it makes sense now'. Maurie had looked at her and raised his eyebrows.

'The cross-eyes. The cross-eyes on the face, now I see the bee on its nose it makes sense.'

'You didn't notice it?' He looked at the face. 'It's not funny if you don't see the bee.' He drained his glass.

'Friends of mine just bought the place. Barb and Artie Banks. We go way back. They got into games and rides about the same time I bought the boxing tent. You'll like Barb.'

Maurie had kept talking, telling her about his life, the boxers, how he travelled to different towns, and finally he'd looked at her, almost bashfully, and said, 'I'd like you to come with me. I want you with me'. She had been so surprised she'd just gawped like the mouth. He was asking if she would marry him and go travelling and live in a tent. She remembered all the stories he'd told her about the people he worked with, of the fun and laughter. She thought about the times when he was away and she'd met less and less frequently with her friends. The talk about clothes and glory boxes and who and when they would marry and how many children they would have had bored her.

He'd taken her hand, 'I'd like you to meet Barb and Artie and the others one day soon. Barb'll show you the ropes'. Almost as an afterthought he'd said, 'Think about it, ay', and he'd laughed and said, 'but not too long'.

Then she'd got home late and overheard her mother.

She had been excited about getting back to Perth after their two week honeymoon at Caves House. She'd wanted to see the expression on her parents' faces when she told them they would be in their house in Gosnells for just a few weeks before going away. She had imagined herself unpacking, putting everything in its place,

and then going away with Maurie on this new mysterious life. She'd felt a thrill about meeting all the people he had told her about, that he'd said so many times they were like family, that everyone stuck together and looked out for each other. It would be so different from anything she had known. It would be so much better. And then of course there would be babies to keep her busy. So they had driven to her parents' place to pack her things.

Then what happened that afternoon was a short and heated discussion between her father and Maurie when Maurie had said, 'Of course Rose will be coming with me'.

She'd got up from the table and walked across the room to where Maurie was standing by the door. 'Well', she'd said, looking at her father and then her mother, 'Now I need to pack my things so we can get to our house before dark'.

When Maurie made love to her that night, for the first time in a long time, she lay in the crook of his arm, her breath warm on the curly, greying hair on his chest, and she wondered what it would be like to have another baby.

'I'm scared of being down the end, Maurie. I'm scared of being alone down there, that I won't see anyone and no one'll come and see me.'

He didn't say anything for such a long time that Rose thought he must have fallen asleep.

'I dunno how to fix that one, love. I thought I was enough for you.'

'Oh, I didn't mean that. You are.'

She had done so much thinking it had gone around in circles, this imagining what things might have been and thinking what things were and she'd felt exhausted in the end from all the thinking and imagining. But she had wondered if Maurie was enough. What was enough, anyway?

'We're a team, and I do support you.'

‘I know, love. I’m sorry. Everyone has rows. Some people don’t say anything, but the row’s goin’ on in their heads so they might as well get it out in the open.’

Lying next to him now she felt relief. He wasn’t angry with her any more. Tomorrow they would set up the swing they’d bought Katharine for Christmas. Rose curled in closer and put her arm around him and her thoughts about another baby drifted away.

Chapter 18

At the sound of the first footstep crunching on the gravel path, Gruffie started barking and running in circles at the door. Eric flung it open and he, Mattie and the dog raced outside. The boys launched themselves at Stan and clung to his arms, while Gruffie, barking and running in circles around his legs, made Stan teeter and almost lose his balance. Bobby and Dan were too old to do things like that and waited while their Dad extricated a hand and clapped them on the shoulder, 'Being good and helping yer Mum, I hope?'

Corrie stood in the door, 'They're trying, aren't you boys?'

'Me and Mattie and Eric chop wood and Dan helps carry the shopping for her, ay, Mattie', Bobby grinned, elbowing his brother in the ribs.

'And Bobby's trying to be funny but he isn't.'

'Get off Dad's arms a minute so he can get inside!'

With the dog still yapping at his heels, Stan managed to make it to the door and kiss Corrie before bodies re-attached themselves.

'Hang on a minute, let me get inside, ay.'

Grace emerged from behind Corrie's dress.

'Gracie! How's my girl then?' Stan could never quite believe Corrie's stories of how excited Grace was before he arrived, because as soon as he appeared she was shy and reserved, watching him and giving monosyllabic answers to his questions.

'You right to bring everyone over to the grounds tomorrow, Corr? I'll meet you by the tent. We'll have time before the house starts to look around, ay.'

Stan ruffled Mattie's hair, 'Hey, boys, we got a big Maori fella now, Tony. He's got tattoos on his face and he makes his eyes pop out of his head and sticks his tongue out.'

'You should see 'im, Corr, scares the mugs something rotten. We can hardly stop ourselves laughing, watching the look on some of their faces. You won't be scared, will ya, Gracie?'

'No. Not even Eric can scare me.'

'That's me girl'. Stan laughed. 'Now, I just got to go out the back and then I reckon I might have a bit of spare change in me pocket and I reckon you boys can take Grace down the shop and buy some chips.'

'Grace, get your shoes on then. You too, Mattie. I don't want to be pulling bits of glass out of your feet.'

They were all waiting at the door when Stan came down the hall. 'Now, I just remembered I got a bit of change in me pocket, so's you boys can go an' buy some chips, an' you can go with 'em, ay, Gracie.'

For the tiniest fraction of a second the children looked confused and looked at their mother, who by the end of that tiniest fraction of a second had laughed, 'We know, you duffer, why'd you think they're all standing by the door?' And Stan had laughed too, dug into his pockets and gave some coins to Bobby.

As she did up her bra Corrie said, 'I put a pillowcase set in the craft section'.

Stan grabbed her arm and pulled her back onto the bed, 'We can go see it tomorrow, ay'.

She kissed him, 'You better get dressed before the kids get back'.

Stan lent over the side of the bed and rummaged in the pocket of his pants, 'Here, another one for ya', and he put a little ballerina on the pillow. 'Reckon I better make another box for 'em, ay.'

She picked up the little china figurine and turned it over in the palm of her hand. She remembered the first one he'd given her, standing outside the truck, after they'd made love and Stan had made her close her eyes and hold out her hand. She remembered

how when she'd got home after sneaking over to the old shack to see him, she would take it from the box under her bed and hold it tight, feeling the smooth china grow warm in her palm, and it was the warmth of Stan's skin as she'd lain next to him and listened to his words and dreamt of their future.

She closed her fingers around this new one, with its little red rosebud mouth and blue flowers painted on the skirt, and felt the cool smoothness of the china become warm in her hand. The ballerinas, now crowded into the shadow box, measured their years together. Except the year that was missing, the year that Herbie died and Stan hadn't come home. She sighed, 'Come on, get dressed! Can't have the kids seeing you in the raw like that!'

For the last few weeks, after washing the dinner dishes and making herself a cup of tea, she had sat at in the chair and taken her embroidery out of the sewing basket. The pillowcases, stitched with a spray of cream flowering gum on one corner and an orchid on the opposite corner, were almost ready to submit to the Ladies' Church Auxiliary tent for the Show. It was her best work yet and she was excited.

She knew her work deserved a ribbon. The other entries were always roses and pansies and forget-me-nots and nasturtiums. She stitched the wattles and orchids and gum leaves and other bush flowers, the names of which she had no idea, from memory, from the time when Stan had taken her to the Stirlings. She had stitched the little marks and blemishes into the flowers and leaves as well because that was how they really looked—not all perfect, but flawed and damaged like nature, like everything.

As she had put the fine needle in and out of the fabric she remembered, too, the sagging cake and burnt jam she'd put in for judging just so she could be with Stan. She had not cared two hoots about winning a prize then.

At ten-thirty Corrie and the children set off down the rutted, dusty road to the sports oval. In the distance she could hear the sputtering motors, blaring tunes and Showies' spiels over the loud hailer. Sideshow alley was in full swing. She was dressed in her best pale-blue pleated skirt and white blouse, and a new straw hat with the old bunch of cherries on the side.

They saw Stan walking towards them just after they'd turned into the main road.

'I tried to come a bit sooner so's I could walk up with you. Problem with the ground to sort out. Hard as a rock.'

Corrie smiled, 'Prob'ly better you didn't anyway, you would've been ashamed of your daughter. She's got a temper hot as curry powder, that one'.

Stan looked at his daughter, with her straight fair hair, light skin and blue eyes and winked. Rose Jackson looked more like one of his mob, with her brown curly hair and brown eyes and olivey-sunned skin. He remembered hearing her in tears once, telling Maurie how she'd gone into a store in a town and the bloke had served everyone else. She reckoned it was because he thought she was a black.

When the children had had a ride on the octopus, the chair-o-plane and the cha-cha, and put ping pong balls in clowns' mouths and shot at metal ducks with popguns, Stan got them all a stick of fairy floss, and they wandered across the oval to the produce and craft tent.

Inside, Corrie led Stan by the hand past trestle tables covered in white cloths. On each one were carefully arranged rows of jams and preserves: deep red plum, delicate pink quince, orange, and golden lemon butter; plates of fruit cakes, some iced white and smooth as silk with lacy borders; sponges dusted with icing sugar and scones with red jam and cream; lamingtons; peppermint and vanilla slices; vases and bowls of artfully arranged flowers: roses, hydrangeas, pansies, sweet williams, petunias, and hollyhocks with sprigs of pussy willow; and vegetables: white orbs of cauliflower and

cabbages big enough to last a month, bright-orange carrots that would satisfy a draught horse, bunches of silverbeet and rhubarb.

At the end, across the width of the tent, was the craft table. Tapestryed cushions with 'Home Sweet Home' woven into pictures of English cottage gardens, pale blue and pink baby rugs with appliquéd teddy bears, patchwork quilts, crocheted lace doilies and tablecloths, knitted soft toys with button eyes and red grinning mouths, and wooden pegs with frilly gingham skirts and painted faces. Corrie stopped in front of the embroidery section. There were tablecloths and runners, napkins, and along the front, the pillowcase sets stitched with bright, delicate posies. She stopped and ran her fingers over the spray of creamy blossoms and the little orchid on her pillowcase set.

'See, I got it right I think. Don't you think?'

Stan looked at orchid with its delicate pink and white petals and the tiny cup in the centre, and the spray of flowers with their delicate filaments. One of the leaves was curled and he could imagine a little insect, a spider perhaps, that had made a home in that leaf.

'They're beautiful, Corr.'

'Do you think so? Really?'

'Looks like the real thing, ay. I'm proud of ya.'

As they turned to go, Corrie heard one of the women behind the table mutter, 'If she thinks she could win a prize with that. Who's ever seen a flower like that, anyway'. And she knew that the woman was right, that those who judged the craft would not give her work a prize, not because it wasn't good, but because it was different and how can you put a value on difference if all you understand is grades of sameness?

Chapter 19

Joan was folding clothes in the lounge room. The window was open and she could hear Tommy and Artie talking. They were supposed to be closing off half of the front verandah for a bedroom for Paddy and Mick, but the sound of bottle caps hitting the floor told her that work had stopped for the day.

‘Look, I make good money off the rides but I’m all for getting rid of the heelies. Stewie reckons we lost on the hoopla again and I dunno, but after what’s happened with Vern and Bull maybe a guild’s the only way to go.’

‘I wanna get rid of the heelies just like the rest of yous, but I’ll be bugged paying for it. We don’t need a bloody guild. Paying out money. For what? And who’s gonna mind the money, eh? There’s sixty foot of empty space in front of Maurie’s when he’s not open and then it’s a bloody sardine can when he is? Maurie’s tent has to go down the back. That’s what I want. I mean, the rest of us open at ten and he doesn’t start till one, so that’s four hours of dead space.’

‘Three.’

‘Yeah, righto, now I know yer good at sums.’

‘Look, mate, just ’cause the heelies don’t affect you. Shoving Maurie down the back won’t fix a bloody thing. Everybody’ll still be rowing over ground? What about that Royal when you had a punch up with Snowy when he backed his truck in faster’n you and took the ground you wanted?’

‘What about it?’

‘Orright! But we can’t afford to keep losing good families. Bloody eastern staters’ll come over’n then where’ll we be.’

‘Come off it, Artie, that’s not going to happen.’

‘You mark my words, if we keep losing people, one day there’ll be a decent road and their trucks’ll roll in and that’ll be it. It’ll be bloody finished for all of us.’

‘You’re talking through yer hat, fair dinkum.’

‘Look, the point is the talk’s just goin’ round and round. Maurie’ll only move down the back if its fair and we all settle on ground. That’s what he said last time I had a yarn with him.’

‘I dunno why yer keep banging on about it. All right, I agree about the heelies. I just reckon we can get rid of them and then sort out ground between ourselves once Maurie moves down the back. I’ll be buggered if I’m gonna pay out good money for a bloody guild. I got a house to pay for and four bloody kids!’

‘Christ, Tommy, tell yer what, you just go and ask the heelies very nicely if they wouldn’t mind just shoving off somewhere else, and next time someone takes the ground you want just ask them very nicely to please move their truck ’cause you had your eye on it first.’

‘All I’m saying is if you lot want to go ahead and do yer bloody guild I’ll see how yer go for a year or so and if it looks like it’s working I’ll join. Can’t be fairer than that now, can I?’

‘Ah, yer a bloody useless young coot, Tommy. If it wasn’t for Joanie I’d knock yer bloody head off.’

‘Yeah, well, wouldn’t be the first time yer tried that but I wouldn’t try again, old man.’

‘Right. Yer finished talking?’

‘Yup.’

‘Yer sure?’

‘Yup. I said all I wanted to say.’

‘Good. Well, I got one last thing to say to yer, Tommy Tiernan, before I go home. Clean the four-legged moths out of yer wallet so’s you got the money for a guild, ’cause after talkin’ to you I’m with Maurie fair and square. You’re stupider than I thought and that’s saying something, ’cause I always reckoned if yer brains were ink yer wouldn’t have enough for a full stop.’

Joan heard the clunk of the bottle on the floor and then the door of Artie’s truck slam. She stuck her head out the window.

‘What did he mean “four-legged moths in your wallet”?’

‘I got no bloody idea. I reckon Artie’s a bit touched sometimes.’

He ambled over to Joan, leaned in the window and kissed her mouth, running his tongue gently along the inside of her lips. He stood back, looked her in the eyes and grinned in his lop-sided way.

‘Are you betting?’

He reached out his hand and cupped her chin, ‘Just now and again, okay. It’s nothing. Jeez, with four kids to look out for. Just now and again. Really. Just a bit of fun’.

‘Bloody hell, Tommy—’

‘Can’t deny a man a bit of fun, can yer?’

She couldn’t. Tommy spent long hours driving the Watkins van, selling balms and balsams to housewives, ‘snake oil’ he called it, and evenings writing letters and making phone calls to get acts lined up for the next Royal.

Anyway, Artie probably was exaggerating. He was dead against betting and got on his high horse about any little thing when it came to Tommy. Artie still felt the need to act like her father sometimes. He meant well, but he should stay out of their business. They were doing well, no doubt about that.

‘Well, reckon I’ve done enough here for today. When’s tea? I’m starvin’.’

‘Clean up the bloody mess first. You want the boys getting nails in their feet and sawing their fingers off?’

Tommy shrugged. ‘How are me boys, then? They being good for their mummy?’

Joan started to pull the sash window down, ‘Hurry up!’

She turned back to the pile of clothes and finished folding them. She remembered how pretty the house had looked when she had eventually unpacked and put everything in its place. The bassinet had just fitted between her side of the bed and the wall, the baby clothes folded and tucked away in a small chest of drawers in the hall. The girls had loved their new room with their new lemon chenille

bedspreads, even if there were no shelves for their toys. Then she'd had two babies.

At first, Tommy had moved their bed against the wall to fit the other bassinet and when the twins had outgrown them, the chest of drawers was moved into the hall to make room for cots. Eventually bunk beds were put in Lou and Anna's room. Lou had begged to have the room out the back, but Tommy had it made into an office and bought a small pool table 'for when the boys come over so's we don't have to listen to screaming kids', and that was that. Closing the verandah had been the only option. Pity it was taking so damn long.

Joan went to the kitchen and got potatoes from a bag in the cupboard under the sink. She could hear the radio and the click of pool balls. She was squatting on the floor, reaching up and dropping the spuds into the sink when Mick came crashing through the flywire door.

'Muuumm, Paddy won't give me back my truck', he whined as the door banged against the jamb.

'How many times have I told you not to bang the bloody door!'

Mick flopped onto the chair, 'I hate Paddy. He's mean as old bootstraps. He said I had to give him my truck or he'll smash it'.

When the boys were born the only way she could tell them apart was the small strawberry birthmark just above the hairline on the side of Paddy's forehead. She had laughed when Tommy said to the nurse that he hoped they'd get to know which one was which before their hair grew, or they'd be forever pulling it back to see who was who.

'Where's Anna? I told her to keep an eye on you two. Where is she?'

'I dunno. Prob'ly in her room, reading, like she always is.'

'Tell you what. You get a chair up to the sink and peel the spuds. That's better than your truck isn't it?'

Joan leaned her head into the hall, 'Anna! Anna! I know you're in there. Get your bum out here! I told you to watch the boys, not

bury your nose in a bloody book!’ She got the slab of corned beef out of the fridge, dropped it into a large saucepan of water and put it on the stove.

Anna was lounging against the door, ‘What?’

‘Get those spuds done or you won’t get to listen to the *Goons*.’

Tommy was having a shower when she went into the back room and rifled through the papers that littered the table he used as a desk. She found the bank statement tucked between a folded page torn from a magazine with a picture of men standing in a boat admiring a large fish one of them was holding proudly above his head.

She looked at the columns. In the black credit column there was a row of zeroes and in the debit column there was a row of red numbers. She shoved the paper in the pocket of her apron. She felt the sweat trickle down the sides of her face. When Tommy opened the door she flew at him, arms flailing, her fists clenched. A couple of her blows landed before he pinned her arms at her sides.

‘What the hell!’

She freed her arm, pulled the paper out and waved it in his face, ‘What the hell is this? A bit of a bet now and again! Doesn’t bloody look like that to me. You bloody, bloody bastard!’

‘Now just hang on a bloody minute, will yer.’

‘Hang on for what, Tommy? Hang on until what? Until the house is gone? What? What do you want me to hang on to?’

‘It’s not what yer think. It’s not the horses.’

‘Well what the bloody hell is it? Tell me, go on. Tell me!’

‘Can yer calm down a bit first, please?’

‘Calm down! You want me to calm down? Look at this!’ She waved the paper again.

‘I didn’t want to tell yer. I didn’t want to worry yer, that’s all.’

‘Jesus, Tommy, did you think I wouldn’t find out? Have you got sawdust between your bloody ears or something!’

‘We’re not makin’ as much on the shows as we should. That’s the problem. I didn’t want to tell yer ’cause I kept hoping it’d get better, but it hasn’t. I went down the track a coupla times to see if I could make it up. Honest, love, it was a coupla times, that’s all.’

‘Bloody, bloody hell! How’re we going to pay this off then?’ Joan lowered herself to the floor.

‘I dunno. D’ya think I haven’t been thinkin’ about that?’

Joan lifted the apron and hid her face in the grubby folds that stank of corned beef and cried. Tommy squatted beside her, put his arm around her shoulder and waited until her tears had stopped. She screwed the fabric and wiped her nose. They sat in silence for a long time.

‘I’m not going to lose the house, Tommy. I’ll bloody die before that happens.’

‘We won’t lose the house. I promise we won’t. We’ll think of something. And I’ll take extra runs with the van until then. It’ll be all right, Joanie. We’ll be all right.’

Joan looked into his beautiful blue eyes, the colour of pale cornflowers.

‘We can’t afford to bring acts over. Not until we pay the bank. I’ll have to dance again and you’ll have to do your magic.’ She blew her nose again into the stinking apron. ‘I won’t lose the house, Tommy, I won’t.’

Chapter 20

Rose was sitting at the table in the caravan, staring at the darkness out the window. There was no moon and a cool change had blown in that afternoon. The cold night air permeated the thin walls. She couldn't stop herself thinking about how it would be if the Tiernans left the alley. She shivered. She could hear Artie on his accordion and Barb playing the guitar and singing 'On Moonlight Bay'. She got up, put her jacket on, closed the door and walked down the alley to join the others.

Yesterday Barb had come to the troughs while she was washing the towels and tapped her on the arm, 'Can I've a word? In private'.

She had opened the door of the caravan for Barb and followed her in.

'I told Joan I was going to talk to you. We have to do something. You know about her dancing.'

'Yes, what about it? She's doing the shows again so they can save money. So they can build a new room for the boys. She doesn't want them out on the verandah. She said it's too hard to keep an eye on them.'

'They've gone broke.'

'That can't be right. She's always says how well they're doing.'

'It's true. The shows've been losing money. Tommy never told her. She found a letter from the bank.'

'Oh, Lord. Poor Joan. Why didn't Tommy tell—'

'Yes, well. Don't get me started on Tommy. I'd like to wring his neck 'cept I reckon Joanie wouldn't appreciate that particular solution, so I've come to talk to you. The thing is, Rose, we have to get going on this guild.'

Rose opened her mouth to say something, but Barb held her hand up, 'Now just hear me out. I know you think it's not fair for your

tent to be down the end. But all of us'll have a bit to lose and some to gain. We lost the Cochranes and then Vern and Helen because they couldn't take the rows any more. And the rows'll just keep on until more families leave, mark my words. And if others leave too, like Joan and Tommy, because the alley's all clogged up and they can't get people through to their joints, what d'you think'll happen. There'll be hardly anyone left.

'Then you know what'll happen, Showies from over east'll move in. They'll come over on the train. Then one day there'll be a proper road and their trucks'll roll in and that'll be it for us. There'll be no Perth Showies. This's not even about the bloody heelies any more. It's about us. It's about stopping the fights and sorting ground and it's about keeping the alley open so's everyone gets a fair go. We're all in this together, Rose, and we got to look out for each other'.

Rose remembered Maurie trying to tell her years ago it made sense for them to move to the end of the alley, to keep the space open, and she had tried to find a way round it, her big plan to rope the alley off because she had wanted to stay at the top. She had wanted to stay there so she could overhear the talk, the little snippets of this and that, the plans and intrigues, as the men passed their van to get to the bar and the women passed to get to the troughs.

'All I'm saying is we need to get this guild and all of us need to get the men off their backsides and do it. You have to tell Maurie how important it is. We have to get things moving and sort this out once and for all.'

Barb leant forward, resting her arms on the table and clasping her hands together as if she was about to pray, 'We all got our battles, Rose, but we got to pick the right ones. This is about all of us'.

Rose couldn't look at Barb.

'For me and Artie, I don't care where our fixed places might be, could be next to you, I'd be happy with that. This is what I think. I've got to work on Artie. We don't need everybody to come on board, but

we need enough to get this guild up. I reckon Maurie's the right person to get onto it too.'

Barb lit a cigarette. 'You're Joanie's friend, Rose.'

She gave a wry sort of smile, 'Can't remember me and you ever sitting down having a chat, can you?'

Rose swallowed the words she wanted to say. The words about how Barb had been awful to her when she was young and didn't know what she was supposed to be doing and made her feel wrong when she worked so hard looking after Maurie and the boys. She understood Joan's attachment to Barb, the way she and Artie had helped her out when her mother died. But Barb was one of those people who made it clear who she liked and didn't like, and as far as Rose was concerned Barb had never liked her and so she had learned to keep her distance.

Then Barb had smiled, 'Come on, cheer up. You always was a bit thin-skinned. You're a Showie, and about bloody time you knew it'.

There was an awkward silence as they had sat with just the narrow table between them.

'I should be getting back. Artie'll be wondering where the hell I got to. You think about what I said. Tell Maurie to talk to Artie. Tell him he has to get on to this.'

That evening Rose joined a few of the Showies huddled round a fire and stood next to Maurie.

'Yeah, well, I had to let one of me warbs go the second day in, he was too bright for me. I told him he oughta be at the university. I was havin' trouble with the motor for the ice-cream machine, it was comin' out too soft and the mugs were complainin'. So I'm looking at the bloody motor and the warb's standing there and he reckons he knows all about motors so I say, 'Well good, you get it going proper will yer 'cause I'm losing money', so he bends down to have a look and then he stands up and says "I see what yer problem is. You need a bigger motor", and I tell him, 'Well, that's a half-horsepower,

the biggest one there is' and he says, "You need a quarter-horsepower" and I says, 'Ow do yer figure that, a half-horsepower's bigger'n a quarter-horsepower'. And he looks at me and says, I kid you not, "Nooo, four is larger than two".'

The warbs—the tried and true ones—laughed along with everyone else at the stories of others who soon showed they didn't have the nous of a gnat and 'were about as useful as tits on a bull', as Artie was so fond of saying.

'I had a mug today who bought tickets for the Gee Whiz for him and his missus and his tribe and it come to fifteen shillings and thirty pence. He hands over a pound, so I says, "Give us thirty pence an' I'll give yer a fiver". He gets some change out of his pocket and he's just about to hand it over, then he says, "Hang on a minute, if I give you thirty pee that means yer charging me too much", and I says, "No, I give you fiver change". So he's shifting from one foot to the other and looks at his missus and scratches his head and says, "No, I don't do that kind of thing", so I says, "Righto, mate, no worries, here's yer change", and I count out four pound seventy in shillings and give it him. Ran me out of coins, but it was worth it.'

The laughter subsided, more bottles were opened and glasses refilled.

'How 'bout another sing song, ay. Get me blood going.'

'Yeah, c'mon, Barb, give us another one.'

Rose drew the collar of her coat up and shoved her hands into the pockets.

'One more for the road, Barb!'

'But make it a quickie, ay. Me knees are bakin' and me bum's freezin'.'

'Yeah, I reckon, front cheeks rosy, back cheeks frozy.'

Barb picked up her guitar and began to sing 'Que sera, sera'.

Rose looked across to where Joan was standing with Tommy. He had his arm around her shoulder and was looking at her, but she was staring straight ahead into the fire and did not join in when the

chorus started ... *what ever will be, will be, the future's not ours to see, que sera, sera ...*

Chapter 21

Joan took another drag of her cigarette and dropped it onto the dirt beside the step, poured the cold dregs of the tea on it and listened to the 'ssst'. She looked at her watch, stood up and opened the door of their caravan. The muscles in her jaw were tight and aching. Tommy had told her that morning she'd been grinding her teeth in her sleep.

She pulled up the gold harem pants she had made and squeezed them over her hips. Her belly hung over the wide band, hiding the coloured glass beads. She fastened the sequinned brassiere with a safety pin, twisted it to the back, leaned forward and adjusted her breasts into the cups. She sat on the edge of the bed in front of the mirror and, leaning forward, peered at her face. With her thumbs on the deep frown lines that marked her brow, she slid them slowly and firmly outward to her temples, pulling the skin, and held them there, admiring her now-smooth forehead. She laughed, a sudden low, quiet laugh, dropped her hands into her lap and watched as the frown lines sprang back.

Anna stuck her head around the door, 'Can I do your hair?' Without waiting for an answer she picked up the hairbrush from the top of the cupboard. She combed her mother's fringe down, pulled the rest of the hair back into a tight knot and wound an elastic band around it. She took the hairpiece from the nail on the side of the mirror and attached it with a gold band around the knot. Joan smiled at her daughter in the mirror, turning her head from one side to the other, flicking the long, thick curling ponytail that reached halfway down her back.

'Perfect', she smiled, 'and now you can watch me do my face and turn from the ugly step-sister into the beautiful princess'.

Anna wrinkled her nose, 'Don't say that, you're not ugly. You're the prettiest Mum in the whole alley'.

Joan laughed, 'And just for that you're my favourite daughter for the next six months'.

'It's just like when I was little. I used to love helping you get ready for the show.'

'I remember. Do you remember me putting eye-shadow and lipstick on you? You'd walk around all day like a little princess and stack on a terrible show when I tried to wash it off before you went to bed.'

'I remember you putting the make-up on me but I don't remember having a tantrum. I bet I didn't, really.'

'You did. I had to promise every night that you could have some on the next day.'

'Huh, I'm sure I wasn't as bad as you make out.'

'Huh yourself. Come on, if you're going to do this, get a move on.'

Anna sat cross-legged on the bed beside her mother and put the bag of make-up in the sling of her dress. She fossicked in the bag until she found the foundation cream and handed it to Joan. She passed her the black pencil and watched intently while her mother outlined her eyes, curving the lines up at each corner, and then with small strokes darkened and arched her eyebrows. Joan licked her finger and ran it along her eyebrows while she held the pencil out with her other hand and Anna swapped it for the little pot of coloured eye-shadow and a matchstick with cottonwool twisted onto the tip. Joan coloured in each eyelid with blue, then leaned back so she could see her whole face to make sure both lids were even. Then Anna handed her a bright red lipstick. Joan filled in her lips, starting in the centre and working out until the red spread just past the natural line of her mouth. She put a few dabs of red on her cheeks and smoothed it across her cheekbones.

Anna did not take her eyes off her mother the whole time this ritual was being enacted and even though she had seen it hundreds

of times, she was still fascinated to watch the transformation of mother to Fatima, exotic dancer from the Middle East.

‘Right, I’m done. Now off you go. Lou’ll be wondering where you are.’

‘Can’t I watch you dance?’

‘No! Go on. I don’t want to hear back from Barb that you girls aren’t doing a good job.’

Joan smiled, ‘Come here. Give us a kiss. And check on the boys too. Make sure they’re not getting up to mischief’.

Joan could hear Tommy just finishing his spiel as she dropped her clothes on the stool and took the veils off the peg. She tucked one veil under her brassiere so it fell across her belly, two into the band at the back of her pants and two in the front. She put the needle down on the record and turned the volume knob up. Quickly she grabbed the last two veils between her fingers and held them up to form a semi-transparent screen across her face. She climbed the rickety steps and stood behind the curtain at the back of the stage.

‘Ladies and gen’lemen, now feast your eyes on the *beautiful*, the *exotic*, the *mysterious* Fatima! She has danced in the tents of the Bedouin and in the palaces of Arab princes, ladies and gen’lemen and is now in Perth to perform for you. Be amazed, bedazzled, be *seduced* by the mysteries of the Middle East, ladies and gen’lemen! The beautiful Fatimaaa!’

The record scratched and crackled into life. Joan pulled the curtain aside and the Dance of the Seven Veils began.

She wondered where the twins were, she hadn’t seen them since this morning. Up to mischief, no doubt. She’d been so disorganised this Royal. She hadn’t got around to buying any supplies for the week. She should talk to Rose. Be straight with her. Tell her the truth. Tell her they weren’t getting acts because they were going broke. And tell her straight out that they were going broke because of her tent blocking the alley so the crowds who should be getting to their tent weren’t. She’d understand. She’d say something

to Maurie. Surely she would. They'd just have to eat hot dogs for dinner tonight. She'd go and see Barb tomorrow morning; she always had extra supplies of food and wouldn't mind lending her some. The kids won't mind hot dogs. But things were already strained with Rose. Why had she opened her big mouth and had a go at her about not standing up to Maurie. She had promised herself not to talk about the ground business again. She didn't want to have a total falling out with Rose. She'd see how they go this Royal. She'd made Tommy promise not to go to the racetrack and to show her the books. She had to learn what went into the black column and what went into the red and, most importantly, why.

The beat of the drums interrupted her thoughts and she got ready for the finale. She started to spin faster and faster, holding the two veils above her head so that they and the veils tucked into her pants fanned out into a circle. She could feel the pin holding the bra had sprung open and was digging into her back. As the drumbeat reached its climax she stopped and shimmied her hips and breasts, except now she kept her arms up in the air so her belly didn't hang down too much.

'Jelly on a plate', she heard someone say, and 'I seen her years ago and that magic show', and 'Yeah, where's the tattooed lady and that half-man half-woman, I wannud to see the freaks', and 'I reckon she's a bit of a freak'.

A few whistled and clapped. Some, she could see, were laughing. Someone must've said something quite rude because she heard a woman say, "Ere, there's ladies present, mate, so watch yer mouth'.

Tommy parted the curtain for her and she climbed down the steps.

She winced as she pulled the pin out of the bra and threw it on the ground, undid the hairpiece and hung it back on the hook, dipped a cloth in a dish of water and rubbed off the make-up, rolled the pants down over her hips and shook the sequinned bra from her

shoulders. She looked up and Tommy was standing on the top step watching her.

‘What’re you staring at?’ She grabbed her dress off the stool and tried to cover herself.

‘What do yer think I’m starin’ at?’

‘Bugger off.’

‘Why? Yer beautiful.’

‘Go on, bugger off. I mean it.’

‘I love yer belly.’

‘Yeah, well, that lot don’t’, she inclined her head at the curtain.

They stood, looking at each other.

Joan pulled the dress over her head. ‘Gotta see how the kids are goin’.’

From the caravan she watched Tommy wander off towards the bar.

Sometime later she heard the door open.

‘Are you all right, Mum?’

‘It’s nothing. I just got a bit of grit in me eyes.’

Joan wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her dress. ‘I’ve got to go and see Barb. Will you please go and get the twins and bring them back here. Tell them I’ll tan their hides if they’re not here when I get back.’

Joan found Barb at the troughs.

‘Dear me, look at you. Here, blow your nose, love, and listen to me. Tommy can’t just blame Maurie’s tent blocking up the alley for you losing money. They’re all as bad as each other, if you want my two bobs worth. All of them’ve been going in circles for years and it’s time we put a bomb under them. I lost one of me good friends over this and I’ve had enough, I can tell you. Now I’ve had a chat with Rose.’

‘I hope you weren’t hard on her, Barb. She does the best she can.’

‘Well, she’s not nineteen anymore.’

‘It’ll be all right. A year or so and we’ll be back on top of it and then we’ll be able to get the acts back.’

‘Hmm. I’m going to tell you something you won’t want to hear, but I’m going to say it anyway because I’m the closest thing you got to a mother and if I don’t say it no one will. ‘Specially not Tommy. Things change, Joanie, I said that to you years ago, but you were too young to take any notice. Back before the war when me and Artie and Maurie were working the alley, there was freak shows with real special people, not like what Tommy and Jack get now. After the war people didn’t want to see that kind of thing any more. A lot of people thought it was wrong to be parading people who had things wrong with them.

‘You have to move with the times, or better, think ahead and give the mugs something they remember and want to do every year. Something they only get in the alley. Thing is now, Joanie, people can see novelty acts on the television. They’re not something they only get to see in the alley any more.

‘Mark my words, the television will have everything we’ve got and more. You and Tommy aren’t the only ones who’re going to have to wake up.’

Joan didn’t say anything. Barb was being a bit over dramatic. People always wanted to see their shows. It was getting them past the boxing tent that was the problem.

‘The mugs want a bit of excitement, and they want to fill their bellies. You have a think about that.’

Barb took her hand and squeezed it, ‘Now, I have to go. Pull yer bootstraps up, put a smile on that pretty face and make the best of it’.

‘I came to ask if I could get some food off you. I didn’t get to the shops before ... ’

Barb laughed, ‘Well, you got more than you bargained for, didn’t you? ‘Course you can. Go and help yerself. I got a lazy warb to sort out’.

Chapter 22

Corrie, Stan, Bobby and Dan sat down on the grass with the boys from the troupe.

‘Now mind you get back ’ere when you hear the drum’, Stan instructed Eric as the younger ones headed back to the shooting gallery for one more turn.

Benny was telling one of his unlikely exploits, which sounded suspiciously like one Corrie had heard him tell last year.

‘Shut up, Vince, I’m tryin’ ta tell a story ’ere. Geez, now I lost me tray o’ thought.’

‘Train.’

‘What train?’

‘It’s train o’ thought, not tray o’ thought.’

‘Tray, train, same bloody thing.’

‘Ow can a tray and a train be the same thing?’

‘Geez, Vince, I dunno. They both carry things? Trains carry people ’n stuff, ’n trays carry cups o’ tea. So, they both carry thoughts, in a manner o’ speakin’. They know what I mean.’

Vince shook his head, ‘You got a brain like a scrambled egg, Benny boy. Too many whacks on the ’ead’.

‘You c’n talk. Where was I? Oh yeah, so I trip over some mug’s boot stickin’ out on the mat see, so I’m grabbing at his legs on me way down and down come ’is dacks and, bugger me—’scuse me language, love—he’s got no bleedin’ undies on. I swear when I looked up an’ saw the one-eyed monster starin’ at me I fair nearly wet meself.’

And Lewis chimed in, ‘Yeah, and yer hung onto ’em a lot longer’n yer needed to, ay, just to make sure all the girls got a good peek-a-boo’.

‘I ain’t never seen someone go bright red all over like that before, ’e looked like he’d been sunbakin’ in the nicky for a week.’

‘Yeah, an’ remember how Maurie called the match and gave ‘im five bob an’ said loud enough for the whole bloody tent to hear, “‘Ere mate, this is for some new undies so next time yer in my tent yer don’t frighten the ladies. Now off yer go and don’t tell yer missus yer been flashin’ the master of the house roun’ in front o’ strangers!”

‘Do yer remember that bloke with the bockity leg? ‘E was lurchin’ round the canvas, up ‘n down, up ‘n down. It was like tryin’ ta land a punch on someone sittin’ on the carousel.’

Everyone had a story or three to tell. Corrie noticed that Bobby didn’t laugh at the stories. He watched the boys intently, as if trying to absorb everything: the way they spoke, their gestures and expressions, the way they sat or squatted on the ground, the way they rolled their cigarettes and blew the smoke out, the way some laughed at their own stories and others who told them straight-faced.

Dan, sitting cross-legged, picking at blades of grass, not looking at anyone, was laughing loudly at the images evoked of hapless mugs on the receiving end of the tricks and deceptions that befell them.

Corrie smoothed her skirt and tried to listen to the conversation. She knew her boys wanted to join the tent as soon as they were old enough. Bobby would be able to look after himself physically, she had no doubt of that, but she wasn’t sure he would manage the rough-and-tumble of tent life. He had changed after Herbie died, gone into himself, and it was hard to know what was going on with him. And Dan. Well, Dan just wanted to be grown-up because he thought it meant doing exactly what you wanted. But there weren’t a lot of choices for kids like hers and they would probably be safer in the tent than anywhere else.

The stories continued until the drum beat and the bell rang. The gees came out of their vans and disappeared into the alley. Corrie and the children headed to the front and wormed their way to the front of the crowd so Grace could see Stan and the rest of the boys up on the boards.

Tony, the Maori boxer, with his legs apart and knees bent, poked his tongue out and stared wide-eyed at the gathering crowd. He stomped and shook his fists and the mugs loved it. They cheered and whooped and dug their mates in the ribs, 'Go on, I dare ya ta put up yer 'and,' and 'I will if you will,' and 'Yeah, righto, I'm no chicken, mate,' and 'Me neither, come on then'.

Corrie smiled. She felt the same thrill seeing Stan up there, posturing and teasing and getting a rise out of the blokes in the crowd. Them with their puffed-up chests and their puffed-up bravado who would only last the three rounds because Stan let them.

Rose let Corrie and the children into the tent before everyone else, so they could get the best spots near the mat. In all the years she had watched the show, not a lot had changed. Some boys she only ever saw once and others had become familiar. Sometimes Stan would bring a few of them home in the evening and they would build a fire in the backyard and cook sausages and wrap them in thick slices of bread.

Maurie was on the mat with the first two, a gee and Benny. Rose was sitting on her stool at the back, next to a pile of towels and jugs of water. After three rounds Benny won and the gee put his shirt back on and joined the crowd to be clapped on the back, 'Never mind, mate', 'Better luck next time, ay', 'Yer did good, I reckon'.

The second match of the house Maurie had paired Tony with a big bloke from the crowd. He was a 'take', chosen to win the fight, to get the mugs excited enough to come back for the next house and bring their mates with them. For the first two rounds they cheered and clapped as the bloke chased Tony round the mat and landed a few punches. In the final round, the bloke was tiring and Tony caught him with a couple of hard knocks to the head. Corrie could see Maurie whispering to Tony under his breath. He would be telling him to 'take it easy' and then, when it was time to finish the round, 'let him hit you, then go down, go down'. Tony moved in and let the bloke take the final punch that laid him flat on his back. It looked a lot

worse than it really was because the bloke was tired out and the punch had barely connected. The crowd cheered and whooped when Maurie handed over the money, and the bloke was received back into their midst a hero.

The next three fights were the gees matched with the boys. Then it was Stan's turn. Maurie tied his gloves on. He slipped the right one onto the bloke's hand, but before he could tie the lace, the man had a coughing fit. He turned away, dug a handkerchief out of his pocket and spat into it. This would be an easy bout, Corrie thought as she watched Stan, looking very handsome in his royal-blue satin shorts. Maurie held up his and the mug's hand and went through the rules for the sixth and final time for this house. Stan did not keep still, dancing and prancing on the canvas like a show horse. The bell rang.

The mug moved in fast and caught Stan off-guard with a blow to his chest. Corrie could see he lost the rhythm of his footwork and before he had a chance to respond, the mug had moved in again and landed one on the side of Stan's head. She could feel Grace pulling on her skirt, the urgency of it, and put her hand on the child's head, reassured, 'It's all right, Grace. It's just part of the show. Dad knows what he's doing'. But she knew something was not right. Stan was too slow.

After that blow, Stan kept moving, circling the mat backwards, with the bloke in pursuit, but not letting him get near enough to land another punch. Some of the crowd started booing and someone yelled, 'G'arn, git in there an' fight, ya yella bastard!' Maurie rang the bell before, what seemed to Corrie, the time should have been up.

Stan retreated to a corner, shaking his head. Rose gave him and his opponent a drink and fanned them with a towel. Corrie wanted to rush over and grab the towel and wipe Stan's face and tell him it was going to be all right. If only it wasn't so hot in there with the smell of the sweat and perfume cloying the air.

The bell rang. Stan danced on the canvas, light as a feather on his feet, back into his rhythm, moving straight in and landing three punches in quick succession, sending the bloke backwards a couple of steps but not unbalancing him. He recovered immediately, moving in, but Stan ducked to the left, and the punch that should have landed on his ribs sliced through the thick air instead. Undeterred, and moving more quickly than Stan anticipated, the bloke followed it up with a left hook, which just caught Stan on the chin as he jerked his head back to avoid it. Stan responded with a heavy blow to the side of the bloke's head.

This was more like it. This was a good round. Back and forth, punch for punch. The crowd loved it. They cheered and whistled and clapped. And they were excited now, too, because the final round was always the best. They'd all come to see the boxer who flew back into the crowd. Next to her, Bobby was standing silently, his arms half-raised and fists clenched. Dan, Eric, Mattie and Grace were cheering like banshees. The bell rang for the end of the round.

Round three started where the last one had finished, punches one-for-one, back and forth. Corrie could see Stan trying to work out how to get into position to land in the crowd, to give maximum effect with minimum damage to himself and the mugs he was going to land on, but it was all defend, attack, defend, attack. Time was running out. She watched the man back off, just long enough for Stan to set himself up. He dropped his eye-contact for a split second. But the bloke was waiting. He knew exactly what Stan was doing. In that split second he moved in and punched Stan hard on the side of the head. Stan went backwards into the crowd all right, but not flying through the air, not in control of what he was doing, but reeling, his feet and legs twisting on each other, his head at an ugly angle on his shoulders, his arms flailing, useless as broken windmill blades, blood and sweat spraying over mugs as they fell over each other trying to get out of the way.

There was dead silence in that tent as the mugs watched, transfixed and helpless as Stan landed on two children who had been unable to move out of the way in time because they were hemmed in by scrambling mugs. The first sound that Corrie heard was Grace screaming, then it seemed the whole tent erupted, as Maurie and Benny rushed forward to pick Stan up off the children, and other people moved in to see if they were all right.

‘Get Gracie and the boys out of here, and all of you go home. Now!’ she ordered Bobby and Dan.

She pushed through the crowd to where Stan was laid on the mat. His eye was swollen shut and the skin above was a pulpy mess of lacerated flesh and blood. She could see the white bone of his skull underneath.

Some of the boys formed a ring around them to stop people tramping on him in their eagerness to see for themselves the injury that was causing that amount of blood on the canvas. Maurie was barking orders at Rose and Benny and the others to ‘make sure those bloody kids are all right’, ‘get a bloody doctor’, and ‘get the bloody tent cleared, for chrissakes’.

Corrie knelt beside Stan and pressed a towel over the bleeding wound. It would need to be stitched. Maurie checked his arms and wrists. ‘Nothing broken, but he might be concussed. We’ll get ‘im to the hospital in a tick. I just got to see to something.’ Corrie watched him walk over to where the bloke who’d dished out the blow was surrounded by three of the boys. Maurie looked the bloke in the eyes as he removed the gloves. Inside the right glove he found what he knew would be there—a piece of lead about three inches long and half an inch thick. She saw Vince’s hand tighten around the bloke’s arm like a vice. Maurie shook his head, ‘I’ll call the cops’. He leaned in so he was an inch away from the bloke’s face, ‘Once you’ve ‘ad yer dealings with the cops I’d go east if I was you ‘cause yer dead meat wherever yer go here’.

Rose and Maurie left the hospital just before six o'clock, leaving Corrie to say her goodbyes to Stan before visiting hours ended. They had offered to wait outside and drive her home but she had insisted she would prefer to walk, to get some fresh air.

She leant to kiss him on the cheek.

'I'll be right as rain by morning, ay.'

She smiled, 'See what the doctor says. Get some rest now'.

She stroked the thick white bandage above his eye, 'I love you, Stan'.

He closed his good eye and squeezed her hand, 'Love ya too'.

She walked along the corridor to the entrance, her shoes making a soft tapping sound on the floor that she mopped every day except Saturdays and Sundays. Stan would be all right. He had to be.

The next morning Maurie came to the house, 'I been up to the hospital and Stan can get out in a coupla hours. He's good as gold, so don't you worry. I'll pick him up and bring him home. An' I saw the cops too. Thought you oughta know that bloke got charged but he's been bailed. He's not a local accordin' to them. They reckon he'll prob'ly do a runner'.

Corrie nodded. She knew even if it went to court he'd maybe get a fine, if that.

Chapter 23

Rose sat on the stool, watching Maurie, listening to his spiel she'd heard a thousand times. She was sure that now with their tent down the end, everything would work out for Joan and Tommy. It had taken two years to get the Showies organised, but a couple more Royals like this and they'd be back on top of things.

She had waited until after they returned from the south run to talk to Maurie. She had thought about what Barb had said to her, and she'd remembered the time after she got married, when she'd sat in the shed watching the boys sparring with each other, the dance that was boxing: the quick, light steps, the ducking and weaving, the split-second timing of the punch, like lightning. And she thought about the way she danced—with Maurie, with the boys, with Joan and Barb and all the other Showies.

She'd taken a bottle of beer and glasses into the sitting room, filled a glass for Maurie, and one for herself and said, 'I had a chat with Barb and we think that you and Artie have to get onto this guild'.

Maurie had just looked at her, surprised. 'Now don't you start on that again, this's been goin' on so long now and you don't need—'

She'd cut him off, 'Don't you tell me not to stick my bib in. I have a right to stick my bib in. We've lost good families and you men act like there's nothing wrong. You all just keep telling your stories and pretending it's all right when half of us are standing round a fire at one end of the alley and the others are standing around a fire at the other end'.

Rose shifted to the edge of her chair and leaned forward so that she was facing Maurie.

'You always tell me it's got nothing to do with us women, but it has. It affects us all. I know you don't think it's important, but you try getting our work done when there's bloody rosters for the troughs, or

the women you counted on to look out for your kids are all of a sudden “too busy”.

‘You used to run the tent before I came along, but I *know* it’s better with me looking after the boys and doing all the work that’s needed. And I want you to talk to me.’

‘What do yer mean, love. I talk to—’

‘No you *don’t*. You and Artie have to get onto this guild, or more people’ll leave and in a few years there’ll be hardly anyone left. I’m a Showie too and this is about all of us, not just you men.’

Maurie had leaned back into his chair and looked at her for a long time before saying, ‘So, a Showie, are yer? Well, you certainly got yerself some new stripes’.

She refilled Maurie’s glass and then her own.

‘And another thing, Maurie. I want to learn to drive.’

He’d laughed then, ‘I won’t have time to teach you to drive, ’specially if I’m doing this guild business’.

‘I’m not asking you to. I’m going to get proper lessons.’

They had finished that bottle and opened another one.

A few days later Rose heard Maurie on the phone to Artie and a couple of the other men. The following week they met around the table on the back verandah. She and Barb were there, which didn’t go down too well with a couple of the men who reckoned it wasn’t the place for women, until Barb made it clear that she and Artie were partners and no decision about anything was going to be made without her say so too.

Rose didn’t see much of Maurie in the weeks before they went still-towning. He was either on the phone or out at meetings. He was tired when he got home, but she pressed him for updates anyway.

‘We can’t ’ave a guild. Accordin’ to the powers that be, a guild’s only for organisations that teach “specific skills”. As far as they’re concerned there’s none of them needed to be a Showie operator. So, there yer go. But they reckon we can ’ave an association. So now we

got to do a whole lot of other paperwork. We got to work out rules and fees and what have you.'

When they returned from up north a few more Showies, including some of the women, had come on board and each took turns having a meeting in their home. Rose went to as many as she could, but the arguments amongst the men about ground went on and on, all demanding their own needs and wants and then having to figure out a way of agreeing to give up bits of those needs and wants to accommodate each other's and make an organisation that would work for everyone. As she listened to them, her foot tapped against the carpet and the ashtray beside her chair filled with butts.

She did notice that even though nothing definite had been agreed between the men and the meetings often descended into shouting matches, the tension in the alley was lessening and more Showies came round to seeing the benefits an association might bring. One day the roster disappeared from the laundry and gradually times for daily chores got adjusted so the women were more available again to look out for each other's kids.

Drawing up the rest of the rules and setting fees had taken more months, so by the time it came to deciding on a name for the association, the women thought it was finally done bar the shouting.

They were mistaken. The biggest arguments broke out and went on and on at meeting after meeting. Towards the end of the year, when they were all gathered in the lounge room at Gosnells, Maurie stood up and declared that the meeting should close and another date set to continue the discussion. Rose jumped from her seat and very loudly said, 'Oh no you don't, Maurie Jackson! You lot are going to stay here and make a bloody decision. I don't care if we have to sit here all night!'

Maurie stared at her. She flushed bright red and sat down. Behind her, a slow clap broke the silence. She turned around and Barb stopped clapping and gave her a thumbs-up, 'Rose's right. This's gone on long enough'.

A couple of hours later, it was agreed; they would be the West Australian Showmen's Association.

When the special meeting was held in a Scout Hall at the end of that year to sign off on who would get what ground and what the rules of their association would be, Rose sat in the front row next to Barb. Up on the stage Maurie read through the document one final time before it was to be lodged.

The boxing tent would be down the end of the alley for all the Agricultural Society shows, but still-towning would remain on a first come first served basis. The rest of the ground was allocated on the basis of how long you'd been a Showie, and if someone left, their place would be taken by the next longest-serving member.

Maurie read out the rules of membership, the annual fees due and the reasons you could be expelled from the association, which caused a few groans from some of the men who hadn't gone to any of the meetings.

Artie was voted in as the new president, no surprise there. Jack Swift became the treasurer, and Barb was nominated to be secretary, but she refused, and said, 'I nominate Rose. She's the right person to be secretary'.

Without giving it a second thought, Rose nodded, 'I'd love to do it'.

On their way home, she said, 'Now Joan and Tommy can get back on their feet so Joan won't have to dance any more'.

Maurie had laughed and shaken his head, 'Yeah, easy access to Tiernan's tent'll fix it. That'n a bit of Mortein to get the bloody four-legged moths out of Tommy's wallet'.

Rose wasn't sure what he meant, but she laughed because it was done and the rest would be easy.

She slipped out of the tent before the house finished, filled a bowl with clean water and sat on the step of their van to peel the potatoes. Mick and Paddy ran past with Colleen in close pursuit,

'Come back here, you little buggers! Wait till I tell your mother what you been up to!'

Colleen stopped in front of Rose, puffing and red-faced, 'I hope Joan tans those boys' hides when I tell her what they did. Honest, you can't take your eyes off of those two for a second and they're up to no good. Do you know what they did? They went and stuck pins in all the balloons. A whole bag of 'em. Ruined. Look at this!'

Colleen held up a stick. On the end a bedraggled balloon hung sadly, sagging against a pink feather.

'I got a whole wall of 'em. Just like this.' She waved the stick, the balloon flip-flopping back and forth.

Rose tried not to laugh. 'Oh dear. They're cheeky, no doubt about that.'

'It's not the word I'd use for 'em. It takes me damn hours to blow these bloody things up and tie 'em on with a damn feather and now they all look like this.' She shook the stick again.

One of Colleen's jobs on the knock-em-downs was to blow up dozens of balloons and tie them with a coloured feather to the sticks. They were the prizes you got when you didn't win a prize. It was the job you got when you were the latest addition to the Banks clan. Poor Colleen had been the latest addition for more years than she cared to remember as Billy Banks, the youngest of Barb and Artie's boys, had still not found a wife. Rose couldn't think of anything to say, so she said 'Oh dear' again.

'Soon's Joan's free I'm telling her.'

'That's a good idea. Let her deal with it.'

'Yeah, good idea. Thanks, hey. How you goin' anyway, Rose? You all right bein' down the end here?'

'I'm fine thanks. Too busy to think about it to tell you the truth. And I get a good walk up to the troughs.'

Colleen hesitated, so Rose said, 'Would you like a cuppa?'

'Won't say no to that, 'specially if I get a piece of that fruitcake you make. I must get the recipe. My Artie reckons it's the best.'

Rose opened the door and followed Colleen in. She couldn't remember if she had ever invited her into their van. She made tea, sliced up some cake and cut an extra thick slice, 'Here, take this for Artie jnr'.

'Gee thanks, Rose. I always say to my Artie I think you're nice. Not like some I could mention, only out to butter their own nests', Colleen gave a wistful smile and sighed. 'Barb's all right, you got to get used to her that's all. Took me a while I can tell you. I used to cry to my Artie when we was first married. I knew she didn't like me. She thought Artie could've done a whole lot better than marry me.'

'I don't think that's true.'

'You don't have to say that, I know she didn't. Anyway ... '

Rose topped up their cups and watched Colleen absentmindedly take a large bite out of the piece of cake she'd cut for Artie.

'I'm not like her, but. I don't mind that you're nice to the blackfellas. They never done no harm to me.'

'Some people are just like that, I think.'

'You hit the nail on the nose there, that's for sure.'

Colleen finished the cake and wiped her hands on her dress, 'Well, I better be off. My Artie'll be wondering where I got too'. She looked at the deflated balloon, suddenly remembering what had brought her to the end of the alley.

'Better find those boys too and give 'em a piece of me mind.'

At the door she turned and smiled, 'Me and my Artie are looking forward to the end-of-Royal party at Joan's. You're comin' aren't ya?'

'Of course, wouldn't miss it.'

Colleen marched off towards Joan and Tommy's tent, shaking the stick like a headmaster about to bring the cane down on a trembling palm.

Rose walked out into the empty space in front of their tent and looked up the bustling, noisy alley. Now they were open at night, many of the Showies left the lights on that festooned the front of their

joints through the day. It was easier than running round at dusk trying to find the right plug to work out if it was the switch not working or blown globes. Curses would fly when motors suddenly died or joints were plunged into darkness because someone had flicked the switch on the wrong plug. Even in daylight they looked pretty, blinking and flashing, with all the different colours.

People ambled past the joints attempting to eat fairy floss or take a bite of toffee apples that fell off the stick, guaranteeing a revisit to the food van to quieten crying children. Those clutching prizes they'd won already, if they stopped even for a second, would be roped in by the spruikers. A qualification for a good spruiker was a talent for honing in on the children, shoving hoops or fishing rods into their hands so their parents couldn't refuse, and teasing the young men who were holding hands with a girl to prove their prowess and their masculinity.

The Showies knew that if the mugs' money ran out sooner than they had planned, then next year they would bring more, because there were a certain number of hours that a trip to the Royal Show had to fill and any less would not be considered a good day out.

Just behind the boxing tent was the area where the rides were set up. Rose could hear the screams and whoops as people were spun, lifted, dropped, swung, tumbled and whirled, some staggering away white-faced and shaken and others lining up for another go, or striding off to the next ride hoping for an even bigger thrill.

The beat of the drum and the ring of the bell interrupted Rose's musing. She turned around, smiled at Maurie and walked over to their van to get the cash box and another roll of tickets. She set up in the ticket box and lifted the canvas window. The boys were up on the boards and a large crowd had gathered on the pitch outside their tent.

'Come on now, who's gonna take the gloves! Two pounds for three rounds! I'll match yer fair and square, come on up the front 'ere

so's I c'n get a look at yer, two pounds for three rounds! Who's gonna take the gloves!' Maurie yelled over the drum and the bell.

Rose watched a man at the back of the crowd start to move to the front. He couldn't have been more than five-foot-six and was as thin as a whippet, so he didn't so much as push through the crowd, but duck and weave.

She could see Maurie watching the ripple as the man made his way forward.

'Watch out, ladies, we got a ferret in the crowd. Hold yer dresses down!'

The men laughed and the women looked around nervously, automatically clutching their gathered skirts to their bodies.

'Come on, fella, git up on the boards 'ere an' let's 'ave a look at yer. Righto, take yer shirt off.'

Maurie stood back and looked him up and down, rubbing his forefinger across his chin and looking from the man to the boxers as if trying to decide who best to match him up with. Finally he said, 'Mate, I reckon you couldn't pull the skin off of a rice pudding, how 'bout yer put yer clobber back on an' come back next year, ay, an' tell yer missus ta put more meat n' potatoes on yer plate'.

The crowd erupted into applause, laughter and whistles as the man buttoned his shirt, clambered down the steps, wove his way back through the crowd and disappeared into the alley.

The boys worked the crowd too, staring them down, dancing on the boards and throwing punches in their direction, while Maurie teased and stirred until he'd lined up most of the boys with a gee and selected a few mugs to fill the rest of the house. The mugs who'd been chosen flexed their muscles under their shirts and shouted to their mates they'd win those two pounds easy. Dead certain they were.

Their mates jostled and pushed at the ticket window and willingly parted with their shillings even though they knew their mate couldn't punch his way out of a paper bag, but in their minds at this

moment, if they cheered hard enough miracles could happen. They could really do with a nice cold glass at the bar.

Rose sat on her stool with the pile of clean towels on the floor next to her and the jar of Vaseline in her lap. She looked at the boys lined up across the back wall, waiting for their turn on the canvas. She was proud of those boys. She was proud they stayed, not because they had to, but because they wanted to.

For the first time in a long while Rose felt she could think about what she wanted to do. This Christmas break, she promised herself, she would get those driving lessons. Maurie picked Katharine up on Saturday mornings, but when he was busy in the shed he kept putting it off, saying he'd go after he finished this or that job, so that sometimes Katharine wasn't picked up until nearly lunchtime.

Chapter 24

Joan stood on the verandah and waved as Maurie squeezed the Humber onto the verge behind Tommy's van. A dozen or so kids were playing cricket in the front yard, the tennis ball plopping onto the sand and bouncing lazily towards an eager Paddy, who was swinging the bat around as if he was playing baseball.

'Out!' Mick yelled to his brother.

'Was not!'

'Was so! LBW!'

'Liar liar! You just wanna bat.'

Katharine got out of the car, tucked her blouse into her peddle pushers and made a beeline for Lou, Anna, Lorna and Susie sitting on the grass under the tree.

Joan waved at Rose, then turned, walked back down the hall and entered the kitchen full of chat and laughter.

Rose lowered the sun visor, looked in the mirror and applied more lipstick, blotting it with her handkerchief.

'Should be a good party.'

'Come on then, out yer get.'

As they walked along the uneven concrete path down the side of the house, Rose could hear Tommy's loud voice and the men's laughter. He would be standing at the enormous brick barbeque, surrounded by them, with tongs in one hand and beer in the other.

She circled the blankets on the patchy lawn between the house, the barbeque and the clothesline and walked up the back steps with the fruitcake and bowl of salad. Voices punctuated by loud laughter were emanating from the kitchen.

'... bit of a test for the new warbs ...'

'... did you hear about the kid who fell off ...'

'... funniest thing I seen in a long ...'

'... she almost had a blue with that mug ...'

‘ ... could of knocked me over with a ... ’

‘You look like you need a beer’, Joan yelled across the crackle of conversations as Rose swung open the flywire door.

She was standing by the stove with a glass of beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, ‘Oh, can’t stand sewing’, she was shouting in Judy’s face, ‘the most I ever do is my costumes and I hate doing even that. Half the time they’re held together with pins’.

A horde of kids careened through the back door into the kitchen, ducking between and around the women and out the door again, banging the flywire against the doorjamb.

‘I think we’ll put an end to that little game. Stella, just snib that door will you. That’ll fix them’, Joan laughed, stubbing out her cigarette in the overflowing ashtray.

‘Now, ladies, and the rest of you, less chat and more chop if you don’t mind.’

Joan was in her element.

Rose picked up a knife and dinged it on the side of her glass to get everyone’s attention, ‘I just want to say thanks to Joan and Tommy for having the end of Royal here and I hope we don’t make so much of a mess they never do it again’.

‘Hear, hear!’

‘And ... listen up! I’ve had an idea. Now we’ve got the association I was thinking it’d be good to have a newsletter. Something where we can have ads, maybe notices for birthdays, and for when there’s an engagement or a wedding. I don’t know what else, but it could be whatever we want.’

‘That’s a bloody great idea’, Joan raised her glass.

‘I’ll help you put it together’, Dot shouted over the approving buzz.

‘Hear, hear!’

‘Thanks, Dot. And anybody else, let me know.’

Loaves of bread were buttered, tomatoes, lettuces and cabbages sliced and diced, pineapple rings and beetroot emptied

from tins, eggs peeled and mashed with mayonnaise and curry powder. Blocks of cheese were cut into cubes and arranged on toothpicks with red and green pickled onions, and paper plates and plastic cutlery were unwrapped, ready to be put on the trestle table on the back verandah. Stories were told of the umpteen things that went right and wrong with rides, fairy-floss machines, hot-dog suppliers, electrical connections, sick and injured children and unreliable warbs.

The women eventually filed out of the kitchen, carrying plates of bread and bowls of salad, which they placed on the table next to platters piled high with sausages and chops.

Rose filled a plate for Maurie and was about to take it over to him when Katharine, Anna and Susie surrounded her.

‘Mum, can I stay at Susie and Lorna’s tonight? Lou and Anna’s already asked and Auntie Joan said they can, so please can I?’

‘Yes, that’s fine, but check with your father. Here, take this to him while you’re at it.’

Since her fourteenth-birthday party and sleepover Katharine had become ‘best friends’ with the Banks girls. Lorna had been charm herself, although some of the more innocent girls from Katharine’s school had looked both a bit shocked and thrilled with her slightly off-colour jokes. Lou and Anna had them all in fits of giggles with the stories they told and Susie should have been in vaudeville. She had inherited Barb’s singing voice, and even had Maurie standing at the lounge room door listening to her sing and laughing at her antics.

Rose filled a plate for herself and sat down on the rug next to Dot.

‘Great idea, Rose, you can count me in. I can fold and stuff ’em in envelopes and put ’em in a post box. I was thinking too, I reckon in the next few years we’re going to have Showies all over the place, what with the south run and the new wheatbelt run, and there’s Kalgoorlie which’s getting bigger every year, and with the still-

towning too, we could write stories about what's happening so we can keep in touch.'

'That's a terrific idea.'

'What are you two nattering on about?' Joan interrupted. She swayed slightly as she bent down.

'The newsletter', Dot laughed, 'we'll have to think of a name for it'.

Joan dropped cigarette ash all over Dot's leg. 'Oh, sorry, love.' She went to brush it off, lost her balance and sat on Dot's foot.

She finally managed to stand up, 'Well, I better mingle. Make sure everyone's having a good time'.

Dot moved her foot out of the way just as Joan was about to step on it.

Rose watched Barb take Joan's elbow and steer her into the house.

'Think I'll get another sausage.'

Rose went into the kitchen. She heard Barb's voice coming from the sitting room.

'... pull yourself together, Joanie, the boxing tent being down the end isn't going to make a blind bit of difference.'

Rose stopped halfway down the hall. She could see Joan's reflection in the window as she tried to sit up straight in the chair.

'Now, you listen to me. Me and Artie have been talking about getting a new ride. It'll be the first one like it in Perth. We think Tommy and you should run it.'

'Tommy'll never bloody do it. You know that, so I don't know why you even think ... '

'Tommy's not the one making the decision. It's a loan and it'll be in your name. When it's paid off the ride's yours, Joan. You do the money side of it. Artie'll take care of telling Tommy and I'm pretty sure he'll agree. I just need to know you'll take it on.'

'Bloody hell, I don't know how to keep books. Tommy does all that.'

‘Rose’ll help you. She can do books.’

‘She hasn’t done bookkeeping since she worked for her father.’

‘Bookkeeping’s bookkeeping. Bit like riding a bike. I’d do it for you, but I can’t. What with all the grandkids to help out with and our businesses to run, I don’t have time.’

‘What’s she going to think if Tommy and me turn up next Royal with a ride when you told her it’s the alley being blocked that made us go broke?’

‘Doesn’t matter what she thinks. We had to get the guild and she hasn’t suffered any being down the end. This’s business, Joanie, pure and simple. We got to look out for each other and you got to look after your family. Rose’ll be fine.’

Joan had slumped back into the chair again and was staring at the floor. Here was Barb offering her a way out of the mess, a way out of the humiliation she felt every time she stepped up onto the stage.

Standing in the hall, Rose felt her neck flush red.

‘What’re you doin’ lurking in the door’, Tommy’s voice boomed behind her.

Rose jumped, the redness in her neck flushing up her face.

‘I ... I was just coming to see where Joan is. I just ... ’

‘Joanie?’ Tommy poked his head round the door, ‘Oh, hi, Barb. There you are. You better stop sitting in here gossiping and come look after us, ay’.

‘I have to lie down.’ Joan got up, stumbled past Rose to her bedroom and shut the door.

‘She’s feeling a bit off-colour.’ Barb glared at Tommy, as if daring him to contradict her, ‘Give her a few minutes, she’ll be right’.

She stood up, ‘I like your idea of a newsletter, Rose. I knew you’d be right for secretary. Well, don’t know about you, but I need to enjoy this party and celebrate we finally got a guild’.

Barb insisted on calling the association a guild because, as far as she was concerned, being a sideshow alley operator did require lots of skills.

The afternoon became evening, the conversations more animated and the laughter more raucous. And no one was more animated or raucous than Joan when she finally made her reappearance.

Somewhere along the line the women emptied leftovers into Tupperware containers, wrapped and binned food scraps, washed and dried dishes and put everything away in its allotted space. Babies were fed, nappies changed, children's faces wiped and pyjamas reluctantly put on. The babies were put in the sitting room, the younger children in Paddy and Mick's sleepout and the teenagers shut themselves away in Lou and Anna's room. For the adults, the pool table in Tommy's office was pushed to the side, the record player turned on, and the Showies danced into the wee small hours to the likes of Hank Williams, Jimmy Rogers and Smoky Dawson.

On their way back to Gosnells, Rose slid over the leather seat and leaned her head on Maurie's shoulder.

'What does "four-legged moths" mean?'

Maurie laughed, 'What on earth made yer think of that?'

'I don't know. I just remembered you saying it once and I never knew what it was.'

'It's havin' more'n a bit of a flutter on the gee gees.'

'Oh. Do you?'

'More'n some and a lot less than others.' Maurie patted her knee, 'Don't worry, love, I don't have the four-legged moths', he laughed.

'Does Artie?'

'Never. He's dead against it. His old man was a bit too fond of it. I dunno, maybe he's worried he'll get the bug if he starts, so ... '

Rose sat up and rifled around in her bag for her cigarettes, lit one and passed it to Maurie then lit one for herself.

She yawned, 'I envy you men'.

Maurie laughed, 'Why on earth ... '

'Sometimes I think a good round on the grass is easier.'

'You're a funny girl. What ever made you think of that?'

'Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.'

Chapter 25

Joan pulled into the driveway and switched off the engine. She knew Maurie would have gone to pick up Katharine. Her head was aching. Tommy couldn't understand why she had insisted on needing to drive all the way out to Gosnells to apologise for her behaviour.

'Just ring her up, Joanie. Geez, I can't see why you need to say you're sorry for having a bit too much to drink anyway. It was a party, for god's sake.'

'I want to say I'm sorry to her. I don't want any bad feelings. Not after everything's just got sorted. You don't understand what a big thing this has been for her.'

'No more'n for anybody else. She finally had to get off her high horse and past bloody time, I reckon.'

'Just shut it. Like I said, you don't know anything.'

Tommy had laughed, 'Well, don't take long. I got things to do and I can't be looking after the kids all bloody day'.

Joan had another reason for getting out of the house. Artie would be over this morning to tell Tommy about the ride and the loan. She knew he'd be very angry. She also knew he had no choice but to accept Barb and Artie's offer and their conditions. She knew that Artie was the only person who could tell him and the only person Tommy wouldn't say no to in the end. She hoped by the time she got home, the thought of having a new ride that no one else had, and the money that could be made would have calmed him down. Barb was not wrong when she'd said things were changing. There were girls in skimpy clothes on the television. Perhaps there would even be boxing on it too one day.

She dismissed that thought, put her cigarettes in her pocket, got out and slammed the car door just as the front door opened. She took a deep breath. Time to do some face-saving.

'I wondered if you'd come.'

‘Can I come in?’

‘The kettle’s on.’

Joan sat at the kitchen table while Rose made tea, put milk in cups and biscuits on a plate. She lit a cigarette and watched her pour the tea and set the cup and saucer in front of her. Rose always had pretty china and everything always matched and never had any chips on the edges.

‘I didn’t sleep last night. I came out to say sorry. I drank too much last night and didn’t behave meself, I think.’

‘It’s all right, you don’t need to say you’re sorry.’

‘I don’t know how much you heard. Sometimes it’s hard stepping around you and Barb. If I tell her what’s going on and then I have to tell you too, it’s too much. I didn’t know she was going to say all that last night. She doesn’t mean to be harsh. She just—’

‘It’s all right. You don’t need to explain.’ Rose swallowed her tea. She felt it burn her tongue.

‘I never told you, but I tried to talk to Maurie once about the ground, years ago. I had a plan of how we could rope off half the alley in front of our tent so’s it didn’t block it up. I was trying to fix things. I thought you and Tommy would think it was a good idea.’

‘Oh, Lord. Bloody hell, why didn’t you ever tell me.’ Joan laughed, ‘Bloody stupid idea, by the way. Anyway, it wouldn’t’ve stopped the rows’.

‘It seemed good at the time. Anyway Maurie just got angry, said he needed a bit of peace and quiet, not me going on at him.’ Rose wanted to say that she had spent a lot of time after that thinking whether she’d made a big mistake marrying him, but she didn’t. It was all too long ago now.

‘You’re not angry?’

‘Why should I be angry? Barb’s never taken to me. I don’t know why and I s’pose I’ve never taken to her because of it. But I know she cares about you and wants to see you right. And I’m glad. I’d hate it if you and Tommy left.’

‘Bloody hell, I wish it wasn’t eleven o’clock in the morning. I need a sherry.’ Joan lit another cigarette and slid the pack across the table, ‘Have one’.

‘You really want a sherry?’

‘Why not. There’s no kids or husbands looking over our shoulders. Anyway, hair of the dog, that’s my excuse. Dunno what yours is.’

Rose came back with a bottle and two glasses.

‘Say when.’

Joan said nothing and waited until the glass was full. She took a large gulp. ‘That’ll put hairs on me chest’, she laughed, put the glass down and looked at Rose.

‘As far as I knew we were making good money. Then I found out. I don’t know how long we’d been losing it, Tommy wouldn’t say. He blamed it on the ground and your tent being up the top. I told Barb and she said she’d talk to you. She said the problem was more that me and Tommy weren’t moving with the times, seeing what people want. Did she tell you that? I thought she was talking through her hat, but she was right.’

Rose looked at Joan, ‘I was always glad we stayed up the top of the alley. I didn’t want to be down the end. I thought I’d never see anyone, apart from you, if I was stuck down there. I never felt quite part of it’.

‘Really? Lord, how could you think that?’

‘And for so long things haven’t been right between us either. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. What matters is you.’

‘It’s been so mixed up, hasn’t it? I thought if I danced again, for a couple of years, we’d get back on top of things.’ Joan stared out the window. ‘Do you remember when you asked if we’d ever do anything else and I said no bloody way?’

‘This’s different. It’s not a food van; it’s a new ride that no one else’s got. It’s what you need to do.’

Joan drained her glass.

Rose picked up the bottle, 'Another one?'

'No, thanks.'

Joan drew in her breath and let it out slowly, 'It's all about the kids in the end, isn't it. Making sure there's enough to go round. Artie's coming over today to talk to Tommy. He'll argue till he's blue in the face. He'll say if they're willing to loan us money for a ride, then why not to get proper freak shows going, but Artie'll explain it all. I reckon once he gets used to the idea he'll be all right. We'll have it for next year's Royal. Did I tell you Tommy's got a new job at the post office? Sorting parcels. It's better money than driving the van. He works so hard looking after me and the kids'.

Rose stood up and cleared the cups and glasses from the table.

'Artie'll get him to understand.' She turned to Joan, 'I told Maurie ages ago that I'm going to learn to drive over the break and I never got round to it'.

Joan put her cigarettes in her pocket, 'Come on, I'm going to take you for your first lesson. You heard Barb. I need you to teach me how to do bookkeeping. If you're going to teach me to do that then I can teach you to drive. I'll drive to the end of the road and you can drive back. By the end of the Christmas break you'll have your licence, I promise. And I'll be able to put numbers in columns and understand what the bloody hell they mean', she laughed, 'and I'll help with the newsletter too. It's a great idea'.

As they drove down the gravelled road, Joan said, 'You know Barb had another baby. Before Stewie. She gave it away.

'She was sixteen. She met this bloke and got pregnant the first time. Anyway, they got married and lived in a flat in Subi. Turned out, between the weeks of the "black dog" he was too fond of two-up games and beer and not fond enough of hard yakka. In and out of jobs he was. They lost the flat and moved into a room in a boarding house in West Perth.

'When he didn't come home for his dinner Barb never thought too much of it. He'd often go straight from the factory to the pub. It

took less beer to get drunk on an empty stomach. And she didn't even think too much of it when he wasn't at the breakfast table.

'At lunchtime a policeman came by while she was feeding the baby. They found his body stuck under the pier in Fremantle. Barb went to the nearest church, sat on the step, fed the baby and put her in box with a rug. She was six months old and her name was Merle.

'So, there it is. She had to be tough as old boot straps because that was the only way she could get through.

'We're all just flip-flopping round, aren't we, making it up as we go and hoping we don't cause too much damage on the way. All I'm saying's, Barb's not made of cast iron but she won't break if you smack up against her now and again. And you won't, neither. Remember that, Rose.'

Joan turned the car round and parked.

'Right, slide over.'

Rose bunny-hopped between stalling back to the house. In between their fits of laughter, Joan held her head and groaned, 'Hope me learning to keep the books is going to be better than your driving, otherwise I'm in trouble'.

When she got home, Joan looked at Tommy and saw in his face that Artie'd been over.

'You knew Artie was goin' to come over.'

She went to him, lifted his arms and put them around her waist, 'We're going to be all right'. She tried to look into his eyes, but they were fixed on the wall above her head.

'We have to be, don't we, we got all these bloody kids.'

'They never really know us as people, do they. They don't know what we really do, what we *have* to do. We get lost in the cooking and washing and nappies and grazed knees and trying to earn a crust and that's all we are. They never *know* us.'

'Tommy laughed, but it had more than a tinge of bitterness, 'You're gettin' a bit deep for me'.

Joan looked at him, 'You're right. I better get the washin' in before it blows away. Where's the boys, anyway?'

'Dunno. In their room, I s'pose.' Tommy dropped his arms and turned to go, 'Anyway, once we pay the loan back, it's nothing to do with them how we run our business'.

Chapter 26

Junie's laugh filled the house she'd been banished from when she was fifteen years old.

'Fancy that! I know Rose and Maurie Jackson! All the Showies. They come to our pub every year. Bloody rowdy lot they are, too! You know we let them stay after closing time. Lock the doors, close the blinds and keep the beer flowing. Fancy that, eh. It's a small world!'

Junie, or June as everyone knew her, kept clasping Corrie's hand and squeezing it. Corrie had not recognised her sister at first, with her halo of permed, dyed red hair, a voice deepened by smoking and a laugh that sounded like a popgun.

'Dying's the only good thing the old bastard's done, eh.'

'Sssh, don't talk about Dad like that. Mum'll hear you.'

'C'mon, Corrie, this's the best thing that could of happened for her. She can sell up and get out of this godforsaken place. If she's got a brain she won't hang around, neither.'

Hew MacDonald had found Herbert Gunn slumped over the wheel of his tractor stuck in a culvert with the motor still chugging. There were only seven people at the funeral in the little church where Corrie had married Stan: Hew and Maureen MacDonald, Lily, Corrie's sisters Nell and Junie, Grace and Corrie herself. Em had sent a card saying she wouldn't be able to come. It was true that Lily Gunn had cried, but not for Herb Gunn; they were tears of happiness at seeing Junie after so many years.

The pot of tea Lily had made for the wake was left to grow cold on the bench. Junie filled pint mugs of beer for herself and Hew and glasses of sherry for Lily, Maureen and Corrie.

Corrie told her about her new job at the hospital working in the kitchen, pushing the food trolley around to the wards and serving the meals to the patients.

‘We get some funny old people in there sometimes. They shouldn’t be there really, but there’s nowhere else for ’em to go. I can’t help but have me favourites, like Biddy Howard. Every morning she says, “Oh my, I heard the fat lady singing last night”. I had no idea what she was talking about till the nurse told me what it meant. And every day she asks me what me name is and I tell her “Corrie” and she says, “Oh my, Connie, that’s a lovely name. I had a friend called Connie.”’

Junie’s laugh popped around the small room, ‘She doesn’t sound so different from some of our regulars’. And then she grew serious and clasped Corrie’s hand again, ‘I can just see you bein’ kind to them, Corr. You always was kind. Do you remember that time you took home those stray dogs that’d been tied up behind the school waitin’ for the dog catcher to come and get them. You walked all the way home with them and Dad hit the roof and ordered you to take them back and I came with you and just before we got there you let them all go. I was so scared Dad’d find out and we’d get a hiding, but you told me not to worry ’cause they’d all find their way home and be happy again’.

Corrie laughed, ‘I’d forgotten that! Funny the things ya remember isn’t it’.

‘You and Mum and Nell’ve got to come to Albany. Come and stay. Roy’d love to meet youse. And Grace, of course. She’s a beautiful girl, Corrie. Spitting image of you the last time I saw you.’ June rifled around in her large bag, pulled out her cigarettes and offered one to Corrie, who shook her head again.

‘Sorry, keep forgetting. I can’t believe you married a boxer from the Show. Wait till I tell Roy. He goes every year. I told you that already, didn’t I. He prob’ly knows your Stan. Promise me you’ll come visit. We got so much to catch up on.’

Junie eventually stood and picked her bag up. ‘I wish I could stay longer, but Roy’ll be needing me.’ She clasped Corrie so hard she could hardly breathe.

‘Promise me?’

‘I promise. We will. Let me get Mum sorted. I got your phone number. I’ll call soon.’

They stood on the front verandah as Junie drove away in the battered ute, Lily waving like a maniac until Corrie said, ‘Ma, she can’t see you any more, come on, come inside now’, and led her back into the house.

Junie was right. Lily Gunn wasted no time selling the farm. She bought a house in Albany, about half way down one of the two hills the town nestled between, overlooking the ocean. The first time Corrie saw it she stood on the street looking up the steep circular driveway. The house was set back into the block, almost hard up against the rocky outcrop behind it. Perched on stilts at the front, it looked as if it was about to slide into the water.

While Lily made a pot of tea in the small kitchen that looked to have been built as an afterthought on the eastern end, Corrie wandered through the house. It was a rambling, creaky old place with floors that had a distinct slope and rooms that ran off other rooms, so that she got disoriented and had to follow the sound of Lily’s voice calling her to find her way back to the kitchen.

‘Plenty of room for family’, Lily had said as they sat on the verandah sipping tea.

‘I reckon we’ll need a bit of string when we go to bed so’s we can find our way out in the morning’, Corrie smiled.

In the centre of the driveway was a small patch of grass and in the middle of that a gnarled old she-oak, which whispered and sighed in the wind that blew off the Southern Ocean. Apart from a few rooftops it was the only interruption to the vast expanse of deep blue water beyond.

Corrie and the children caught the train to Albany once a month to stay for the weekend. She and Grace took Nell for walks around the harbour and they’d stand and look up the steep main street lined with shops. Corrie loved the way the town nestled between the two

round hills. She imagined what it must have been like before cars; how you could have run from the top of that street; just run and run until you reached the bottom and tumbled into the sand.

When she hadn't slept well on the sagging mattress she would get up early and walk to the top of the headland and look down at the beach and across the ocean that went all the way to the ice-cap.

In the afternoons she walked down the hill from Lily's, up the main street and sat in the lounge bar of June and Roy Pritchard's pub.

'You know, the other best thing that bastard did, was kick me out. When I think I could've ended up like Em ... Poor Em, she married Dad by the sounds of it. I can't believe you married a blackfella, Corr. Good job you did, eh. If you'd married one of them farm boys, he would've had you working like bloody Dad made Mum work. We kicked ourselves out really, didn't we, not that we knew it then, and good for us, I say', Junie's laugh popped around the Lounge Bar.

'You wouldn't guess it from looking at your Grace though, that she had blackfella for a Dad. I s'pose that's good, really. Not that I got anything against them. We don't let them in here, but that's not 'cause Roy and me don't like them, it's our regulars, they wouldn't want to be drinking with them, see. But Roy'd be real chuffed to meet your Stan. He said Stan's been round for years, got a reputation. You have to come down when the Show's on, Corr.'

Eventually Corrie told her sister about Herbie. June had hugged her and said, 'I'm so sorry such a terrible thing happened to you, Corr, but I reckon when a terrible thing happens it either makes you stronger or breaks you and I can see it's made you stronger. You got to be proud of yerself for that'.

Corrie felt even more than she already did since they had met up again, that June was the older sister. She knew so much more and had opinions about everything, which Corrie supposed was from

talking to lots of people and being in a real town, not like where she lived, which was only there because of wheat.

She had never seen her mother so content, despite the arthritis that had settled into her joints, it seemed, as soon as she had stopped labouring on the farm. Lily insisted on walking up to see June every day, even if she did need frequent rests.

‘If I don’t keep going I’ll freeze up completely and then who’ll see to Nell’, she’d insisted when Corrie suggested they meet at the little deli which served tea and sandwiches halfway up the hill.

‘Besides, I’m not paying for a pot of tea when I can get a free one at Junie’s.’

Lily Gunn maintained a strict frugality. June didn’t understand it and got cross with her mother for buying clothes in the Baptist church jumble shop, particularly when she wore full skirts and over-size jumpers with a pair of bobby socks and her solid, brown- leather men’s shoes.

‘You look like those women who sit down the park with a bottle in a paper bag.’

‘She’s worried about looking out for Nell when she’s gone, that’s all’, Corrie had explained. ‘Just leave her be, Junie. She’s had someone telling her what to do all her life.’

Seeing June and her mother, even when they disagreed about something, made Corrie feel lonely when she went back to her own house. She would sometimes see Sylvana, depending on her shift at the hospital, and chat to the patients when she handed out the meals and the other women in the kitchen, but it was the evenings that felt empty, sitting in the chair with her embroidery and no one there to listen to the little thoughts that popped into her mind and then circled like the bushflies round the bare globe above the kitchen table.

Chapter 27

Maurie was leaning against the car door, scanning the road behind them.

‘Here they are.’

He swallowed the rest of his coffee and handed the cup through the open window to Rose.

They had been waiting for the rest of the Showies by the side of the highway, to travel southeast for the wheatbelt shows the Agricultural Society had begun four years ago; the same year they’d formed the association. The shows were very popular in the towns and with half the Showies doing the south run, the alley operators had less competition and made good profits.

As Joan and Tommy’s truck passed them, the last in the convoy, Rose caught Joan’s eye and inclined her head to the passenger seat where Katharine was sitting. Joan mouthed ‘wow’, at the same time holding up Mick’s arm, which was swathed in plaster, and gave a what-can-you-do shrug of her shoulders.

Maurie leaned into the open window and rolled his eyes, ‘That boy’s broke his arm *again*?’

‘That’s Mick. It was Paddy last time.’

‘I can never tell those two apart.’

‘Paddy’s got the birthmark on the side of his forehead.’

‘Yeah, well, they need takin’ in hand, those two.’

‘They’re just being boys.’

‘Brats, I’d call ‘em. Tommy thinks the sun shines out of their little backsides. I’d give ‘em a good clip round the ears.’

‘Go on, we better get moving.’

Rose watched Maurie stride over to the truck, heave himself into the cabin and waited for the sound of the motor before she turned the ignition key.

She settled back into the seat. It was going to be a long drive, what with Katharine sulking and defiant next to her. At least she didn't have to put up with Maurie quietly fuming and neither of them speaking to each other.

The assortment of cars, trucks, trailers and caravans crawled slowly up the Darling scarp and at the first opportunity, once they reached the flat, they filed off the road into a truck stop to allow the line of frustrated motorists banked up behind them to get on their way. Kids and warbs disgorged from cars and trucks and raced off into the scrub to find a place to pee, while the dogs lifted their legs against the nearest wheel.

Katharine bolted out of the car as soon as they pulled up. Rose watched her disappear into the scrub with the Tiernan and Banks girls. While she got the basket with the thermos, mugs and Tupperware container with the fruitcake from the boot, the men gathered around the car, armed with the first of the wooblies that would ease their boredom on the long drive ahead.

'Nice', Harry said, stroking the blue duco. 'Must've set you back a pretty penny?'

Harry was always on about how much something cost. If he bought something, he was forever telling you how much it set him back, and if it was something someone else had bought he was always asking how much it cost, then telling them how he knew someone who knows someone who could've got it cheaper, if only you'd told him before you went out and wasted good money.

Rose took the basket and the picnic rug and walked over to Joan, who was still gathering things from the boot of their car.

'Good, I was hoping you'd come over. I've been fluffing around waiting. So', she jerked her head towards where Katharine and the other girls were standing, 'what the hell's going on?'

'In a nutshell, she refused point blank to go back to my parents. She said she was bored stupid with school and wanted to come with us. Maurie hit the roof. He launched in on her, told her she was

ruining her life and come hell or high water she was going back next year. You know what she said? She said, "Well does that mean Mum's life's ruined?" That sort of stopped him in his tracks long enough for me to tell them both to shut up before they said something they'd regret. So, here she is. I tried to tell Maurie that she'd probably change her mind after doing a run and we should just let it be. He's so angry. They're not speaking to each other.'

'Bloody hell. I can't say I'm that surprised, though.'

'She'll change her mind. I'll make sure she gets a good taste of hard work. Maurie's most angry 'cause she didn't do her exams.'

'Hmm, well. Wait and see, I guess. Anyway, better get this tea served.'

'What happened to Mick?'

'He fell out of the tree.'

They walked over to join the other women who were already pouring tea and piling sliced cake onto a plate. Rose loaded up a tray with mugs of tea and cake and waved Stan over to come and get it for the boys.

The women's attention was interrupted by loud voices coming from the group of men.

'Yer bloody stole me best warb, yer mongrel.'

'Ah, give it a rest, will yer.'

'You'd nick a blind parrot's bloody corn given ... '

'Put it this way, if Pete dropped the pay packet he gets from you off of the Empire State it'd float away on the bloody breeze.'

'Yer lower'n a lizard with a beer belly, Frank, that's all I got to say.'

'Yeah, right, Artie, and yer a gunner. Gunner give yer lads a raise, gunner give 'em a decent place ta sleep.'

'They're worse than bloody kids. Think I'll go find meself a nice bush.' Joan picked up her cigarettes and disappeared into the scrub that screened the road from the paddocks.

‘Put a sock in it, you lot!’ Barb yelled with a mouthful of cake.
‘Where were we?’

The Banks women had new nylon slip-on covers in their vans that could be removed, washed, dried and put back in a couple of hours tops.

‘Now that’s a great idea, Barb. Can I’ve a look? I’ve been worried about spoiling my cushions.’

Pansy Fisher and her husband Des were one of the new Showie families who’d joined a year after the association was formed. She and Barb disappeared inside the caravan, trailed by Colleen, who had suggested the idea of slip-on covers and participated in the planning, making and fitting of them, and was keen to make sure Barb gave credit where credit was due. Curiosity got the better of the other women and they followed, leaving Rose alone on the rug until Joan came back.

‘Is it a bad break? Mick’s arm?’

‘Not serious, a greenfinger or greenstick, or something. The usual thing kids do. Just add it to the list of breaks, strains, sprains, cuts, bruises, bumps, slices and dices. We got rid of the swings, we lock every drawer and cupboard, padlock the shed. I don’t know what else to do to make the place twin-proof. First thing Tommy said was we’d have to cut the tree down, and I said over my dead body and he said well, either yours or one of theirs I reckon.’

Rose laughed, ‘Well, it won’t be the last injury on the list’.

‘Tommy bought a new television. Reckons that’ll keep them out of mischief. Best bloody baby-sitter I’ve ever had. The girls like that *Six o’clock rock*, which drives me up the bloody wall.’ Joan sighed, ‘I suppose we’ve got time for another cuppa. They’ll be ages discussing the ins and outs of bloody cushion covers’.

Rose watched Lou and Katharine standing over by the scrub, deep in conversation with Billy Banks. He was a dull young man who thought himself otherwise. When Billy told a story he would get side-tracked and it would go on and on until Stew or Joe or Artie jnr would

step in and finish it for him. Whenever Billy got started, Maurie would mumble under his breath, 'Here we go, worse than drawing teeth' and she'd elbow him in the ribs and try not to laugh.

The other women returned and sat down.

'I must say, that's the best idea I've seen yet, Barb. I have terrible trouble getting the dust out even when I do put sheets over me cushions.'

A loud whistle made them turn. The men were waving at them.

'Come on you lot, stop yer jawing and let's get on the road.'

The women gathered the mugs, plates and leftover cake, rounded up children, called dogs and settled everyone and everything in their proper places.

Katharine ran over, 'Can I—'

'Don't even ask. Get in the car. This's a working holiday, so don't push your luck or your father'll put you on the next train back to Perth. I mean it, you understand.'

Rose watched her daughter stomp back to their car. It was hard to believe Katharine would be seventeen soon. She hadn't been much older than that when she met Maurie.

As the convoy drove through the town to get to the showground, people stopped and stared. Some children, and even some of their parents, waved.

'I remember this place. It's got all those grand hotels', Joan looked at the buildings with their deep verandahs and intricate stained-glass windows. 'Must've been a lot of money here once.'

It seemed like every kid in town had followed them to the ground. They watched from a distance as the Showies backed in their caravans and trucks, unloaded gear and rides, erected the joints and put the 'guts' in—the curtains, lights and banners, and finally arranged the plush before tying on the smothers.

Joan knew they eyed the Showie kids with suspicion. Her children sometimes attended the school in town and often found themselves embroiled in playground battles, defending themselves

accusations of thievery. For their part, the Showie kids thought the country kids were just plain pig-ignorant, as Mick had pointed out once while she cleaned up his bloodied nose, 'That stupid boy didn't even know the lady without a body is just a trick with mirrors, 'cause you'd be dead if yer didn't have a body, wouldn't yer'.

The irony was that the Showies had had their trucks, joints and caravans robbed over the years and Dobermans and Alsatians had been added to their retinue to act as guard dogs. They did a good job too. Even new and unsuspecting warbs were sometimes frightened out of their wits if they wandered too close to a dog that was unfamiliar with them.

By the time the sun was dipping below the line of trees, sideshow alley was set up for business the following morning. The town children had been shooed home and Joan knew they would be counting the pennies, threepences and sixpences extracted from moneyboxes, and be dreaming of thrilling rides, kewpie dolls with sparkle on their dresses, hot dogs, lemonade, and the treasures to be won for a shilling on the games of knock-ems, hoopla and shooting galleries; things that Perth kids could buy in Coles for threepence.

The bloke from the Agricultural Society pulled up next to her and wound his window down, 'G'day. Les Tweehan. I'm here to collect the rent'.

'Artie has it all ready, Les. He's over there, by the carousel,' Joan pointed half way down the alley.

Rent was charged on how many feet each joint took so the men cribbed a few feet here and there and collected the money ready to go, knowing the bloke from the Society was not going to bother walking down the alley to measure each joint.

Mind you, other towns did well out of the Showies. One town had its grandstand burnt down last year and the association donated a hundred pounds towards rebuilding it. It all worked out in the wash. Although goodwill hadn't saved Dot and Jack's show at the Royal

last year. They had a strip act and even though it promised a lot more than what was delivered, the Society got all up in arms about it. A letter was sent to the association saying that sort of entertainment was a threat to the moral health of the public and it was to be closed down immediately or the police would be brought in. Luckily, Jack and Dot had the food van or they would've lost a lot of money.

The first night in the first town of the run was always the night for a get-together, so once business with the Agricultural Society was concluded and any stray townie children who'd been found lurking in the shadows had been marched off the grounds, the gates were shut and the Showies could relax.

A fire was lit, sausages laid out to cook on wire grates, bread was buttered, bottles of beer opened and emptied into waiting glasses. Barb sat on a canvas stool and tuned her guitar.

'Right, any requests?'

'How 'bout "Pack up your troubles", we all know that one.'

'K-K-K-Katy', 'Keep the home fires burning' and 'If you were the only girl in the world' were requested, and those who knew the words sang along until Artie yelled, 'Time to eat!'

Later, when bellies were full and the stories and laughter had subsided, Dot called across the circle, 'Barb, can you just sing 'Molly Malone'?'

'Oh, good choice, Dot, exactly what I would of picked', Joan smiled.

'Me too', Rose held up her glass in salute.

A hush fell over the group as Barb sang, the sound of her voice never failed to raise the hairs on the back of Joan's neck, especially the last verse where Molly's ghost wheels the barrow through the streets still crying plaintively, *cockles and mussels alive, alive-o*.

'Beautiful, just beautiful, Barb.'

A rousing rendition of everybody's favourite 'Show me the way to go home', everyone singing along at the top of their voices, signalled the end of the evening for the older Showies. 'Goodnights'

were said and they made a beeline for their warm, if a little cramped, beds, leaving the young ones to enjoy what was left of the fire.

Chapter 28

Rose watched from the caravan window as the convoy of Showies from the southwest run filed through the gates of the Albany showgrounds and pulled into their allotted space. Women emerged from vans and stood, hands on hips, waiting to greet their sons, daughters and grandchildren. Soon the sound of clanking of metal, flapping canvas and barking dogs, mixed with colourful language, drifted across the grounds. Warbs carrying boxes of plush, power boards and leads dashed back and forth between the trucks and the joints, racing to get set up before darkness fell. There were now so many leads running across the track and between the joints, the warbs' job was to connect and check everything and then dig a shallow trench to bury them.

As the wheatbelt mob had slowly made its way south, the Showies spent less time with each other in the evenings. New caravans, larger and more comfortable, were too inviting after a long, hard day's work. The gatherings around a fire for a sing-a-long and stories were left to the young people and the warbs.

Now everyone was reunited in Albany for the rest of the week, they could relax, catch up on the news and spend the evenings at their favourite pub across the road from the showground.

Katharine had done everything she'd been told to do, selling tickets, helping Rose with the cooking, and sitting in on the houses with her to dispense water, hand out towels and patch up the odd cut. She had done it all without complaining, but as soon as she finished, had disappeared. Rose soon learned where to find her, either with the Banks or Tiernan girls helping spruik the rides and sell tickets at the gate, or chatting and laughing with Billy Banks and Pete.

Maurie had become grumpier and more distracted, barking orders and giving monosyllabic answers to anyone who dared ask

him a question or, heaven forbid, tried to engage in a conversation. He had relied more and more on Stan to look out for the boys and do the warm-ups before the shows. And Stan had done a good job, particularly with his boy, Bobby, who'd not been with them very long. Maurie'd refused to take on Stan's other boy, Dan. She'd tried to argue that having brothers, doing a tag-team show, would be a good drawcard, but he'd refused point blank. 'That lad's not ready yet. He needs to grow up a bit first. Maybe next year.'

Rose made herself another cup of tea and sat back down at the table to finish reading Pansy and Des Fisher's story she'd asked them to write for the next edition of *The Showman*. They used to work in a circus: Des as a clown and Pansy was a trapeze artist. They had become tired of the travelling life and retired to earn their living making little plaster figurines and ornaments in their back shed. Des mixed the plaster and poured it into the casts and Pansy painted them, finishing them with a coat of lacquer to make them look like china. Des would then sell them door-to-door. A visit to the Royal had made them realise they missed the camaraderie of circus life. They decided being a Showie would give them the opportunity again, and they'd probably make a better living using their plaster creations as prizes on a game of chance.

Rose corrected the spelling mistakes and put in missing full stops. As she worked, she thought about Katharine and the big row that was to come. She had deferred to Maurie's judgement all these years, but it had been hard. She wanted Katharine to be with her, but there was also that part of her that agreed with Maurie about needing consistency with her schooling. If only Katharine had waited to do her exams to complete form five, Rose felt sure Maurie would be less angry and more willing to listen to her.

She finished the corrections, put the story back in the folder and got out the pile of advertisements scribbled on scraps of paper people had handed to her over the past few months. She leafed through them, sorting them into different categories: business

equipment, domestic, things to sell, things people wanted to buy. She had to laugh at the one from Harry Pickles. He must've gone through his back shed and found some boxes of plush that had been sitting there for at least ten years, judging by his description. He'd know the mugs would take one look at it and move on to the next joint with good-quality prizes. Knowing Harry, he would've decided it was worth taking the punt to try and earn a couple of extra quid from another Showie whose judgement was temporarily impaired by a few too many wooblies.

She put an elastic band around each of the piles and put them away, sat back and lit a cigarette. She loved doing the newsletter. She loved reading the stories people sent in. It often meant knocking on their van door and asking a few questions to get things clear, which meant a cup of tea, a cigarette or two and a lot more story than had been written down. So far, it was the younger Showies, the second generation, who were more interested, but gradually the older ones were more willing to share their stories, too.

Maurie poked his head round the door, 'Come on, love, some of us are heading over to the pub. Grab yer jacket and let's go'.

As they walked across the windy ground towards the gate, Rose ventured, 'You got a bit of spring in your step'.

'Yeah, well, on the home run and lookin' forward to a nice evening before the fun begins tomorrer.'

There was quite a gathering of Showies at the gate, hunched against the wind, stamping their feet and blowing on their fingers.

'Bloody hell, reckon I could count on one hand the times its been halfway decent weather down 'ere', Artie moaned, as he took Barb's arm and steered her out the gate and across the road.

They entered the Lounge Bar and sat at the tables Roy and June Pritchard had set up ready with glasses. June came bouncing through the door with two jugs of beer in each hand and set them down without spilling a drop.

‘Good to see you, how are you?’ she grinned, as she moved around the tables and filled their glasses. ‘All ready for the big day?’

She emptied the jugs and, on her way back to the bar for refills, stopped where Rose and Maurie were sitting.

‘How you going? I hear one of me nephews’s joined your tent. Young Bobby. He’s a nice lad, that one. Should do well, I reckon. Be an asset, he will.’

‘He’s doing well so far. Stan’s doing a good job with him.’

‘That’s good to hear. I’ll be sure’n let Corrie know you said that. She’ll be glad to hear it, I reckon. She and the kids are goin’ tomorrow. She wanted me to come for dinner tomorrow night with them all but I told her I couldn’t. I said Roy’d never be able to do the front bar and look after the showpeople as well.’

Maurie had laughed a few years back, when June had bounced over and hugged them and told them how she’d been reunited with her long-lost sister and found out she’d married a boxer from the tent. Since then, June had told them about her mother moving to Albany and Corrie’s visits with the children. It was as if Rose and Maurie had somehow become part of the family.

The Pritchards certainly looked after them and, as Artie was fond of saying, ‘When yer on a good thing stick to it, ay’. And they did. No Showies set foot in any of the other pubs in town. June always made sure there were bowls of hot chips on the tables, the meals were generous and the jugs were never left to sit empty. At six o’clock, when they were meant to close, June and Roy pulled down the blinds and turned off the main lights in the bar. A small donation to the local cops ensured they could keep serving in the Lounge Bar until the Showies stumbled back across the road to fall into bed. For those who still hadn’t learnt restraint, the Albany Show often meant a week-long hangover. Those who did pace themselves waited for the last night before really letting their hair down.

Rose left Maurie talking to some of the men about motors and what horsepower was best for particular jobs, and went over to sit at the table with Barb, Nancy, Stew, Joan, Dot and Bert.

‘Hi, Rose, I was just saying about one of the warbs’, Bert smiled, ‘I told him to hook up all the swing boats facing clockwise and get the mugs on as soon as he was done, so I could help Nance with the dodgems. A couple of them’d got stuck. Anyway, it took me a while to sort out, and when I get back they’re all goin’ round backwards with a lot of people looking very uncomfortable and quite a few squawkin’ kids. I know how they felt, too. I can’t go in a train unless I’m facin’ the same direction the train’s goin’.

‘So I stop the ride and get everyone off and tell them to come back in a hour for a free ride, and I say to him “what the bloody hell you think yer doin’, I told yer to put them on facin’ clockwise”. He looks at me and says, “they are facin’ clockwise”. I says, “ow the hell you figure that” and he’s says, “well, if yer looking at a clock the hands’d be comin’ round like this, so I put the swings on like yer said, facin’ clockwise”.

‘Can yer believe it, this fella told me he wanted the job so he could save some money for when he’s at university next year, so I give him the job thinking he’d have the nouse’, Bert laughed.

‘I can beat that one’, Stew interrupted, ‘I sent me warb to move the truck with the plush closer to the joint. A job you’d reckon’d take five minutes, so when he hasn’t come back after twenty minutes I sent Nance over to see what’s the hold-up. And there he is with a bit of wire trying to unlock the driver’s door ’cause he’s gone and locked the bloody keys in, hasn’t he. So Nance walks round to the passenger side and tries the handle, and lo and behold, it’s open, so she says, “This door’s open” and he says, “Yeah, I know, I already done that side”.

‘D’you think there’s a recipe we could learn for picking warbs who’ve got more’n a few brain cells?’ Nancy said seriously to Barb.

‘Never found one yet’, Barb took a swallow of beer, ‘but don’t do what Artie did, if yer find a good one, pay ’em enough to hang on to ’em. Hens teeth they are, hen’s teeth’.

Rose filled Barb’s glass, ‘I know there’s a big birthday coming up for you next year, and Maurie too, so I thought it’d be nice to do a story for the newsletter. What it used to be like on the showgrounds before the war and all that. What do you think?’

Barb rolled her eyes, ‘Thanks for reminding me. *Sixty*’. She turned to the others, ‘You reckon I ought to do it?’ And without waiting for a response, ‘I’ll think about it and let yer know’.

Joan winked at her and mouthed, ‘She’ll do it’.

‘Right, I’ve had enough of you lot’, Barb grinned, ‘time to find someone else to ’ave a decent chat’.

The talk about warbs, kids, the weather, and all the news of each run continued until Maurie tapped her on the shoulder, ‘C’mon, love, time to hit the hay’.

She watched Maurie take off his shirt and drop it on the floor. The muscles were flaccid under the skin, which hung loose around his elbows. He climbed into the small bed and turned on his side. She curled into him and put her arm around his neck, ‘I was thinking, with you and Barb both turning sixty next year we could have a double celebration. We could have a big party at our place and invite everyone. What do you think?’

He laughed quietly, ‘Sounds to me like a good idea. What’s Barb got to say about it?’

‘Haven’t asked her yet. I just thought of it.’

Rose began to imagine a design for their birthday party invitation. She would make it the front page of the newsletter, and inside she’d have a little story on how Maurie and Barb came to know each other and become Showies.

Chapter 29

In the morning Rose got up and dressed quickly. She would go and have an early cuppa with Joan before getting the breakfast. She opened the door and crept quietly across the annex, past Katharine asleep the on the camp stretcher. As she made her way along the track towards the Tiernans, she could see the sway of the vans as the Showies moved around, getting ready for the day. She could hear the click of cupboard doors and the chinking of breakfast plates and the muffled talk.

She knocked quietly on Joan's door, 'It's me. Rose. I need a cuppa'.

The door opened and a hand waved her inside. Joan was still in her dressing gown.

She had been staring at her face in the small mirror stuck on the inside of the cupboard above the sink. She'd packed the boys off with Tommy and the girls, to get everything ready for opening. Tommy always liked to do a final check in case any globes had blown or disappeared during the night, and to make sure the motor was still filled with petrol and the leads for the music and the loudhailer were still plugged in. Just in case someone had come along during the night.

The association had stopped the rows about ground, but it hadn't stopped the myriad of niggles and frustrations, or the accusations of sabotage either. Water found in petrol motors, electric leads that had been cut, tent pegs mysteriously gone missing so joints collapsed in the first gust of wind, all provoked flared tempers and harsh words, and occasionally an all-out brawl on the grass.

'You better make it while I put me face on.'

Joan picked up the bottle of foundation, shook it and poured a generous amount into the palm of her hand. She rubbed the liquid into furrows across her forehead with her fingertips while Rose filled

the kettle and plugged it in to the lead, which disappeared out of the window and joined the hundred other leads plugged into power boards somewhere in the alley.

A loud rap on the door made her jump.

'Who the hell is that?' She called, irritated by the disruption to her morning ritual.

'Shall I see?' Rose whispered.

Joan shook her head, '*Who is it?*'

'It's me. Colleen. I need to talk.'

'Just a minute.' Joan quickly spread the rest of the foundation over her face and patted it with a large powder puff.

She opened the door of the van, 'It's early, Colleen, what do you want?'

'I think I just done something terrible. If Barb finds out she'll kill me.'

Joan rolled her eyes, 'Come in. I'm sure whatever it is it's not that bad'.

Colleen was panting, 'Joey just arksed me to get a box of plush from the truck and I told him, I'm not yer damn wife and yer better do it yer damn self if yer don't think wives are worth any damn thing'. Then she noticed Rose. 'Oh. Oh dear. I didn' see you.'

'It's okay. Now what on earth are you talking about. Just back up a bit.'

'It was me put the can of oil on the step. Just so's he'd know, you know, that someone was onto him. Poor Stella. It's not fair on her, and Barb didn't say nothing 'cause he's her golden boy. And now he knows it was me and he'll tell Barb and then I'll cop it and my Artie'll be mad at me. I shouldn't of done it, but I couldn't help meself. Oh, I think I've gone and cut off me nose despite me face. I'm goin' to be in so much trouble.'

Joe's wife Stella had always insisted on staying in hotels when they did the southwest run, but had refused to come with Joey on the wheatbelt run. She had imagined one-horse towns and dusty hotels

with lumpy mattresses and grubby sheets, so had opted to stay home with their kids. Even after Joey bought a new caravan she had refused to come. A few people had suggested Joey had a wandering eye when Stella wasn't around, especially after a few beers. Then there had been one night when he was heard trying to open the door of his caravan in the early hours of the morning. Trouble was the door made a high-pitched squeal, which had set the dogs off.

Someone had taken matters into their own hands and put a can of oil on the step. There was a fair bit of speculation about who put it there. Barb thought it was Peggy, trying to look out for her daughter, but her pointed comments had got no rise from either of the Flannerys.

No one had thought of Colleen.

Rose busied herself with making the tea so she wouldn't laugh.

'He's not going to know it was you put the oil can there just because you said that. Bloody hell, don't worry about it, Colleen.'

Rose turned to look at Colleen. 'Joan's right. I wouldn't worry if I was you. And neither of us'll say anything, will we, Joan?'

'Never. We'd never breathe a word. Now I have to get dressed, so if you wouldn't mind.'

'Oh, yes. Sorry, I didn't mean to walk in on you. Thanks, but. I feel better now I told someone.'

Joan closed the door and laughed, 'Honestly, she gives me the irri-ts, but good on her for sticking up for Stella'.

'She's not so bad.'

'You're good to her. Better than I am. I'm not very patient. Anyway, she's gone up a couple of notches in my book.'

'I bet Peg's secretly thanking whoever did it.'

'I bet Barb is too. Actually, I thought it was her put it there even though she was acting all offended. Anyway, whatever he was up to I reckon she prob'ly had words with him.'

'You don't think he was up to anything, do you?'

‘What? Funny business? No way. Barb’d bloody kill him. Out with the warbs partying most likely.’

Joan stood in front of the mirror. ‘Right, I’ll just finish putting me face on. Where’s that cuppa?’

She took the tweezers out of the floral bag and plucked the stray hairs that had grown outside the arch of her eyebrows, then blackened them with pencil. She drew the black lines around her eyes and filled the lids in with iridescent blue. She turned the lipstick until a stub of bright red appeared and drew it back and forth across her lips, rubbing them together so the colour spread outside the line of her mouth. She put a few dabs of red on each cheek and smoothed it over her cheekbones. She stood back and looked at her face, ‘Done. On with the glad-rags, then I’m ready to face the day’.

She plopped the lipstick into the bag and closed the zip.

‘What’s it like up north?’

Rose laughed, ‘Hot, during the day, and inland bloody freezing at night. Why?’

‘Tommy’s quit his job at the post office. We think it’s a waste having to pay someone to take the ride north when we could just as easily do it.’

‘Good for you!’

‘We’re getting a food van, too. We haven’t decided yet, hotdogs or donuts.’ Joan saw the expression on Rose’s face and laughed, ‘Not for me, yer daft bugger. For the girls! I said years ago you wouldn’t catch me dead standin’ over a pot of boiling water and the same goes for a vat of boiling fat. And I won’t be camping out in the middle of bloody nowhere like you do. I might do a Stella and stay in the hotels’.

‘You better bring the caravan. I’m not sure you’ll even find a hotel to stay in in some of those inland places.’

Rose lit a cigarette, ‘I’m pretty sure Katharine’s not going to go back to school’.

‘Like I said, I’m not surprised. And what about you, where do you stand?’ Joan noticed Rose wasn’t scratching her chest like she usually did when she was upset.

‘I’ll back her up. It’d be easier if she was a bit more interested in the tent, as far as getting Maurie on side.’ Rose laughed, ‘There’s always Barb and Artie, they always need people. That’d be a turn up, wouldn’t it?’

‘Barb’d look out for her. It wouldn’t be such a bad thing.’

‘Anyway, Stan’s got a girl. He’s been so helpful, ’specially this trip, what with Maurie being such a grouch. I’d like to help him out. She’s too young now, but in a few years she might want to come and work with me. Plenty of time to sort it out.’

The noise of motors spluttering to life and tunes blaring down the alley interrupted the women. Joan looked at her watch, ‘Lord, it’s time already. I better go make some money’. She checked her face again in the mirror.

‘Come on, I’ll walk you down to the ride.’

Instead of going down the track between the Showies’ caravans and trucks and the joints, Rose and Joan turned and walked into the alley. With the meeting up of the Showies who did the southwest run and the wheatbelt run, the Albany Show was impressive.

People queued at the gates were making a beeline for their favourite game, or strolling past each one, looking at the prizes on offer and weighing up the chances of winning before making their decision.

The two women walked past the gaudily painted joints, with their tinny tunes blaring and coloured lights blinking. Each one was festooned with plush hanging on the canvas walls, or displayed along boards covered in bright fabric—stuffed toys of bright green, lolly pink, orange, yolk-yellow and blue, kewpie dolls with their little stiff skirts of sparkled net and Betty Boop eyes, and an array of knick-knacks, all waiting to be won and taken home to clutter shelves, mantle pieces and dressing tables. In front of them, the Showies

competed to spruik the superiority of their particular permutation fishing pools, knock-ems, laughing clowns, darts and shooting galleries.

Between them the food vans were already dispensing their treats. The smell of hot dogs and chips, nutty popcorn, sickly sweet toffee apples and oily jam donuts wafted across the Alley. Barb's grey head was bent over a spinning tub, her hand expertly winding swathes of pink fairy floss onto a stick.

‘ ... no losers, everybody wins a prize ... ’

‘ ... hot jam donuts ... ’

‘ ... test yer skill an' daring ... ’

‘ ... three goes only two bob ... ’

‘ ... fresh popcorn, fairy floss, toffee apples ... ’

‘ ... win a lovely crystal vase ... ’

Above the noise of the tunes and spruikers they could hear the mugs' screaming, willing to have their stomachs turned so early in the morning on spinning, jolting, zooming, rising and falling thrill rides.

Rose caught a glimpse of Katharine standing in front of the Cup and Saucer. She was talking to Billy Banks and Jack and Dot's youngest son, Ted. She touched Joan's elbow and inclined her head. Joan laughed, 'She's one of us'.

Katharine turned and saw them. Rose smiled and waved.

'Well, I'll leave you to it.'

'Rose, I'll see you right, what ever happens, you know that don't you.'

Rose smiled, 'I know. But we're fine'.

'Me and Tommy went equal partners after we paid the loan back, but I'm the bookkeeper from hell thanks to you. Not a penny goes where it shouldn't', Joan laughed.

Rose squeezed between the queue of people waiting for the chair-o-plane and the merry-go-round and wandered back into the relative quiet of the track. She had a few hours before their tent

opened. She'd feed the boys, make Maurie a good breakfast of bacon and eggs, then sketch out her ideas for the birthday invitation.

Joan strapped the leather cash bag around her waist and took her place in front of their ride.

Chapter 30

Corrie hardly recognised Dan when he marched up the steep driveway to the house, his duffle bag slung over his left shoulder just like his father. He'd filled out and his skin had darkened from working long days in the sun on wheat and sheep farms. When he bent to hug her, she felt the hardness of the muscle under his shirt and the smell of stale sweat in his clothes.

She was glad he'd gone bush, away from the town, what with getting into fights and the police coming round and saying they'd lock him up next time. Maurie Jackson had said, 'I'll take yer eldest boy, but give the other one another year, I reckon, then we'll see'. Dan had been resentful, 'I'm bloody taller'n Bobby'. It's true, he was, but maybe Maurie had sensed in Dan a bit of a temper that would not go down well in the tent when the mugs were egging their mates on to give the bloody Abos a good hiding.

They sat on the verandah and Dan told her about the farms he'd worked on, all the way up in Merredin and across to Esperance, and as he talked she felt the change in him. In the six months or so since he'd left, her second-eldest boy had become a young man.

Lily opened the door and stuck her head out, 'You two better get your skates on or you'll miss the show'.

They set off to the showground to meet up with Eric, Mattie and Grace outside the tent. Corrie almost had to run to keep up with him as they made their way up the hill and past Junie and Roy's pub. Yesterday, she'd asked Junie to come for dinner tonight, but she'd said, 'I'd love to, Corr, but we'll be pullin' beers all night for the Showies', and had shoved a couple of bottles of beer and a nice 'top shelf' sweet sherry for Lily into Corrie's bag.

She could hear the bell ringing and the drum beating as they neared the gates. She wanted to be there to watch Stan and Bobby

up on the boards together, but she could see Maurie and the last of the troupe climbing down the steps as they hurried towards the tent.

Dan took her arm and steered her out of the crowded alley to the track behind the joints. They were almost there when a large Doberman came loping towards them, barking and snarling. Corrie turned to run between the tents, tripped on one of the ropes and fell.

Dan squatted beside her, 'You all right? Here, give us yer hand'.

'I'll be right, just give me a tick. Frightened the daylight out of me.'

'Here, what the bloody hell you think you're doin'!' a woman yelled. 'What's up, love? Was he trying to nick yer purse? Want me to call the cops?'

Dan straightened up and looked at the woman. She reminded him of some of the owners of the farms he worked. Tight, nuggetty men and women. Think the worst, then you won't be disappointed, was as much about the weather as about strangers, and a stranger was anyone who hadn't been farming the district for at least three generations.

'This's me mother. She tripped on the rope.'

'I'm Stan Cooper's wife, from the boxing tent', Corrie interrupted.

'Oh, right.' She looked at Dan. 'This your boy then?'

A small group of Showies had gathered, including the dog's owner, who had not managed to stop it barking and snarling.

'You know these people, Barb?'

'What're they doin' on the track?'

'Bloody lucky they didn't get bitten, I reckon.'

'They ought ta be in the alley, not coming down here.'

'Yeah, this's for Showies, this track.'

'It's all right. She belongs to one of Maurie's. Stew, put yer dog in the van for a bit.' The woman turned to Corrie, 'You want me to get Rose?'

‘I’m fine. I just got a fright.’

‘Righto, then.’ She put her hands on her hips, ‘Go on, you lot, you can get back to whatever it is’.

They reached the tent just as Rose was closing the door.

‘I’ve been looking out for you. I thought you weren’t coming, so I told Grace she could be with Katharine and help give out the towels. I thought she’d enjoy it, especially with her Dad and seeing Bobby. I hope you don’t mind.’

‘No, I don’t mind. Thanks for taking care of her.’ Corrie never quite knew how to be with Rose. She always felt awkward. She had wondered once, a long time ago, if it was because she felt a bit jealous of Rose; that it was Rose, not Corrie, who sewed the buttons back on Stan’s shirts, and patched the cuffs where they had frayed, and cooked his meals every night.

It was so crowded inside they were unable to get to the front. It was all right for Dan, he was tall, but Corrie could not see Grace at all and could only catch glimpses of the action. She had to keep asking Dan what was happening.

‘What’s Gracie doing? Is she all right?’

Dan held onto her hand, ‘She looks like a real pro. Got a grin on her face from one ear to the other’, he laughed.

Finally, Dan said, ‘It’s Bobby! Bobby’s up! He’s up with Benny.’

‘Second last bout, ladies and gen’lmen! Got a young boxer here, hasn’t been with us very long, so let’s hope this fella I’ve teamed ’im up with doesn’t walk away with that prize money too quickly, ay. Right, shake ’ands you two.’

The bell rang. Corrie stood on tiptoes and craned her neck. She could just see Bobby’s dark, curly hair through the crowd, moving around the canvas, and hear the slap of gloves between the cheers and whistles.

‘Tell me, tell me what he’s doing!’ She tugged on Dan’s sleeve.

Dan was laughing and whistling. ‘He’s givin’ Benny a right old hidin’. He’s doin’ good.’

It seemed like no time at all before bell rang again, and that was it. Maurie declared Bobby the winner after one round. Corrie sank back onto her feet.

Stan's bout was with Eddy. After the incident with that bloke and the metal bar, Maurie didn't take the chance of putting mugs up against Stan. He was too much of a drawcard to take the risk of being injured like that again. Stan had told her that even if Maurie'd wanted to, Rose wouldn't have let him. He'd laughed, 'The boys reckoned she give him a right earful about that one. They could hear her in the van that night, going on at him till all hours'.

'I'm going to wait outside. I'll come back tomorrow.'

She'd get Dan and Grace to look after Nell, and maybe she'd be able to persuade Lily to come. She'd make sure they'd come early and get a spot at the front so they could see everything.

'Here we are, Corr!' Stan called and waved.

Grace broke away and ran over and hugged her.

'Mum, guess what! I was standing by the ticket box when Rose was selling the tickets and this bloke come up to me and he said, "Giddyay, girly, you here to see the blackfellas get a good hiding then, ay", and Rose leans out the window and says to him, "See those two blackfellas up the end there, well, that's her father and her brother, so just watch your mouth".'

'And where was Eric and Mattie?'

'They were up the front. Rose said I could come with her. She said her girl Katharine would look after me.'

'I know, she told me. You're s'posed to stay with the boys. They're s'posed to be lookin' after you, not ... '

'But, Mum, I got to stand at the back of the tent with Katharine and help her hand out towels and give everyone a drink!'

As they walked down the hill, Corrie watched Grace, her hand folded with Bobby's. She was laughing, saying something to Dan walking next to her. Her long hair, tied back into a ponytail, was

missing the bright green ribbon Corrie had tied around it before she, Eric and Mattie had set off for the show.

They turned into the steep driveway.

'Here they come!' Nell jumped up and ran to the rickety railing, waving a flag she'd made that morning from the old Christmas cards Lily always saved for her craft box.

'Nell! Don't lean on the rail. I told you a hundred times it'll give way and then we'll be scraping you off the gravel. I could do without that drama, thank you very much!'

They crowded onto the verandah, all talking over each other, telling Lily about their day at the show; the rides and the games and the fairy floss, but most of all Bobby's fight, until Lily said it was time to come and eat or it'd all be burnt and ruined.

They sat down at the big jarrah table. Corrie noticed that Grace made sure she sat next to Bobby. She laughed the loudest at the stories he told about the other boys, the jokes they played on each other, looked envious when he boasted about all the pretty girls he'd met, and proud when Maurie'd said he was a good boxer and a fast learner.

'You should see the Royal. You reckon this show's big. I know its bigger than at home, but that Perth Royal! There's so many rides and games, you wouldn't believe it. They got a Ferris wheel too. I reckon it'd take two whole days to get round them all!'

Corrie watched Grace's eyes widen.

'Pity yer missed seeing me an' Dad up on the boards, Dan. We look pretty good, ay, Gracie? Maurie reckons I might get a big sign on the tent with me name on it one day, just like Dad. And you too, ay. We'll be the Cooper brothers.'

Dan had been gazing at the table the whole time, listening to Bobby. 'I won't be joining the tent. It's not for me. I been thinking about it a lot the past couple of months.'

Corrie looked at Bobby and saw the disappointment on his face. A hush fell over the table until Stan said, 'You got to do what's right

for you, I reckon, and if you thought about it and it feels right, then good for you’.

Mattie offered, ‘Me and Eric’re gonna join the tent, aren’t we, Eric?’

‘We’ll see, you two got a while before worrying about that’, Stan smiled.

Lily and Grace cleared the plates and everyone moved into the large sitting room in the centre of the house. Once, its two narrow doors at either end would have led onto the verandah, and the windows would have looked out across the rooftops and the Southern Ocean, but someone had built a long passageway across the front to get to the warren of rooms that had been added to the far end of the house.

The boys sat on the floor playing a game of Snap. The loud slapping of hands down to claim the pile of cards was accompanied by arguments about who’d said it first and whether saying it first, or getting your hand down first, meant you won the kitty. Nell had decided to make a flag for everyone, so Grace was helping her cut pictures from a magazine and glue them to pieces of paper.

Lily, Stan and Corrie sat in the faded old armchairs Lily had insisted be brought from the farm. She took a gulp of the sherry Stan had poured and said, ‘Stan, I reckon it’s time Corrie came to live here with me and Nell. What d’you think?’

Lily laughed at the look on his face, ‘That came out wrong. I mean all of you. There’s plenty of room for all of you here. Me and Nell can share, so Gracie can have her own room and the boys can double up when Bobby and Dan are here’.

She turned to her grandchildren and said, ‘You’d all like to live here, wouldn’t you? Tell your Mum and Dad they got to come and live here’.

Nell got over-excited and the scissors she was waving around flew out of her hand and hit Eric on the head, which made everyone

laugh except Lily, who told her off and then told everyone off for laughing.

‘Just think about it, is all I’m saying.’

Later, when they were getting ready for bed, Stan said, ‘You been quiet’.

‘I been wondering, do you think Rose’s got her eye on Grace for the tent?’

‘No, ’course not, she’s just a girl. Rose told me she’d look out for her, that’s all. She asked me if I wouldn’t mind. It was just a bit of fun. Anyway, what would she want with our Grace. She’s got Katharine.’

‘I thought her girl was never going to be a Showie.’

‘Yeah, well, that was their idea, but Katharine’s got others, ay. Me and the boys heard some mighty big rows.’ Stan laughed, ‘She gave them a run for their money, that’s all I can say’.

Corrie manoeuvred herself down into the sagging mattress.

Stan found her hand under the bedclothes, ‘You done a good job with those kids, Corr. I’m glad Dan’s worked out what he wants instead of just following Bobby. Don’t worry yerself about Gracie. We’re all together so let’s have a good time, ay’.

Stan’s breath was warm against her ear, ‘I reckon you should live here. Lily’s good company, and Junie too. And one day I’ll be needing yer to look out for me, ay, when I go silly in the head’.

‘Don’t say that.’

‘I forget things sometimes.’

‘No more’n me or anybody else’, Corrie lied.

Stan sat up and rolled a cigarette. After a while he said, ‘Corr, I been thinking it’s getting time I give the tent away. I was thinking maybe another year, make sure Bobby’s settled’.

‘You’d be happy here?’

‘Reckon I would. Plenty of jobs to do round the place.’

‘I dunno what I’ll do having you round every day.’ She stroked his leg, feeling the coarse hair against her fingers. ‘You’ll prob’ly drive me crazier’n the kids ever did.’

Stan butted his cigarette and lay down. ‘Reckon we can drive each other crazy.’

The springs on the old bed pinged and groaned as Stan tried to get up without waking her.

‘Stan?’

‘Shh. Sorry, I was gonna get you a cuppa.’

‘I’ll get up.’

‘No, stay here. I’ll bring it.’

She would rather have got up to get the ache out of her back. She levered herself up and leaned against the pillows. She listened to the sounds coming from different rooms; the creak of floorboards, the soft pad of feet, hushed talk and muffled giggles.

Stan put the tea on the table beside the bed and sat down, ‘There yer go, nice cuppa’ll get yer right, ay’.

‘I been thinking. I’m going to make a special tablecloth to use for when we’re all together.’

When the show ended, Corrie didn’t go back to her house with Stan and Grace and the boys to pack up, but she’d made a list of what was to be left and what she wanted them to bring back. At the top was the old chair, the chair she had come to think of as Herbie’s chair. She would put it at the end of the creaky verandah, in the corner. When her eyes needed a rest from the fine stitching of the flowers she would sew onto the new tablecloth for the big jarrah table, she would look down the hill, across the harbour to the deep blue-green of the Southern Ocean. Second on the list were the little china ballerinas.