

Robyne Young

*The Basket
and
The Briefcase*



A Promotions from the Pen Publication

The Basket and the Briefcase

Robyne Young was born in Wellington, NSW on November 7, 1958. She has lived in Albury since 1988 and considers it her hometown. She briefly entertained thoughts of being a home economics-needlework teacher, but chose a path which saw her work as a television, newspaper and radio journalist, university lecturer, TAFE teacher and establish her own public relations and media consultancy. She has been Public Relations officer at Wodonga Institute of TAFE since January 2001.

In 1998 Robyne picked up the threads of her creative writing life. Last year “The Basket and the Briefcase” was published in “New Albury Writing” (Letao Press) and “The Six O’Clock News” is included in 4W Fourteen (4W Press). She is also working on her first novel.

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Robyne has two teenage sons.

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*For my mother who held the basket
and the briefcase in perfect balance*

God couldn't be everywhere and therefore he made mothers.

Jewish Proverb

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Foreword

In 1995 my mother, Edna, was diagnosed with breast cancer. She underwent a mastectomy and appeared to be free of the disease. In early 1998 cancer visited her again, this time in the form of ovarian cancer. On July 15, 2001 she lost her courageous struggle. The first and last stories in this collection are based on these experiences. As for the rest of the collection, the stories are inspired from the lives of ordinary women (if such creatures exist!!) and are about the things that link them, and yet can so easily keep them apart.

My thanks go to my family and friends who have read some of the stories and given me the confidence to complete this project, and to Margie England for her enthusiasm, care and attention in creating the cover.

My love and thanks also to my muse - my love - for his continued support and inspiration.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, to my parents – Edna and Don – for encouraging me to take heed of my inner voice and follow my heart.



The Peace of God

Sarah stood as Father Tom concluded the service with the familiar words: “The peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his son Jesus Christ.” At the end of the passage she whispered “Amen”, and stayed kneeling along with the rest of the congregation. She waited for Father Tom and his assistants to pass her pew before she gathered her prayer and hymnbooks and made her way down the aisle.

“Morning Sarah.” Father Tom put out his large hand and warmly took one hand, then placed his other hand around hers. “And how’s your mother keeping?”

“Very well. Considering,” Sarah answered. She had no need to go into detail. Father Tom was fully aware that the “considering” included the cancer that for the past three years had been an overwhelming part of her mother’s and all of her family’s lives.

“She’s almost at the end of this lot of chemo and in very good spirits. Very good.” Sarah didn’t add that she thought her mother had at times totally lost the faith that had been so strong. God, faith, church had all been important throughout her life; now it seemed that her mother had loosed herself from this anchor and drifted.

Sarah decided not to stay for the morning cuppa and began the drive home. It was a good hour's drive from the little church. She didn't attend every week, but since her mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer some three years before she'd found comfort there, not so much in the prayers, but in the people she worshipped with.

But today there had been little solace. Sarah had begun to question all the events of the past three years. The closing blessing kept coming back. *"The peace of God that passes all understanding..."*. It was the ultimate loophole. The big cop-out. *I may turn your life upside down, but you must trust me.* Perhaps it would be easier to have no faith, no belief. Maybe that's why her mum had given the Church away. If only Sarah could understand what possible plan there could be behind the loss of a breast, an episode of ovarian cancer and now what appeared to be bowel cancer in a person who least deserved such pain and distress.

Sarah knew it wasn't a case of a God meting out punishment. Her mother like everyone else was human and these things sometimes just happened. Just happened to all sorts of people. She remembered someone observing that it wasn't that bad things never happened to bad people, just that no one knew about them, because no one really cared what happened to bad people. We found out more about the bad things that happened to good people because generally we knew good people. Sarah guessed that everyone had their own way of making sense of the incomprehensible. But if she was to learn a lesson from all this, she had no idea what it was. Maybe there was no lesson to be learnt. Maybe it was just life. All she knew was that she woke each day a little afraid. She did hope, and pray, that this would be the last of the chemotherapy for her mum. She believed her

mother was the most courageous woman she'd ever known. Her mother had made it clear that she was just "too busy" to die. So why did Sarah feel the fear she did? Each day she tried to cover her fear with humour. Good friends often asked how her mum was doing. "Well, considering," had become her stock reply. Then she would joke: "We've been kept on our toes the past few years. I've told the good Lord I'd like to throw *my* toe shoes away!" Her friends would laugh along with her, but inside Sarah would be in despair. She felt she had no courage, and no right to take people's sympathy when it was her mother who was the sufferer.



By the time she drove through the farm gate, Sarah's mind had settled just a little. She wondered whether she intellectualised too much and shouldn't just get on with life whatever it threw up at her. The farm was her retreat, her sanctuary. Each tree along the drive that closed behind her now familiar, enveloping her in the serenity of their space.

The house stood atop a large rise. From her kitchen window she could see the valley and the small creek that in a good year flowed. The kitchen was her favourite room in the house, the table doubling as her desk and dining table. Friends who came to visit were used to the sight of piles of papers pushed to the end to give space for the colourful dishes and glassware she loved to use when she entertained. She didn't so much entertain though, as oversee the gathering of those she loved. They never arrived empty handed, but brought gifts of

food, wine and company. There were times when she wanted to have her friends join hands around the table and give thanks, but thought this might be a little over the top, and would quietly say a grace to herself. Her friends had become as close to her as family. They had been her strength through every recent crisis.

Sarah did have family of her own, but always felt she shouldn't burden them with her fears. Each of them was trying to cope with their mother's illness in their own way. Each of them chose not to burden the other. It was as if knowing the other's fear would multiply that fear, and the new mountain of dread would be insurmountable. They stayed in contact by phone, the physical distance between them and their busy lives preventing more frequent visits. Occasionally Sarah felt guilty that work and other commitments stopped her from visiting her parents more often, but they said they understood and she felt a little absolution. Her mother's words returned. "*I know you're here with me and you come when you can. You've got your life to live too.*" But Sarah wondered what sort of life it was when the busyness interfered with having the time you should with your family - whether in crisis or not.

She filled the kettle to boil then went to change out of her "church" clothes. Not that she really dressed up for church these days, but she felt it was a sign of respect to at least make an effort. She admired Mrs Lancaster who still wore her hat and gloves each Sunday, and, Sarah was sure, her best shoes as well. For Sarah there was comfort in the knowledge that there were the Mrs Lancasters of the world who would put an arm around your shoulder because they knew instinctively that that was better than any words of comfort. Sarah removed her church dress and as she did brushed her left breast. She could feel tears begin to

prick her eyes. The image before her in the mirror wasn't her, but her mother with her left breast removed. She remembered the first time she'd seen the scar. Her mum was to have her prosthesis fitted and Sarah went with her. There was the trip to the Anti Cancer Council shop to pick up the voucher for the lingerie store that specialised in fitting women who'd had mastectomies. The woman told of how she'd 'lost a breast' many years before and when she travelled used to keep her money safely in the false breast! "*Lost a breast*". It seemed such a strange saying, as if the breast had been carelessly left somewhere. Sarah's mother had no choice but to 'lose' the breast. Sarah was astounded when people saw the breast as the same as fingers and toes. In fact some saw its loss as being less significant than that of an arm or a leg. Sarah wanted to broach all these thoughts with her mum but didn't know how. The woman in the store fitted the "new breast", draping a knit fabric to show how "real" it could look.

"Why don't you feel it?" Sarah had realised the woman was talking to her. Hesitantly she had touched the gel-filled silicone amazed at just how real it was to the touch. It was when her mother was waiting for some bras to be brought in that Sarah saw the scar for the first time.

"It's healing well isn't it?" Sarah wanted to give some words of encouragement, but could only mutter a "Mm. Yes." She couldn't help what she was feeling. The scar was ugly. The skin rising almost like a pintuck along her mother's chest. She could feel the tears rising, but willed them not to. Her abhorrence at the sight was selfish. Today her mother was feeling good about herself. Good that she was still here, and Sarah had no right to spoil that. She was saved any further comment by the

attendant bringing in a range of bras to be tried on, but the image of her mother's mutilated chest stayed with her through the rest of the day and periodically returned.



Everyone had said how lucky her mother was. Lucky the cancer hadn't spread to the lymph glands. Lucky she hadn't needed chemotherapy or radiotherapy. Yes, they had been spared that and life went on.

Sarah distrusted life's little lulls, and had her suspicions confirmed when ovarian cancer invaded her mother's body. Chemotherapy this time wasn't one of a number of treatment options; it was a reality. Sarah's faith was rattled. She grieved for the sapping of her mother's vitality, her hair loss, the pain she must be feeling. She felt guilty that she didn't visit more often. For weeks she didn't ring her siblings. The Everest of fear was now unconquerable. No amount of '*The peace of God*' or the hymns she sang - '*Trust and Obey*', could give her what she needed to even begin the journey. She didn't exactly cut herself off from her mother, but visited even less frequently, hoping that by not seeing her she might not feel the loss so badly if her mum should die. Sarah knew the thoughts were ridiculous. The ties between them as mother, daughter and women were eternal and unbreakable.

The church beckoned again with its comfort, but Sarah began to arm herself. She entered on the Sundays she attended with a list of questions that were never really answered. On those

days it seemed the hymns had been carefully picked. ‘*Count your blessings*’, ‘*Trust and obey*’ (There it was again - God’s little joke?) This time she would not give in to blind faith. She would be prepared for anything.

Her hand shook as her brother broke the news.

“They’ve found another lump. It’s in the bowel. The doctor’s sure they’ve got it, but there’ll be more chemo.”

“How’s Mum?” It seemed a stupid question.

“She’s pretty good. A bit groggy. In some pain. But she’s still here.”

Yes, thought Sarah. She’s here. Minus a breast, minus a whole lot of healthy cells, and now minus a bit of bowel, but she’s here. She chastised herself for her crassness, but there was nothing delicate in any of this. And yes, she should be grateful. Grateful that they’d been given more time. Grateful it would mean more shared experiences to add to their box of memories. But still she couldn’t get the fear to leave. She tried to replace it with superstition. ‘*Things happen in threes.*’ This would be the end of this threesome she told herself.



Sarah finished changing into her jeans and shirt and put on her walking boots. She went outside into the crisp, winter air and began to walk. She inhaled the scent of the eucalypts and was so taken up with her thoughts that she almost tripped over the echidna that was lumbering across her path.

She watched it as it laboured, pushing one leg ahead and then the next as it plodded. It was an astonishing animal really. Sarah knew its spikes were sharp, but moved down to it for closer inspection. It wasn't a beautiful animal by any stretch of the imagination. Its appeal lay in its individuality. For a moment it looked at her, assessing whether she was friend or foe. It curled itself up. Instinct would protect it.

Absurdly, Sarah found herself singing aloud. *“All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful the Lord God made them all.”*

The Lord might be wise, but Sarah didn't feel she had any wisdom. Wisdom should give her the strength to accept the events of the past three years, perhaps even to make some good come of them.

She returned to the house to find the kettle steaming, its whistle filling every corner. She poured the water into the teapot, and took the china cup from the dresser. She turned the pot three times in a clockwise direction, then poured the tea from a height into the cup. She sipped the tea as she looked out from her kitchen window, and listened.

“The peace of God,” she thought as she sipped her tea. Maybe it was beyond all human understanding. Maybe it just was.

Hothouse Flowers

The dark rich soil filtered through Iris's fingers. She had at her side a new trowel and garden fork, but preferred to feel the moistness of the soil on her hands. She loved its texture. Not gritty, but smooth like the soil she made mud pies from as a child.

Iris eased the tiny new seedlings from their egg carton cradles. She liked to grow her own plants from seed; watch the growth emerge from the seed raising mixture until it was strong enough to survive out in the open. She rarely lost a plant this way, unlike when she bought them from the nursery in those plastic punnets that you could do nothing with. When she had finished with the egg cartons she broke them up and returned them to the soil. "You're the original greenie Mum," her daughter Bernadette ribbed her.

Iris and Tom still grew most of their vegies and always had flowers from the garden in vases in the house. Iris turned the soil, returning to their first garden in the suburbs of Sydney. As newlyweds and with little money they had managed; more than managed. Iris made all of the new furnishings and quickly transformed their little flat into a home. It concerned her that Bernadette and her contemporaries seemed to want everything now, or even yesterday. She was even more concerned for her grandchildren. Hours spent in front of screens: no time outside.

She supposed they were learning about the world, but would rather they learnt from the experience of living. Hothouse flowers were never as strong.

For Tom and Iris, their life and marriage had not been materially full, but rich with all of the important things in life. Now in their late sixties they still shared the best of everything, and were everything to each other. While her widowed friends seemed to have adapted to their new single lives, for some a newfound freedom, Iris could not imagine a life without her darling Tom.

Iris rolled back her cuff and checked the time. One thirty. Well past their usual lunchtime. She smiled as she realised how much routine they had in their lives. Predictable. Yes. Boring. No. Perhaps Tom was busy doing something inside and the time had slipped away from him. She made her way around the back of the house to the laundry and lathered her hands under the warm water. She scrubbed her nails, not too vigorously, knowing she would be back out in the garden again after lunch and would only have to scrub them again. Clean dirt, she thought and smiled to herself. Clean dirt. Not enough of that under nails and on knees. When her daughter was small she had let her “grub around” as she called it, but with the passage of time, Bernadette became pedantic about not wanting to get dirty and had passed this attitude on to her own children, never letting them simply play. Still, you never knew these days exactly what might be in that dirt. She had recently read about some poor little who had been stabbed with an infected needle in a playground and developed HIV. Who knew what his future would be now.

"Too old to solve the problems of the world," she sighed. Going into the kitchen Iris was surprised not to find Tom. She

checked the bathroom, the back sunroom and then their bedroom. She didn't see him, but heard the moan. "Tom, are you alright?" Another moan and Iris was around at the other side of the bed. "Tom. Darling?" His eyes looked glazed. She checked for a pulse. It was there, but weak. She barely remembered dialling the ambulance, the officers arriving and checking him, then the trip to the hospital. They had been kind and let her travel with him. They arrived at the hospital. "Is there anyone we should call?" the younger one had asked.



Bernadette and the children arrived in the afternoon.

"Sorry I couldn't get here earlier. Had to wait for Bridget to finish her piano lesson."

To Iris it seemed Tom's collapse was more important than a piano lesson, but said nothing. She wanted to say, "*I needed you here, dear*", but instead agreed that there was really nothing Bernadette could have done and it was good Bridget had her lesson.

"Mum. I'm bored," Thomas moaned.

"Just a minute Thomas," Bernadette said somewhat sharply. Thomas had been named after his grandfather but to save confusion with his namesake, he was given his full name. Iris wondered had they called him Tom, he might have had a bit more life about him, but Thomas seemed to suit the son Bernadette had. Bernadette said he was deep and thoughtful. Iris reckoned he was just broodish.

"I'll just find the doctor Mum, and he can fill me in."

“I can fill you in dear. Your father has had a stroke. They’re not sure how severe. They won’t know for sure until tomorrow morning if it’s a mini stroke or a full blown one. I don’t know how long your father was there before I found him. We had morning tea at about 10.30 and he seemed fine. I wondered why he hadn’t called me in for lunch.” A vision of Tom lying on the floor came to Iris and tears came to her eyes. She took a deep breath. “The doctor said we just have to take a wait and see approach. Your father’s in intensive care. You can go and sit with him for a while if you like and I’ll watch the children.”

“Thomas. Bridget. You go with Nan while I go and sit with your grandfather. Mum, here’s some money to get them something at the cafeteria. Now. Which way to intensive care?”

Iris motioned down the corridor then watched her daughter walk swiftly to the ward. There had been no “Bye mum”, “Don’t worry mum, he’ll be fine”. No reassurance. No comforting touch or look. Bernadette had never been an affectionate child, but Iris believed that with time and some experience of motherhood, she might mellow. Their only tie now seemed to be that Iris was the woman who had given birth to Bernadette.

Iris attempted conversation with her grandchildren.

“Well kids. It looks like it’s just you and Nan. So how’s school?”

“Boring,” Bridget and Thomas responded singsong in unison.

“Oh, really,” said Iris. “I wonder then why you bother to go.”

“ ‘Cause Mum and Dad and the teachers make us,” huffed Thomas.

“It really can’t be that bad. There must be something good about it. I know if you think really hard there’s one interesting thing you’ve done this week,” she said.

Thomas was seven and in grade one; Bridget twelve in her last year of primary school and confident that she could skip secondary school and go straight to university. Both children had inherited their father’s stocky build. Unfortunate really, Iris thought, that they couldn’t have taken after their mother more – in build anyway. Their lack of physical exercise didn’t help either. Iris had tried to talk about their weight problem, but Bernadette had simply dismissed it and said the build was in their genes. Well it might be, Iris thought, but they were bursting out of their jeans! She was almost embarrassed by them. When she had dreamed of grandchildren, Thomas and Bridget were not the grandchildren she had envisaged. Her grandchildren were fit, healthy children who liked to garden with Nan and Pop, who would spend their time in the kitchen with their Nan as she baked cakes and biscuits. There would be no problem with how many they ate either, because they would soon work them off running around in the yard or out on the sporting field. The reality was quite different. Apart from Bridget’s piano lessons she had very few outside interests. Bridget had been a reader when she was younger, but now preferred to watch television – any one of twenty channels. Yes, she knew all the latest gossip about the pop stars and who was in and who was out on some show called “Big Brother”, but Iris found she couldn’t even have a conversation with her. And as for Thomas, he was just a brat. Iris knew this was a very old fashioned word to use, but it was an

apt one. He whined when he couldn't get his own way. Whinged when he felt Bridget got more than him and bellyached when he was asked to help out with small chores at Iris and Tom's to the point where Iris just didn't ask him to do things anymore. Then he moaned "I'm bored". And he had no manners at all! Iris stopped herself. There was probably no cause for alarm in the scheme of things. Maybe I'm just getting old. She sighed a little louder than she had intended.

"Nan?"

"Yes dear?"

"I've just thought of one interesting thing we did this week."

"What's that dear?"

"Well, we have a boy in our class who comes from somewhere in the bush, and he talked to us about his life on the farm. You know he doesn't even have a TV. How pov is that?"

"Pov?"

"Yeh. Pov. Plebby."

"Plebby?" The language of the young Iris thought to herself.

"Plebeian." Bridget's voice rose over the top of the magazine she was flicking through. "It means common."

Thomas continued almost over the top of Bridget. "Like they must be really poor or something that he doesn't have one. And he doesn't..."

"Well not necessarily," Iris interrupted. "There might be a lot of reasons why they don't have a television at their house."

"Like what?" asked Thomas.

"Some people decide not to have one and spend time talking to each other, doing work or what we used to call chores

– dishes, bringing in wood, maybe they have chickens to feed and dogs to look after.”

Thomas looked at her incredulously, almost as if she had suddenly given him a lesson about the life and times of some alien culture.

“People and children do do these things,” Iris assured him. Plebby indeed.

Bernadette returned to find the three of them at the table, but quite apart. Iris was sipping her tea, pondering the workings of the mind of a seven year old who used words like “plebby”, Bridget was mindlessly turning the pages of a teen magazine full of tips on the importance of being yourself, but fitting into a very structured mould, and Thomas was ensuring he sucked the very last drop from his milkshake. Iris waited for Bernadette to chastise as the loud slurping sound filled the coffee shop and one or two senior heads turned. Bernadette simply ignored her son’s lack of manners and sat down with them.

“How was your father?” Iris asked as it became apparent that she would have to extract the information.

“He’s resting. The doctor’s not due for another hour, but I had a good talk to the nurses and they say he’s comfortable and only time will tell. I suppose they know, but I wouldn’t mind ringing George’s friend in the city to see what he thinks. Dad’s doctor could send Dad’s notes to him. You can never be too careful Mum. Maybe Dad should be in Sydney. I want to make sure he gets the best of care which he’s unlikely to get here.”

Iris had to interrupt before Bernadette had her father in the ambulance and 200 kilometres away with no thought of the feelings of Tom and those who loved him. Iris took a breath to calm her voice.

“That’s kind of you dear, but I know they’re very good here. Besides, we know the staff here and Tom’s doctor knows his history and I’m sure she’ll pass it onto the specialists. I can easily come and visit when I want to. It’s not far by taxi or I can get the bus. There’s even a room here if I want to stay.”

“Well, if you think the care here is good enough, but the offer is there.” Bernadette’s words were full of irritation.

“I just want to go back and sit with your father for a little while: I’d like to be there when he wakes.”

“But that could take ages yet Mum,” Bernadette said matter of factly. “Are you sure you don’t want me to drop you off at home and I’ll pick you up and bring you back after I’ve taken the children home?”

“No thank you. I can always get a taxi home.”

“Whatever suits. Children say goodbye to your Nan.”

“Bye Nan.” Iris was surprised when Tom offered a kiss.

“I hope Pop’s better soon.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine love.”



Iris watched as the trio left the coffee shop. Her daughter was a stranger to her. She felt no connection with her at all. Iris had hoped that when her daughter became a mother some understanding would develop between them as women. But it wasn’t to be. At times it seemed Bernadette bore no resemblance to the rootstock she had come from. She was sharp tongued, sometimes to the point of being rude and seemed to have no regard for others. Her emotional traits were not those of her

mother's, grandmothers', or from what Iris had learned from family history, any of the matriarchs. She knew Bernadette was of a different generation, but that was no excuse for coldness.

Still unsettled, Iris made her way down the corridor to intensive care.

"Hi Mrs Grant. Come to see Tom? He's resting comfortably."

That was the second time in half an hour that Iris had heard that word. Comfortable. Comfort. That's what she wanted from her daughter. The comfort of love. The comfort of companionship. All the things she thought she would find when she had carried Bernadette almost forty years ago, but they had not come. She sat down in the chair next to Tom's bed and took his hand. As she lifted it she looked at it closely in hers. It was a strong hand, browned from many hours working outdoors and in the garden. Not so much recently, as he'd preferred to be in the back sunroom and read for hours at a time. Novels, biographies, a major newspaper cover to cover. "*Have to keep up to date my love,*" he would say. "*Keeps the mind active.*" His mind may have been active, but Iris would sometimes go in and find him fast asleep with the newspaper open on his lap. The image of him, glasses in his hand, mouth slightly open, truly slumbering made her smile. He had tended to sleep a lot lately, but Iris simply put that down to him being almost 70. She was always tempted herself to have a bit of a lie down of an afternoon, so really thought nothing of it. She stroked his hand thinking of all of the strength and gentleness it had given. They were soothing hands. Hands that as a 19 year old had gently lifted her face to his the first time he kissed her. At that moment Iris was, what they called then, "a goner". She knew that this was the man she

would marry and have children with. As it turned out nature decreed that they would have just one child, Bernadette.



Bernadette had been an independent child from birth. She did not like to be held, even when Iris fed her. When Iris had been pregnant she had rejoiced in the growing baby inside her, the life she and Tom had created, and was impatient for the weeks to pass and the day to come when she would hold her baby. The labour had not been difficult taking just three hours from the first pain announcing her imminent arrival to the crowning of the baby girl's head. The nurse had whisked her baby away to be bathed and weighed, before bringing the tightly wrapped child back to Iris for her first breastfeed. Tom met his daughter then, but only for a few minutes as the nurse didn't think it appropriate that he should stay while his daughter suckled. Iris had a vivid memory of the accepting smile of her young husband. He was never one to make a scene, but in his quiet way seemed to get the things that were important for them. But Tom wasn't the only one whose access to the baby was limited. For the first two days Iris was barely allowed out of bed, but sometimes her need to see her child overwhelmed her and she would sneak to the nursery. She hated being separated from her daughter and as often as possible would hover over Bernadette's crib. She would stand just watching the sleeping child, too frightened to pick her up lest she should be caught out. Iris so wanted to hold her and smell the soft baby smell and touch her delicate skin, but she would make her way back to her

room and wait until Bernadette was brought to her as the schedule allowed. Each four hours seemed like a day and Iris couldn't wait to take her baby home where she would throw all schedules out of the window. But it seemed Bernadette had liked the routine in the hospital and kept to it at home. She still fussed before every feed and Iris wondered if the child would ever drink enough to thrive. But each visit to the clinic Bernadette had gained enough weight to keep everyone happy. Despite the fussing, Iris treasured the times when the baby would accept the breast. Then, for just a few minutes Bernadette would settle and feed and her baby fingers would stroke her mother's skin. But this lasted only a couple of months, and then feeding times became such a battle of wills that Iris gave in and weaned her child. Bernadette's pattern of getting her feeds over quickly continued, and her displeasure at being held became greater. Eventually, Iris would prop the bottle and watch sadly as her daughter simply gained the nourishment she needed. She always stayed nearby and talked to her and smiled at her. How could this child grow properly without warmth and smiles? But grow she did, and as she grew her need for her parents seemed to diminish even more. By the time she went to school it was as though she really just needed them there to ensure she was fed and clothed. Yes, she liked to have stories read to her, but only until she could read them herself, which she managed to do at a very young age. As Bernadette approached adolescence, Iris thought they might find some common ground in shopping or even gardening which was Iris's passion, but Bernadette was quite happy to save her pocket money and go off shopping on her own. As for the garden, she hadn't wanted to go anywhere near dirt since she was three. She accepted her transition to

womanhood very matter of factly, as just part of life and never discussed with her mother what Iris believed was an exciting time. The harder Iris tried to be part of her daughter's life, the more resistance she met. In the end Iris just let her be and returned to her garden.



Bernadette did not bring her first boyfriend home until she was twenty. George was a quiet young man with the quality that Bernadette seemed to need most; he didn't mind being bossed. Iris didn't think the relationship (if you could call it that) would last long, so was very surprised when it did and three years later Bernadette and George were married. Bernadette planned everything for the wedding, with little input from Iris. Iris wanted to help her choose her flowers. She knew which would be best for a winter bride, but Bernadette insisted on importing the blooms for her bouquet. Bernadette mapped out the life she and George would lead including when they would buy their first house and when they would have their children. And things went exactly to plan. They had built a new house in a new subdivision of the town she had grown up in. The garden was meticulously planned and a gardener kept it in perfect order. They had furnished the house with the trendy furnishings of the time, and then proceeded to have their children. There were five years between Bridget and Thomas (*I don't want two in nappies, Bernadette had proclaimed*) and Bernadette mapped out her children's lives as well. From the beginning she had instilled routine into them. They fed and slept when she dictated (*Too afraid to do anything else,*

Iris decided). There was no “dropping in” at Bernadette’s. You had to call first. Unannounced guests and unpredictability were not welcome. Even when Iris rang ahead she didn’t feel welcome in her daughter’s home. Yes, it was modern, but Iris never felt the warmth she did in her own home. They had moved there when Bernadette was three and felt rooted there. It was as if the house had always been meant for them, and the community was the one they were destined to be a part of. Iris had tried to explain to her daughter about having a sense of place and belonging. Bernadette had listened, but simply replied that she felt no such thing, and dismissed it as sentimentality.

Iris had become resigned to the relationship she was not to have with her daughter, or as it turned out, with her grandchildren. The result had been that her relationship with Tom grew stronger and they did things independently of Bernadette. Iris sometimes wondered whether this had put Bernadette outside of them. But, she remembered, they would plan family outings that Bernadette would grudgingly take part in. Eventually it was just easier to stay home, which really was no burden. In fact Iris and Tom were happy there tending their garden and welcoming friends. The door was always open.

“Mrs Grant?” She was still holding Tom’s hand and hadn’t heard the nurse walk up beside her.

“Sorry dear. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I didn’t mean to startle you. Can I get you anything? Cup of tea?”

“That would be lovely. Thank you.”

“Back soon.” She gently cupped Iris’s shoulder.

Iris felt a sob in her throat. In that moment the young nurse who she barely knew had shown more compassion than her daughter of forty years.



The stroke impacted on Tom's speech and slightly on the movement down his left side, but he could walk with the aid of a stick. The doctors were confident that with the right rehabilitation he would make a good, if not full, recovery. They now knew a lot more about how the brain was affected and even though Tom was almost seventy, if he had the will to recover, that could do more good than the rehabilitation itself. They told Iris and Bernadette there were practicalities to consider before they went home. He would need some help with movement. He was not a small man, and Iris was petite.

Iris was about to answer the doctor's concerns when Bernadette spoke.

"Don't you think a nursing home would be a better option?" Iris wasn't sure who the question was directed to, and neither was the doctor, but the doctor responded.

"No. Not at all. Your father has only minor disabilities and as long as there is some home help I think your mum and dad will be fine." Iris smiled at the doctor gratefully for her alliance.

"But really. It's not like you're getting any younger Mum. And this could be the start of the downhill run for Dad."

"Would you mind leaving us for a moment?" Iris asked the doctor.

The doctor had barely left the room when Iris began to speak, but Bernadette cut her off.

“Be sensible Mother.” Mother? Who was Bernadette talking to? At least when she addressed her as “mum” there was a little warmth. Mother was an alien term to Iris. Iris barely noticed Bernadette was still speaking. All she wanted to do was take Tom home, sit in the back sunroom and look out over their garden. It was beautiful now. The seedlings she had planted the day of Tom’s stroke were beginning to bloom. Between her visits to the hospital she had managed to tend her new charges, mulching carefully around them to keep the moisture at their roots. Just two weeks ago they began to bud and this morning she noticed the first of her zinnias out. They were a hot pink, and would soon be joined with bright yellows and reds. The zinnias were bordered with alyssum; just white for simplicity and then behind the zinnias, red salvia. She was sure the vibrancy would lift Tom’s spirits.

“Are you listening?” Bernadette’s tone was now demanding.

Iris had had enough. Her daughter may never have wanted her affection or protection, but Tom did, and she would do everything to shelter him. Iris faced her daughter. “I don’t know why there is this sudden interest. You’ve been almost like a visitor to us, only dropping in when you feel you have to, or bringing the children when it’s convenient for you. And now, such concern. You wanted to move Tom when he first came into the hospital. Move him to Sydney where we don’t know anyone anymore. Your father has recovered well because he is home. This is his home. His patch. We’ve been here for almost forty years. We know everyone. Well maybe not everyone

anymore, but our friends and their children and grandchildren. It's the environment we know and that knows and cares for us. The doctor has said your father will be alright. He's strong and he will recover."

"But, how will you manage? He needs some help with his movement. And then there's the rehabilitation. I just can't drop everything to take him. I have to get Bridget to her music lessons, pick Thomas up from school. I don't think you realise how hard it is going to be."

"No one is asking you to help." At that moment Iris felt as though the tendril-like link between her daughter and herself was completely snapped through. She began to speak again, softly this time, trying to wrap the weeping wound that had opened, but Bernadette interrupted.

"Maybe we should put his name on the waiting list for a place in a home. Sometimes the first stroke is just the first sign of worse things to come." The tape began to lift.

Iris spoke again quietly, but firmly. "We'll manage. Now I just want to get your father home."



Bernadette left the hospital ahead of her parents. She had intended to drive them home, but after the disagreement with her mother the decision had been taken out of her hands. She knew they were comfortable where they were. She hadn't meant it at all about the nursing home. Secretly she had always loved the weatherboard house with its colourful garden. Her mother managed to have colour in the garden all year round, and her

azaleas made a beautiful show in their season. Iris was so at home with her plants, and Bernadette had wanted to feel that way too. She remembered when she was very small, three or four, she had spent time in the garden. She had a little spade and bucket she had brought with her from Sydney. But the garden became a place she didn't want to be in. She watched from her bedroom window as her mother turned the soil. In her face Bernadette always saw happiness; contentment. It was a look she never saw reflected back at her. Bernadette always saw bewilderment in her mother's eyes, as if she was trying to gain some sense of who her daughter was. To Bernadette it just seemed easier to stay inside and read books entering the worlds they offered instead.

And so she had lived her own life. She couldn't say her parents hadn't been affectionate, because they had tried their best to be so with her, and they were always affectionate with each other. As she got older she found she couldn't enter their world. It was too intimate. Parents weren't supposed to act like that; like lovers. So she put herself further and further outside their world and affection. All the time she felt alone, so when she met George, she decided he would be the man she would marry and have her children with. With him she would have full control of her life.

When her father had his stroke, she had wanted to go straight to the hospital, but had to pick Bridget up from her piano lesson. For the half hour she waited for her daughter, she struggled with where her priorities should be. She knew her mother would expect her to look after her own children first, yet she wanted to take this opportunity to show she could be the daughter who could be relied on and who really did care. She loved her father, but the thought of seeing a weaker version of him was too much for her. She also didn't want to present a watered down version of herself to her

mother. So she had entered the hospital and assumed the persona her mother had grown accustomed to and now expected.

What Bernadette hadn't expected was her mother's response. It was as though she had found a new strength, or maybe simply recovered an old one that had been lying dormant, just waiting for the right conditions to come out. The thing was, Bernadette didn't feel hurt by what she'd said. Iris was right. From her perspective for most of Bernadette's life she had not been the daughter she wanted. Despite early attempts and an environment where a strong bond should have formed between them, they were just too different. Sometimes Bernadette felt as though the moment she had left her mother's body, she was destined to grow alone. Her mother had tried her best to tend the growing flower in the environment Bernadette had chosen for herself, separate, but protected as if in a hothouse. The only problem was that when she was ready to go outside, she couldn't cope with the varying conditions normal life offered. She felt rootbound.



The taxi pulled up outside the pretty weatherboard. "Nice garden," the driver commented.

"Yes," said Tom. "It's good to see it."

The driver carried the bags to the small front porch. "Take them in for you?"

"Thank you. Aren't you Harriet and Gerald's boy? Went to school with our Bernadette didn't you?"

“Yeh. Just moved back here with my wife and two kids. Good place for the kids to grow up in we thought. Clean air. Room to grow a garden and a few vegies.”

“Strange how you all like to come home,” Iris smiled as Harriet and Gerald’s boy put the bags down in the hallway.

“Hope you’re feeling a lot better soon Mr Grant. Bye Mrs Grant.”

Iris helped Tom inside and through to the sunroom. “You sit here darling and I’ll make us a cuppa.”

She had only had time to fill the kettle when Tom called out to her. She went quickly to him.

“Look. Out there in the garden.”

She expected to see some pretty bird, or a new plant emerged; Tom was always alert to changes in the garden, but instead saw Bernadette. She was kneeling at the end of the vegie patch, digging furiously, as though searching for something lost. She was digging with the little yellow beach spade she had owned since she was two.

Iris didn’t know whether to go to her or leave her alone. She stood at the back screen door for a few minutes just watching. Iris couldn’t remember ever seeing her daughter in such an energised state and wondered whether her own lack of sleep over the past weeks was making her hallucinate. She made her way quietly down the path until she was a few feet away.

“Want some help?”

“Mum. I’m really sorry. I just..”

“Shh.” Iris said softly as she knelt beside her daughter. “Maybe we’re both late bloomers.”

The Six O'Clock News

At first she thought it was the sound of a lamb separated from its mother. Then she remembered they'd sold the last of the lambs before Christmas and the breeding stock were on agistment. She heard the cry again, but it wasn't until she felt the heaviness in her breasts begin to release that she realised it was the baby. She didn't move, but stayed at the sink staring out the window across the paddocks. Did you still call that area devoid of crop or even a blade of grass a paddock? There was more life in a desert.

The baby's cry grew more insistent, triggering a further response - a deep maternal instinct to go to her child. But she felt stuck, hands glued to the cold stainless steel of the sink. Then some primal force overtook her body and moved her feet one slow step at a time, up the hallway to the nursery. She pushed the mosquito net aside and reached in to pick up her daughter. The baby was hot and red faced. Wordlessly she brought the baby closer and carried her into the living room where the air conditioning had managed to bring the temperature down to a tolerable level. It was a noisy old evaporative cooler that grunted as it pushed the chilled air into the room. Too small to cool the open plan space of living and dining room, but better than outside.

Jane dropped into the rocking chair. She lay the baby across her lap and undid the buttons of her blouse, and then the clip on her nursing bra now soaked with milk. Jane lifted the baby to her leaking breast. She was trying to remember what the lactation consultant at the hospital had said. *Check she's attached properly. Bring her to you. Don't lean down to her. Place a pillow on your lap if you think that will help. Make sure she opens her mouth wide before you attach her.* Wasn't this supposed to be natural? Wouldn't they both know what to do? She read little about preparing for the baby's birth and breastfeeding, but there was nothing in what she had read about being alone with a ten day old baby, ten kilometres from the nearest neighbour, your partner having to work in town because the farm just wasn't paying, or the days that stretched beyond twenty four hours silently slipping into each other. The baby's instinct was strong. She knew what to do and latched onto the full breast to suckle. As she drank, she calmed and the red left her face and her skin faded to softest pink.

From the chair Jane looked out to the western side of the property. It mirrored the view from the kitchen window. No crops. No stock. No sound, except the bark of the dogs when a car went down the road, or a tourist got lost and made their way up the drive and to the house. It didn't take long for the travellers to realise their mistake and go back down the drive. Jane would hear the cars and almost hold her breath; always relieved they didn't stop the car and come to the door expecting some sort of country hospitality. Even her tiny garden had been lost to the drought. Before the baby she had managed to keep some water up to it even if it was recycled from the wash, or water she saved in the bath from her shower. The baby's arrival

signalled a shift in priorities, besides Jane found it too hot to spend much time outside. The heat had a way of staying inside your skin and heating your blood. Jane wondered if the hot blood went to the brain, would it cause it to bake leaving it incapable of any rational thought. A couple of times when the house closed in around her and she couldn't bear to be inside for another minute, she had ventured outside late in the afternoon. Heavily pregnant she had pushed herself to walk for as long as she could, hoping to bring her labour on. But the unfamiliar weight and the pull on every ligament around her pelvis made every step arduous. She found her breathing restricted and that she was sweating profusely. She hated her swollen and misshapen body. That women blossomed at this time was a lie to her. She wasn't blooming; the child within was consuming her. As she walked she felt the pressure of the baby's head in her pelvic area; she hoped this was a sign that she would give birth soon. She didn't want the child, but was still torn with thoughts of its life, once born, it would have. Times for them were grim. He had taken a job in town just to meet the mortgage payments. She had worked for as long as possible, but when the school term finished that was the end of work for her. And while the baby exerted a force from within, events apart from the drought impacted on her. She knew these events were a world away, but the world was now so small they were closer than her doorstep. It chilled her to think of bringing a child into such an uncertain world.



They had not planned the child. Jane was reaching a point in her career when the next step would be the principal's position. He had re-established the farm, and through careful buying of breeding stock they made a reasonable living. Reasonable enough to live on and a little more. The first dry year hadn't alarmed them, but the second put them on alert and the third sent them back to the bank. With her income they would be okay; it would be tight, but they'd be okay. Jane began doing a bit of work with him on weekends. This life didn't come naturally to her, but she enjoyed the time with him. Conversations in the ute as they checked stock and when it was there, water. Conversations as they lay in bed and made detailed plans for when it rained, and contingencies they hoped to never have to use if the rain didn't come. A baby was never part of those conversations. There were no conversations about a third person in the relationship.

Her pregnancy confirmed, they began to make adjustments, putting away what they could from her wage each fortnight. But Jane couldn't make the adjustments in her psyche she felt she had to make to accept this child. She couldn't believe how many times people stated the obvious – that her life would change, or made the assumption that because she was both a woman and a teacher she would be a natural mother. She needed some control over that change. She needed to be in command of her mind, for her body now belonged to the baby. It had taken her over. Subtly at first. Had it not been for the absence of her period and the tiredness in the early months, she would barely have known she was pregnant. Then in the next trimester when her pregnancy became obvious, the baby encroached on her inner space and Jane and her body became public property. She told

herself she would get used to it, but knew she wouldn't. Told herself that some maternal instinct had to kick in. Didn't it always? Or had she evolved to a point where her self-fulfillment wasn't reliant on bringing a child into the world? They didn't need to be a family to be happy. He embraced the idea of fatherhood. He tried to bring about acceptance in her. She didn't fight it, but couldn't even move toward it.



She drew her gaze back from the window to the baby who had settled into a rhythmic sucking, and then contentedly came off her breast. Jane again lay her down across her lap. The movement woke the baby and she cried. Not the earlier cry of despair, but almost a whimper. Jane undid the other clip on her bra and placed the baby on. She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was almost six o'clock. Twenty four hours before her partner would be home. He had barely seen his daughter, having to return to town only hours after bringing them home. Jane looked forward to him being there and a change from the constancy of the week she had just lived. She used her free hand to reach for the remote and turned the television on. She flicked through the channels. The new television war was on every one of them. Tonight not even the relief of the local news and an upcoming state election. She was about to turn it off when images of an Iraqi woman and baby appeared on the screen. Despite the sounds of the bombing nearby, the baby was sound asleep in its mother's arms. Jane could only see the baby's face; the rest of its body shrouded by the mother's clothing. The

mother was telling the journalist of her fear for her child, and her other children whom she had sent out of the city. The journalist asked her why she had not left too. The interpreter's too English voice said "*the woman stayed because she had wanted to give birth to her child in her home. It was her right, and the right of her child to be born in this city. Her city. Her home. Her sisters had stayed with her for the birth. They were not sure of the future, but prayed to their god to deliver them from the evils of every side. The baby's birth had been uneventful and now she was waiting for the return of her sisters to help her move to a safer place.*" The journalist signed off, and the newsreader reappeared on the screen and began her introduction of the next story. Jane switched the television off. That woman had been prepared to risk her life to bring her child into the world. She had believed so much in her right as a mother and in her god that she should give birth where she wanted to. No hospital. No doctor or midwife. She had given birth as millions of women had over the centuries – in her home and in the company of women. But what did Jane know of this woman and her feelings when the woman had been carrying *her* child? She knew nothing. She knew nothing of these people whose lives and deaths were now played out on television every minute of the day. Jane didn't know if the woman had wanted to bring that child into the world any more or less than Jane had her own baby. She couldn't assume a higher intelligence. By a quirk of fate, Jane had been born into a society where women could choose their course in life. By a twist of fate, her course in life had been changed and she had no idea how to steer her way through it. She looked to the baby for an answer. The baby slept in reply.

It was eight o'clock when Jane woke. The baby was still sleeping, although now her tiny lips touched Jane's nipple with a

kiss. Jane scooped the baby toward her, and detached herself from the rocking chair. She returned the baby to her room and the basinette, making sure the netting was secure around the basinette base. She stood and watched her sleeping child. *Will I ever fall in love with you?*



The next morning Jane woke with the baby beside her in the bed. She'd no idea how the baby came to be there or when she had brought her in. The baby's position next to her suggested that she had fed her at sometime during the night. Jane carefully moved her body and slid quietly from the bed. She undressed and looked at herself in the full length mirror. She liked her reflection less now than when she was pregnant. Her once flat stomach was now an arrangement of folds of flesh that were patterned with fine red lines. She went into the ensuite and turned the shower on, letting it run until it was hot and then climbed in. Jane let the water run over her. She knew there was little water and she should be quick, but needed the cleansing; needed the water to wash away her selfish thoughts sending them down the drain leaving space for more maternal thoughts to enter. She let the water soak her hair and lathered the shampoo through it. As she tilted her head back, she closed her eyes feeling the water through the length of it. She turned the water off and stepped out wrapping herself in a towel. She was exhausted. She lay back on the bed next to the baby.



The day progressed through feeding and changing. It was a little cooler than the day before, but there was still no sign of rain. Jane knew she should eat, but couldn't even find the energy to make a sandwich. She nibbled at a biscuit at some stage during the day. She did remember to drink. At what passed for lunchtime she rang him and asked him to buy some groceries. *Whatever he liked. It didn't matter that he was delayed. She'd be alright until he got home at eight. She's fine. She's sleeping.* She looked at the microwave clock. Five to six. Just two hours to get through. The baby was sleeping in her basinette, a soft breeze drifted from the verandah through the French doors. Jane sat down in the rocking chair and switched on the news. *In tonight's news Coalition troops move closer to Baghdad... Claims civilians killed when a missile hits a residential areaand Australia set for a berth in the World Cup final.* It was incongruous to Jane to mention cricket and war in the one sentence. As the second report began, there was something familiar to Jane about the room that had been hit. It looked like the same room the Iraqi mother had been interviewed in. It *was* the Iraqi mother's home. In the report last night she had noticed the vibrancy of the wallhanging, its richness heightened against the white stone wall. Now its colour was blurred by the dust and rubble. The report began - *"An Iraqi mother and her child were sheltered in this room when the wall collapsed killing them. She had decided to stay here to give birth to her baby and was waiting for relatives to come and move her to a safer location. US defence officials say the missile may have moved off course and should not have been anywhere near this area and there will be a full investigation."* Jane sat staring at the screen. She felt the hot tears run down her face and their saltiness on her top lip. Why was she crying? She didn't know the woman or the baby. Their lives and death had nothing to do with her. Shaking, she

turned the television off and went outside. Here nothing had changed. The paddocks were still bare of pasture and stock, the dam near the house was still dry and despite the breeze, the air held onto its dryness. Jane walked around the verandah, through the French doors and into the baby's room. She was still sleeping, her hand clenched into a tiny fist just under her chin.

Jane went into her room and took the small suitcase from the wardrobe. She packed toiletries, underwear, two dresses that probably didn't fit her yet, a couple of t-shirts and a skirt. She checked her wallet. She had her credit card and forty dollars in cash. The car was still full of petrol ready for the trip to hospital. At the last minute they'd taken his car. She wondered if she should leave a note, but what would she write?

She checked the time. It was almost seven. If she wasn't to pass him on the road to the highway, she would have to leave soon. How would he manage the baby? She didn't know; she just knew *she* couldn't. Jane threw her suitcase onto the backseat of the car beside the baby capsule. She listened for the baby's cries a final time, but all she heard were the dogs announcing a car was coming up the drive.

The Basket and the Briefcase

*I*n the doorway stood the fairy princess. Her tiara tilted slightly to the left, while her wings drifted to the right. Her fairy dress came just to her knees and below them saggy stockings with the feet pulled out to be too long.

“I don’t want to be a fairy princess. I want to be a Spice Girl.” A tiny ballet-slippered foot stamped and the fairy princess pouted.

The fairy princess’s mother continued to put papers and other business paraphernalia into her briefcase. She had been up until three in the morning hemming tulle and her fingers were numb from sewing sequins onto the fairy wings, and now the fairy princess was informing her that she didn’t want to be a fairy princess at all, but a mass media and marketed creation!

“Tiff, it’s too late. Mummy’s going to be late for work. All week you’ve wanted to be a fairy princess. So why now do you want to be a Spice Girl?”

The emphasis on the “why now” was totally lost on the fairy princess who had also managed to bend her wand into a shape that was anything but wandlike, and the fairy princess’s mother, (whose real name was Josie), wondered why on earth she was having this conversation with a six year old. She had to leave in the next 15 minutes and was beginning not only to curse Spice

Girls but also Book Weeks, costume parades and teachers who still insisted on having them. “This is an ideal way for us to make books come alive,” the flier had said. “*This is the ideal way to test the patience of parents!*” Josie inhaled, picked up her briefcase and moved toward her daughter.

“Tiff this is a book parade and Spice Girls are a pop band – on TV not in a book.” Josie could see her daughter loading the ammunition. Her bottom lip dropped and a tiny tear magically appeared in just one eye.

“But Emily’s going to be Sporty Spice, and I promised I’d be Ginger ‘cause of my hair.” The fairy princess began to remove her tiara, and then her wings tearing them in the process and scattering sequins on the floor. Right on cue, the king entered.

“How’s my princess?” Josie was about to tell all to the king when the princess began to speak.

“Daddy I don’t want to be a fairy and I promised Emily and you say you mustn’t break promises and mummy says I can’t and I really HAVE to be Ginger.” The fairy princess did not draw breath and made more tears join the single one that had appeared moments earlier.

The king knelt in front of his little princess and put his arm around her.

“Alec,” interjected the queen, who in her daughter’s mind was now the wicked witch, “I have to get to work. Mum will be here a bit before nine to pick her up. Then she’ll go back to the school in time to check her costume.”

Tiffany’s eyes brightened. “Nan can make me a Spice Girl. Can’t she Daddy?”

“I’m not sure Tiff.” Josie threw her husband a “don’t you dare” look.

“Tiff. Mummy stayed up all night making you your costume so that you could be a beautiful fairy.”

“I didn’t ask her to!” A fairy foot again stamped the ground.

Josie put down her briefcase and brought herself eye to eye with her daughter.

“Tiff. Nanna is not going to make you a new costume, and you are not to ask her. You wanted to be a fairy and that’s what you’ll be.”

“No I won’t. And you won’t be there so how will you know?”

“I’ll just know.” Josie threw back as she walked out the door.



As she waited for the lights to change, Josie tried to put the conversation into perspective. She tapped her fingers against the steering wheel wondering how she had let herself get into yet another argument with Tiffany. Each morning Josie woke with the expectation of a smooth morning and every school day morning she was disappointed. A hair ribbon the wrong colour; favourite socks in the wash, always wanting to wear party shoes and not school shoes. Every morning Josie resolved that Tiffany would not get her own way, and every morning Josie gave in because she had to get to work.

She had hoped her efforts of stitching until the wee hours like some fairy godmother would mean something. But to whom? Tiffany? Alec? The truth? She did it to gain approval from her mother. To show that she could combine career and motherhood in some seamless way. But it was hard when her mother lived only a couple of blocks away and was more than eager to take Tiffany to school everyday and pick her up of an afternoon and bring her home. It meant Tiffany was settled by the time Josie and Alec got home. Sometimes her mother had dinner ready for the three of them. She would never stay, insisting it was important for the three of them to have time together at the end of the day. But Josie was beginning to feel too indebted to her. She also knew that her mother meant well when assuring Josie that she loved to have time with Tiffany who was no trouble. That was because for Nanna, Tiffany really was the fairy princess from the book; the little girl who weaved magic in her life. Tiffany would always manage to be in earshot of the conversation and would throw her grandmother her special ‘*thank you Nanna*’ smile.



At 10 Josie was tempted to call her mother just to check that everything had been okay. She wouldn't ask whether Tiffany's costume had changed, but did want confirmation that the fairy princess and not Ginger Spice would appear in the book parade. It was ridiculous, but her stomach was churning at the thought her mother might have succumbed to Tiffany's tears and all of her work would be in vain. Josie picked up the phone, then

put it down again. Her mother could be anywhere, and as she refused to have a mobile, Josie had no hope of finding her quickly. She pulled out a client file. What did it matter if Tiffany changed her costume? It mattered.

“Sue. I’m just popping out for a little while.”

Josie gave herself two choices. Well there was a third: to not go, and finish the proposal that had been sitting on her desk since Monday with its deadline fast approaching. No that wasn’t really a choice. The choices were these. Go home and see if the costume was abandoned on Tiffany’s bed, or go straight to the school and see whether Tiffany had won. Who was she kidding? Tiffany had already won as soon as Josie left the office; left urgent work that was there to be finished and was driving toward Tiffany’s school. Why couldn’t she have been content to stay at home? Filled the hours between nine and three? Coffee; lunch; with girlfriends; tennis; the gym. Now *she* was living in fairyland! By the time Tiffany was three, Josie was itching to pick up on her own career as a graphic artist. She tried playgroup and other activities, worked on being the “good” mother. She’d even tried the “perfect compromise” – working from home. She had picked up a good range of freelance work and decided that once she had spent some quality time with Tiffany during the morning, she would be able to work while Tiffany napped. So each morning she read to Tiffany, then they would watch “Play School”. Josie smiled slightly as she remembered a time when the only banana she knew was the one in the fruitbowl. Now she knew about Bananas in Pyjamas and more latterly Hi Five! But where on earth had Tiffany found out about Spice Girls? Weren’t children of her age supposed to be into those funny guys in coloured skivvies?

The working from home option hadn't worked very well. Although Josie had managed the discipline of working from home, the practicalities had dented her sense of humour. She had tried to give Tiffany her own "work" to do, but that lasted about 15 minutes and Tiffany always seemed to want the colour Josie needed. In the end Josie decided to wait until Tiffany turned four and was at preschool. But those days offered little more time than the days at home. "You're a graphic artist! How wonderful." She was also targetted for fruit duty and excursions and there were the seemingly endless invitations to visit with Tiffany's "best" friends. While Josie felt she was withering, Tiffany thrived in the new environment. The petite girl with the red curls was everybody's favourite. One day from the preschool kitchen window Josie watched her fairy princess holding court.

"Sarah you sit there and Gemma you sit there. You are my servants and I am the queen and you have to do everything I say."

Josie pulled into the school parking lot, still unsure of what she was doing there. Why couldn't she just go back to work and find out at the end of the day exactly who her daughter had decided to be? The truth was she wanted to see Tiffany in the book parade. Of course she hoped the fairy costume would have been restored and not abandoned, but Josie resolved that if Tiffany had in fact been turned into a Spice Girl, she would say nothing at the school and not throw her mother a "she got you didn't she?" look. She would be the good daughter.



“Yoo-hoo. Are you ready Tiff? It’s Nan.”

“We’re in here Fran,” Alec called from the living room.

“Nan!”

Fran put her cane basket on the floor and gave her granddaughter a hug. For once after their welcoming cuddle Tiffany didn’t go rifling through the basket looking for some treat but faced her grandmother directly.

“Nan will you make me…” Alec cut her off.

“Fran. Can we talk for a minute? Tiff, go get your bag love.”

Alec spoke quietly. “Fran, Josie spent hours on Tiff’s costume for the book parade. She was up until three this morning. Now Tiff wants to be a Spice Girl because she apparently promised her little friend that she would. I know she’s going to ask you to change her costume for her, but I’m asking you not to. Have to go now. Have a good day Tiff.”

“Bye Daddy.” As soon as she heard her father’s car leave the drive, Tiffany turned to her grandmother. “Nan. Do you know what Spice Girls wear?”

“No I’m afraid I don’t sweetheart.”

“Oh it’s easy. Ginger Spice just wears normal clothes – sort of.”

“What about your beautiful fairy costume Mummy made you?”

“I don’t like it!” Tiffany dismissed the costume and her mother.

“Did you change your mind Tiff?”

“No. Well, I might have. I just forgot to tell Mummy.”

Fran sat her granddaughter down.

“Tiff can I tell you a story about a little girl I knew?”

“Will it take long?” Tiffany eyed the clock and knew when the big hand reached twelve and the little hand the nine, she should be at school. “Won’t I be late for school?”

“It will be alright.”

“Oh. Okay.” Tiffany had heard her Nan’s stories before, but was sure that because she had to get to school this would be a shorter one.

“There was a little girl I knew. She had five brothers and two sisters. She had a big bed and shared it with her sisters.”

“She didn’t have her own bed?” Tiffany’s eyes widened as she thought of having to share her bed. She did share hers, but only with her teddy. Sometimes she climbed into mummy and daddy’s bed when she was frightened, but she couldn’t share her bed every night.

“No,” her grandmother began to explain. “Because lots of children shared their beds then. They weren’t lucky like you. This little girl....”

Tiffany interrupted. “What was her name Nan?”

Fran wasn’t prepared for this one. “Let’s call her Susan.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Susan’s mummy didn’t go out to work like your mummy, but she worked at home very, very hard. Because she had eight children to look after she had to cook a lot. She baked bread and biscuits, and she made all of her children’s clothes.”

“Didn’t they have Myer?”

Fran smiled at her granddaughter, but continued on. “No sweetheart, and they lived a long, long way from any big town.”

“Nan,” Tiffany tugged at her Nana’s arm and pointed to the clock. “It’s time to go. Is this story nearly finished?” Fran had to think quickly.

“Almost. Anyway Tiff, Susan’s mummy would love to have made her a pretty fairy costume, but Susan could only have one good dress and one pair of good shoes. Not like you with all of your lovely dresses in your cupboard and your party shoes, school shoes, gym shoes, ballet shoes and sandals. And now you have a beautiful fairy costume to wear as well.” Fran sat back, picked up her basket and made ready to leave.

“Nan? Can you make me into a Spice Girl?”



Peter Pan, Harry Potter, at least three Bananas in Pyjamas, and Goldilocks and the Three Bears all paraded past the parents who gathered in the large kindergarten room. They circled the room three times then stopped. Two women entered the room and then stood together talking quietly. The younger one seemed a little agitated. The older woman patted her arm and smiled at her.

Josie looked for the red curls, fairy dress and wings, but couldn’t see Tiffany anywhere.

“Mum, Tiffany did come to school this morning?”

“Yes dear. I dropped her off myself.”

“I can’t see her anywhere.” Their conversation was interrupted by Ms Harding.

“Thank you everyone. First of all I’d like to say thank you to the parents, grandparents and friends who are here today and for all of the hard work that has gone into the costumes. Also to the children for looking so wonderful.” She paused and looked around the room.

“Now we have a special treat. As part of book week we have been encouraging the children to write their own stories about their families, and we were going to ask a couple of the children to read theirs out. This morning one of our students came in and asked if she could tell a story about her family. It wasn’t one that was written down, but she said it was a story that she had just heard. ‘Tiffany, would you come out please?’”

Josie looked at her mother, who just shrugged her shoulders in response.

Tiffany came out from behind the makeshift screen carrying her grandmother’s cane basket. She sat it down on the floor beside the chair that had been placed in the middle of the room. Tiffany wasn’t wearing the fairy costume, but one of her own dresses.

“Once upon a time,” she began, “there was a little girl called Susan.” Josie looked to her mother for some sort of explanation, but received a bewildered smile in response.

“Susan’s mummy didn’t go to work like my mummy, but she worked very hard and made bread and everything and all of her ten kids’ clothes.”

From the basket Tiffany removed some brightly coloured fabric and began to pretend to sew, her tiny fingers holding the threaded needle.

“One day, Susan asked her mother to make her a pretty party dress, because she only had one good dress and that was for everything!” she exclaimed wide-eyed. “But her mummy decided she would make her something very, very special for a nice surprise.”

With a flourish, Tiffany pulled out the fairy dress, wings and tiara. She held her make believe needle and thread and made tiny stitches through the air above the fabric.

“Her mummy loved her so much, and even if she didn’t have a lot of time to do it, she sat up really, really late one night and made Susan this special, special dress. And she had to make it because they didn’t have very much money, but they didn’t have Myer either so her mummy couldn’t go and buy it for her. The end.”

Tiffany made a tiny curtsy to the audience, put everything back into the basket and ran behind the screen.

“Mum?”

“I didn’t know what she was going to do. She didn’t want to wear the fairy costume, so I suggested she pop it into the basket, and she could decide when it was time to get ready what she wanted to be.”

“Are you sure you didn’t have a talk to her Mum?”

“No. I simply told her a story. Isn’t that what Nannas are supposed to do?”

Being Audrey Hepburn

*I*ts shape and colour whispered seduction. The classic rounded neckline at the front that would reveal her smooth décolletage and just a little cleavage – sensual – while the back dipped slightly lower and would show off her well shaped upper back. Its curves would follow hers – bust, waist and hip – while the length to the top of her knees would be perfect. It was sitting right at the front of the rack. Did she really need another little black dress? No, not really, but this wasn't any little black dress. This was THE LITTLE BLACK DRESS. The Audrey Hepburn, “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” little black dress, or as close as she was ever going to get to it. She could see herself in it and her hair in a French roll, subtle make up and just a single strand of pearls. But, there was no special occasion on her social calendar in the near future where she might dress like this. Even though Christmas and New Year were just around the corner, her dancecard was empty.

She didn't quite know how this had happened. There had been promise in the air last summer, cosy nights in the autumn and winter and then in spring, when she believed something might blossom and warm, a cooling; from him an “*I'm not sure I'm ready for this type of commitment.*” But she hadn't asked or even hinted at commitment, she had simply asked for friendship and

perhaps the occasional satisfying of physical needs when it suited them both. Not just sex, but a companionship of bodies and minds. Nothing complicated. It had seemed they could continue like this for as long as it suited them. They'd been so comfortable with each other, but now she thought of it, they had shared very little of their real lives and she really knew nothing of him. Probably best, she thought. She had minimal, no had absolutely no maternal needs to be met. Friends of her age were marrying, buying houses, having babies. She cherished her independence and lifestyle where she could do what she wanted. "Ah," but her friends asked "Are you really happy?" Really, she had no idea because surely anyone's state of happiness was relative. But to placate them she answered: "Yes." Firmly, with no "but" implied. Even he had known that. Maybe it was her reluctance to commit that had lead to his unwillingness to stay and eventual leaving. As it turned out, she could take him or leave him. Her independent status meant she did not have to think twice about this little black dress or any other piece of clothing that might take her eye.



She took the dress into the changeroom. She thought of herself as neither beautiful nor plain. She believed her eyes and hair were her best features – deep blue eyes that contrasted with her dark brown hair which she wore shoulder length. An easy length for wearing out, or sweeping up. She pulled the dress over her head, down over her body and zipped it up. She turned as much as was possible in the tiny fitting room, (*maybe that's why it*

was called a fitting room), but found it almost impossible to get a complete view of herself in the dress. She thought about stepping outside the room but didn't believe she could trust the opinion of the boutique owner. (*"Oh, it fits you perfectly!"*) But rather, she did sense, even though she couldn't really see, that this dress did fit her perfectly, and because it was not so much a dress, but a costume to lose her daily identity in. She saw herself wearing it in all kinds of situations, out, elegant and charming, or in a more intimate setting with someone special. Pathetic really! Here she was, the modern woman with everything she needed and she was fantasising about the man who would be her escort. Well for this dress she needed an escort. A debonair one (Did *anyone* use that word anymore?). Tall, dark, handsome, definitely suited and preferably Yves St Laurented. She laughed at the thought that that man still existed in this century. Life was so different to that now. It seemed men had jumped upon equal opportunity and feminism as a sign that women shared their sexual wishes and would go to bed with them after the first date. Maybe all men weren't like that, but her experience of them lately had been so. What had happened to the sweet dance where a respectable distance remained between the dancers until they knew each other better?

She unzipped the dress enjoying the way it slipped to the floor. Now that held promise! She managed to get herself back into her suit and took the fabric of her dreams to the counter.

"Gorgeous choice," the boutique owner said. "Now are you right for jewellery to go with this?"

"Oh yes. I'm calling in at Tiffany's on the way home."



She couldn't wait to get the dress home and try it on again, this time with the sheer stockings – yes stockings (*This was not a pantyhose dress*) and jewellery she knew would set it off perfectly. She wasn't going out this evening, but wanted to have a dress rehearsal ready for the time when it would carry her into that fantasy world.

She layed everything out on the bed and began to undress. She kicked off her shoes and removed her other clothes. It was then she saw something about the dress she hadn't noticed before.

It was blue!

Strings

“**O**ctavia! Octavia!”

The staccato of her mother’s voice bounced from the kitchen down the hall and stopped at her door. Octavia counted. One and two and three and...

“Oc-tav-i-a!”

Octavia knew if she waited just one minute more her mother would enter her bedroom and then appear at the entrance of the music room. Octavia refused to yell back in reply. She began counting again. One and two and three and four... She let her eyes drift around the compact built-in verandah she now knew as her music room. With barely enough room for her, her cello and her music, she’d made the best of the space carefully arranging everything. Her metronome sat on the small oak cupboard she had brought from her father’s house. No, it wasn’t just her father’s house, it had been her house too. Her home and also that of her mother. But it seemed the house, the town, everything was too small for her mother, or perhaps her mother too large for them. Her mother, Jeanette, wasn’t large in stature, in fact she was quite small: it was her posture and manner that were overwhelming. So overwhelming that people avoided her rather than risked any sort of contact. Mostly it hadn’t bothered Octavia, but occasionally when she’d been younger and at

primary school, she'd wished for the mother who'd visit the school, help with the school fete, or who would even turn up for parent days. As she got older though she was pleased that her mother was often "*too busy*" to take part in school affairs. "*I see enough of school for work, thank you.*" Fortunately her father made up for all her mother's faults. He was gentle, musical and warm. Responsible for the important things in her life - her music and her name. She knew he had named her even before he told her the story of how it had been chosen. It was a story he repeated often, especially when she came home upset at being teased.

"What sort of name is Octavia? Octavia Octopus! All those arms. All those fingers to play that big instrument!" The group of sixth graders would jeer. Her father would soothe her with the story and his voice.

"When you were born, I looked at your beautiful hands and long fingers, so long for a baby, and knew they should play an instrument. No, not just play but create music. So I gave you a musical name. You'd be like all the notes of a scale with all their differences. Complete on their own, but a symphony when put together." He had gently held her hand and traced along her fingers as he wove his spell of comfort.

She was pleased her father had named her. Her mother's choice would have been something efficient like Beth or Ann. A name that only took a single breath. Octavia believed that's why her mother said her name so quickly. One short note for the *O*, a staccato *ta* and then the last two letters in one. Except when her mother was annoyed. Then she would dramatically extend it.



“Oc-tav-i-al!” Her mother now stood at the door.

“You’ve been in here for ten minutes and I’ve heard nothing. It’s 4.15 and at 4.30 you have to begin your homework. I want you finished by five.”

At fourteen, everything in Octavia’s life was timetabled. Alarm at seven, showered and dressed by 7.20, hair neatly braided for school even though she wanted to wear it out like the other girls. Always completely ready before her mother left for work. One morning she let herself dream under the warm water, getting her hair wet on a day when the extra five minutes to wash it hadn’t been allowed. She thought of all the notes that the water could be, hearing the music in her head. If she could just keep those notes, she might put them into some music she’d been writing. She was just imagining the first few bars when the shower screen was slid open.

“Octavia! What are you doing? It’s almost twenty past, and you’re not even out of the shower. And your hair. There’s no time to dry it now.” She could tell her mother was agitated at the thought of being late. But it wasn’t this that made Octavia cross her arms covering her small breasts that were then just beginning to emerge. It was her mother’s complete disregard for her privacy. She quickly turned off the taps, stepped past her mother and grabbed a towel wrapping herself in it. She knew too well what her mother would say next.

“Oh Octavia. What on earth do you think you have to hide?” The comment was never passed in fun, or mother-daughter affection. Just a statement: matter of fact. Octavia wanted to talk to her mother about many things. Shop. Talk. Laugh. But she had realised when she was quite young that these

things took time, and it was time her mother hadn't scheduled. At twelve she had known what was happening to her body. The human sexuality program at school took care of that. She was sure the only reason her mother had allowed her to attend was to save her from having to explain the facts of life to her. To Octavia her mother was sexless, of no specific gender. Even the clothes she wore suggested unisex. Not that her mother could be described as masculine with her petite features and glossy hair, perfectly cut. Her mother's choice of clothing was smart with every piece of her wardrobe (and there were not many of them) chosen because they "mixed and matched." Octavia had always thought that expression described perfectly her mother's sense of the practical. Nothing ever wasted. The human sexuality program at school had informed her that her parents had to have been together at some stage for her to even be here, but she wondered if her mother's efficiency extended to immaculate conception. Octavia remembered the first time she'd heard the story of the Virgin Mary and Jesus in church with her grandparents. She didn't challenge the simplicity of that explanation, because to Octavia everything was possible. When it came to issues of sex, Octavia and her friends rarely spoke of the changes they were experiencing, or of boys (who they perceived as just troublesome children who you couldn't even talk to. To contemplate any other relationship required a quantum leap, and they were unwilling to step let alone leap). But the Year 10 girls sometimes talked and giggled as though knowing or at least speaking of such things was a rite of passage to senior school. As she was only in Year 8 her participation in such conversations was only that of eavesdropper, and she normally found the whole subject so dull, or distasteful that she would quickly dismiss

anything she'd heard.

"So, what have you been doing for the past five minutes?" Her mother's voice intruded into her musings.

"Reading my pieces through before I start." Octavia attempted to appease.

"There's really no time for that. You have fifteen minutes!" Her mother left the room and Octavia began her escape.

She placed her stool behind the cello on its stand, moving the large instrument slightly forward before positioning herself. She loved the sleekness of the timber as she leant into its curves, her blonde hair crinkled from her braids hanging over her arm. Octavia picked up the bow, and placed her fingers on the neck finding each string. She brought the bow slowly across balancing the instrument's weight against her small frame. The sound was rich and deep, each note cocooning her. She didn't need to read the music - she knew every piece by heart. She wanted to have them perfect for when she met her dad. He'd chosen the cello as her instrument, and when she had practised in their old home he had accompanied her. He said the instrument would challenge her, but if she mastered its size and created the mellow sounds that were possible, then she could master anything.

But now she practised alone. The music room of the old house they lived in was two hundred kilometres away. She would often let the notes take her to the room's tall ceilings of pressed tin, the timber lined walls with dado rails. They were bare of decoration, but the floor was busy with her father's music books, music stands, old scores, the day's newspapers. The things that drove her mother to distraction, and intensified her frustration.

"I don't know how you two work in here. And what must

the students think!” Her father, Mark, would reply with a half smile. Octavia often thought he’d been given the wrong name and that Edward or Alexander would have suited him better. Something regal. Her grandparents had been quite religious, so her father and his two brothers bore the names of the saints or apostles. Grandma and Pa may have given him a short name, but they acknowledged and loved his difference, finding money for his music lessons when there was little to spare. He had never had aspirations of being a concert pianist, but realising he had a passion for music and could convey that passion, his parents had encouraged his studies, both in music and as a teacher. Although her father had a good teaching job, loved his students at school and his music students, her mother was never satisfied and complained about other children being in the house. More often than not, her objection was that they were given a few extra minutes for their lessons.

“Come on Jeanette,” her father would attempt to placate. “What’s a few minutes?”

“A few minutes each time means you don’t finish until late, Octavia begins her lesson late and we eat late. Children need routine.” Octavia felt she was beginning to leave childhood and needed less “routine”. Although she knew her mother had seen the changes in her, she still treated her as she did when she was a small child.

“Yes. I know. I’ll try to keep it under control.” Her father was the chastised child agreeing to keep the peace.

Octavia would hear these exchanges from her room, an impish grin invading her face. She knew her father had no intention of cutting his students’ time short, and her mother would revisit the conversation again soon. He would walk up to

Octavia's room and stand in the doorway. He was untroubled by her mother's obsession with timetabling.

"Ready love? Mum wants to have dinner on time tonight." His attempt at seriousness always failed miserably as a conspiratorial glint appeared in his blue eyes. Octavia's eyes mirrored not only her father's colour, but the same look of mischievousness could illuminate them. Octavia may have inherited her mother's frame, but that was all.

They would move into the music room and begin the lesson. Their relationship was more like a marrying of spirits than teacher-student or parent-child. Occasionally her mother would go to Sydney on some professional errand, and Octavia and her father wouldn't stop for dinner, choosing to munch sandwiches in the music room, or sometimes finishing a small work and suddenly realising the dinner hour had long passed. They'd make do with a supper of toast and tea.

Octavia had always been curious about what had drawn her parents to each other. She knew opposites attracted, but this surely had been a collision destined to end in destruction. They had met at college when studying teaching. According to her father, her mother's efficiency had been legendary around the campus, and he loved the order she brought to his - if not chaotic - then definitely disorganised life. If something needed to be done for the student group, she had done it. But somewhere along the way her efficiency had turned to officiousness. Octavia didn't know when, and because her father's nature was never to disparage, she probably never would. In the end it was her father's gentle manner that had proved to be his shield and he had survived, teaching Octavia how to survive in the process. She trusted his way, so was utterly bewildered when her mother

announced that she and Octavia would be moving straight after Christmas, and totally astonished and disappointed with her father for the first time, when he announced his consent.

“Just think love, you’ll be able to have extra lessons at school, go to concerts. See real musicians. You’ll be able to come home on some weekends.” She could tell from his voice that there wasn’t real consent, simply compliance. He explained to her that he hoped to apply for a job in Sydney soon, sell the house and move later in the year. Then it would be easy for her to spend time with him when he found a place to live.

“But Dad, that could be six months away!” She thought of the desolate afternoons and weekends, and wanted to cry. But instead she simply hugged her father in understanding. Her mother had decreed their future. Jeanette never stated that she and Octavia’s father were separating, expecting Octavia to accept the fact.

“It’s just not working love. Your Mum’s scored a great job in Sydney so it makes things easier.” Even though Octavia loved and trusted him, surely it was easier for her to stay here with him. She suddenly saw a life of harmony with no tirades, just unending peace, wonderful music and late night suppers with the toast cooked over the fire - another of her mother’s gripes.

“I’d love you to stay with me, but you’re best to settle into a new school in the new year.” Again these weren’t his words but her mother’s. There would be no grief in leaving the school. A new one would give her the chance to be a new, or changed Octavia if she wanted to be. No more “Octavia, Octopus” who hid behind her cello. But leaving her beloved dad was like having her cello and bow in two different places. She could pluck the strings, but the rich melodies only came when the two elements

were in contact.



Christmas was just a date on the calendar: an inconvenience amid the half packed boxes. Her father had tried to persuade her mother to leave the packing until a few days before the removalists were due.

“No. I want to get started now. It’s a good chance to have a proper clean up and see what I need to get for you before I leave.” Although they wouldn’t be living together, Octavia sensed her mother needed her father to need her. Octavia also knew her mother didn’t care much for Christmas, and to her credit it was the one time of year she gave some concession to the child in Octavia and her father.

“Jeanette. It’s fine. I don’t need much here. It will be less for me to pack up when I move anyway.” Her father was always the keeper of harmony, conducting himself and Octavia’s life to offer as little interference as possible into Jeanette’s existence. But this year her mother’s concession stretched only to ceasing the packing and stocktaking of their lives for Christmas Day. Boxing Day was just that with the contents of hall cupboards neatly folded before being packed into the large cartons. The cartons labelled, they were stacked in the music room. Despite the lack of room, Octavia and her father played each day storing up the hours they could each draw on during their separation.



The day to move came, and Octavia knew her best defence was to go. The removalists arrived early (her mother's instruction so that they could have everything in Sydney by nightfall) and she and her mother left just ahead of the truck that carried the trappings of Octavia's life. Octavia had insisted the cello and her music go in the car with her. She would not trust her lifeline to anyone else. Her mother had agreed, but Octavia was sure it was out of a sense of economics, not of any degree of understanding of the things that were important in her daughter's life. Also in the car were two doonas and pillows, toiletries, towels and a box of essentials - tea, coffee, biscuits and toilet paper. Octavia had packed her own overnight bag with a t-shirt and jeans, knowing that all of her things would be unpacked within 48 hours of them being delivered.

"If our things don't arrive at least we'll be comfortable for one night." While Octavia knew this was the practical and sensible thing, she preferred her father's approach, even with its forced joviality.

"Well, if everything doesn't arrive you'll just have to go to Macca's in your pj's tomorrow morning love!" Octavia gave him a small smile in appreciation of his efforts.

They arrived at the house in the early afternoon, hours before the removalists came. The house was small with small rooms, and hot in the January steam of the city. Octavia wondered how she would breathe in these tiny rooms, but kept telling herself it wasn't for long. When her father moved he would find a rambling house where she would make her real home for her visits, or maybe even live with him again.



Octavia began school and although she didn't make any great friends found she was readily accepted. Playing in the school orchestra helped, and achieving wasn't frowned upon, so academically she allowed herself to blossom. Her mother left before eight each morning, giving Octavia half an hour before she made her way to school to rehearse the events of the promised days with her father. On orchestra days her mother allowed her to take a taxi. It seemed to go against her mother's frugal nature, but Octavia had to admit her officiousness never stretched to allowing discomfort. But again she wondered if it was the cello that was her main concern.



The taxi deposited Octavia home at the front gate. Today marked the six month point of her separation from her father. Each day she returned home hoping to find some sign that he was coming. Octavia balanced the cello on the fence as she checked the letterbox. Nothing. She carried the cumbersome instrument to the front door, found her key and opened the door. Her mother wasn't home yet which was unusual. Good, thought Octavia. A little time to put her things away and watch some TV - something apart from the ration of news her mother allowed. *"You have to learn about the real world. You can't live in that music fairyland forever."*

Octavia kicked her shoes off in the bedroom and walked in stocking feet to the kitchen, stretching up on her toes ballerina

like. This she also could only do if her mother wasn't home. Her mother hated people walking about with only their socks or stockings covering their feet. She poured a glass of juice and took it into the dining area, turning the small TV on as she passed. Octavia had just made herself comfortable when she heard the familiar sound of her mother's car. In one flowing movement she turned the television off and walked quickly to the verandah, grabbing her shoes on the way past. She slipped them on and picked up the music she had been learning. It was one of her father's favourite pieces. She touched each note feeling the imprint of his fingertips on the page, each note connecting her to him. She was absorbed in this when she felt the reverberations of her mother's voice.

"Octavia! Octavia!" and moments later "It's 4.15 and at 4.30 you have to begin your homework. I need you to be finished by five."

Octavia didn't know why the time limit was being imposed, and knew better than to question for more information that her mother was willing to impart. Octavia put five o'clock out of her head, returned to the score and her playing. She knew each note journeyed from her world to her father's. She played, eyes closed, hearing his accompaniment.



Octavia didn't hear the footsteps on the front porch, the door open or the greeting, but sensed a subtle change in the air around her. She kept her eyes closed melding herself with the cello. She drew the bow across and out into what should have

been nothingness, but instead felt a comforting touch to her fingers and then a gentle coaxing at her elbow. She was afraid to open her eyes, but began to play again, this time with extra confidence. Octavia knew she and her father had never performed an unfinished symphony.

Nanna's Pudding

The snow white tablecloth was now decorated with bon bon toys, turkey gravy, a splash of red wine and green candle wax. Louise had warned it wasn't wise to burn the candles without a dish underneath (No, they won't drip her sister-in-law, Helen had assured, they will simply burn inside themselves). But drip they did and Lou wondered how on earth she was going to remove the wax that had not simply dripped but now impregnated the once white as white damask of Nanna's cloth. Nanna would know how to get it out, but for the first time in all the years of Christmases Nanna was missing. Her absence wasn't simply marked by her not being there, but by the decorum missing from the dining table.

Louise remembered Christmases past where Nanna had reigned – matriarch and keeper in check of small children who dared to stain the white damask. She had always ensured that the toddlers of the group occupied their high chairs, while the middle group – those aged four to twelve had a Christmas table of their own. Adolescence marked the right to occupy the dining table central to the beautiful dining room Lou now saw transformed from an elegant place to a room strewn with the remnants of Christmas papers, toys already broken and was that a turkey bone

she spied in the corner? Ugh! Nanna would be turning in her grave.

It had been Louise's idea to continue the tradition of the family Christmas. The family these days was her older sister Jill, her two children – Adriana and Ben, thirteen and ten respectively; her brother Mark –with number two wife of six months, Helen, and her two children, Sophie, four and Declan two in tow, and her eldest sister Therese and her husband, Adam and their two children, Sam and Alex both now in their twenties and both overseas this Christmas; her mother, Dawn, father Ed and her - Louise – still single at thirty and with no desire to acquire the trappings of the 21st century – partner, mortgage and children. Dawn and Ed lived in Nanna's house which they'd shared with Nanna until just six weeks ago. Nanna had died without illness or drama simply failing to wake one afternoon in her chair in the living room. A fitting way for a woman of her style to go Lou thought. Lou could see her chair from the dining room. It seemed to be the only unmarked piece of furniture for the day, but, Louise felt, not unoccupied. Organised as ever, Nanna had the pudding already prepared. It was the October ritual with the soaking of the fruit – the recipe said soak overnight, but the fruit often soaked for a week with a generous splash of brandy added just before the pudding was mixed. It was then cooked and left in its basin until Christmas Day when it was returned to the pan for its cooking to be completed. The brandy butter was also made a few days early, and as Lou was preparing it just two days ago, she had realised that Nanna really was gone.

As Christmas approached Louise put to her mother that they should all spend Christmas together. The family rarely had get togethers and it would be wonderful. She would look after

everything, and as the pudding was already done the day would be easy. Dawn was a little concerned at Lou's suggestion. She wasn't sure what was going on, but had sensed an uneasiness between her older daughter Jill and her new daughter-in-law, Helen. Dawn knew little of Helen, but as she was her son's choice, was willing to accept her. Acceptance was all she could manage this Christmas. She wasn't looking forward to having Jill's children there and she was struggling with the knowledge that her mother was gone. Yes, she knew her mother had lived a good and full life, but in the past few years they finally had established some understanding of each other and were enjoying each other's company. They seemed to have relaxed into each other's habits, but now she was gone. Dawn believed Jill's children could only be described as brats. Indulged too much and not given enough responsibility, nor were they expected to eat their vegetables – a sure cause of juvenile delinquency according to her tenets, while Helen's children were small and the thought of little ones at the table did not thrill her. Of course her own children had been allowed at the table, but not at the adults' table until they were thirteen, but if Lou really wanted to, of course she could host the dinner here. She would not make Louise nervous about the day and would not mention the possible hostilities. How could she, when she didn't really know if they existed. It was just a feeling. Dawn also secretly prayed that the influence of her mother was not totally buried with her. Yes, Christmas was a time for goodwill towards all men - or to be more politically correct - people and surely that could extend between in-laws.



Louise viewed the mess again, but decided it wasn't worth the effort to make a fuss. She turned to Jill. "Why don't we clear this mess up and make way for the pudding?"

Jill's response was to throw a "why me?" look at Louise, and a "you could offer to help" glare at Helen and Therese. Helen seemed preoccupied, but Therese responded. Louise thought it was probably better if Helen stayed where she was. While the conversation at the table had been pleasant during the meal, there had been a silence between Jill and Helen. Still, Helen was relatively new to the family and was finding her way. Louise often wondered if the reason she lost boyfriends was the overwhelmingness of the intimacy of her family. Everything would be fine until she brought them home to her parents' and Nanna's house. She knew her family didn't mean to put the new ones on the outside, but it did happen. It seemed even worse when it was a special time for them and Christmas had always been so.

"I'll help," said Mark, the peacemaker, and he effortlessly piled a tray high with Nanna's best china. The three of them proceeded in single file to the kitchen, and Dawn marvelled at how it had only taken 20 years for them to not fight over who would do the dishes.

In the kitchen they scraped, rinsed and packed the kitchen filling it with their chatter.

"Hey," said Mark. "Remember this?" His question was accompanied by a quick flick of the tea towel he was holding across Therese's bottom.

"Yes," she laughed. "And remember this?" She picked up a large cookbook. That was enough for Mark to stop. He'd

recalled how it felt to have that come crashing down on his head when he was about ten. He was only slightly shorter than Therese in those days. Now she'd find it impossible to deliver this comeback unless she stood on a chair.

"What about this?" chirped in Louise, grabbing the water spray and good naturedly covering Mark's face with a fine mist.

With ease they were suddenly children again and found themselves remembering dozens of antics in Nan's kitchen: antics that Nanna always seemed to uncover no matter how hard they tried to hide them.

"Do you think Nan ever knew it was us that demolished that apple pie that time?" Mark asked.

"Oh definitely. Do you know she never made a pie without telling me about the time the dog stole the pie from the kitchen window?" Lou replied.

"Pups more like it!" laughed Therese. Mark began to wash the dishes while his two sisters dried. There was a dishwasher, but Nanna's fine bone china had to be handwashed. The three of them feared that if a tiny speckle of the gold leaf disappeared, Nanna would know they had been placed in "that contraption."

Nanna had also believed that time spent doing dishes was precious family time. Time to talk and catch up. She made it clear that using the dishwasher simply encouraged people to sit in front of the television for longer periods of time. Although her aversion to television only extended to the commercial channels. An avid watcher of public television Nanna often filled in her grandchildren on the latest developments in some conflict, or astonished them with her recall of scientific facts.

She had had little formal education, but her life experience was astounding and Louise marvelled as she grew older at the

solutions to life's everyday problems that her Nanna explored. Louise guessed it would be called common sense – a commodity not all that common, Louise thought and then laughed at herself. She was starting to think like her mother *and* grandmother.

Nanna also seemed to be able to move with the times in terms of her children, grandchildren and their relationships.



Dishes done, Lou took the pudding basin from its bubbling pool, unclicked the lid and turned it out onto the special Christmas plate.

“Wow, sis. That smells fantastic.” Mark picked a piece of sultana that had dropped from the pudding.

“Out of it!” Lou slapped his hand playfully. “And you can thank Nan.”

Lou then poured the brandy into a small decorative saucepan to warm and got it ready to flame. She had decided she would flame the pudding at the table. It had long been a Christmas ritual and it was one she had loved since she was a small child. The blue flames dancing on the top of the pudding and then disappearing. The feeling of being grown up because you were allowed to have pudding with alcohol in it. It all held a special magic for her, and when the flaming was successful it marked a sense that all was right in her family's world.

Mark and Therese had already taken the dessert plates and cutlery to the table.

“What's this fork for? You don't eat cake with a fork!” Ben said in a loud voice.

“It’s for the pudding stupid. And you use a dessert fork for the pudding,” Adriana informed her etiquette-challenged brother.

“Enough you two,” quipped Jill.

“Okay everyone,” interjected Mark ignoring his niece and nephew.

Match at the ready, Mark lit the brandy in the pan and Louise then carefully poured it over the pudding. It lit, but she miscalculated slightly with the pour and a blue flame found its way to Helen’s paper hat. (She had refused to put it on proclaiming it would make her look ridiculous. Jill had then protested at this protest saying they all wore them and it was part of the day). The flame turned the bright orange paper to black. Louise’s main concern was to stop the flame going any further and she dropped the pudding plate to the table. There was silence. The precious Christmas plate had smashed and the pudding was now impregnated with glass as well as the sixpences Nanna still put in it.

“My plate!” exclaimed Helen. The clan looked at her puzzled at the outburst.

“Your plate? When did it become your plate?” Jill was trying to keep her voice calm but a slight screech still crept in.

“Well mine and Mark’s plate then. Your grandmother gave it to Mark and so it’s ours. Louise how could you be so careless?”

Louise was too busy trying to remove the pudding from the table before Declan took handfuls of pudding, glass and sixpences and put them into his mouth. Lou reckoned if Helen overreacted to a smashed plate, she would be calling in the SES if even a currant got caught in her small son’s throat.

“For goodness sake!” This was just too much for Dawn. “That plate belonged to my great-grandmother and if anyone should be upset it should be me.” She breathed deeply. “Helen. Jill. I don’t know what’s going on between the two of you, but now is not the time or place for it. Adriana. Ben. Would you please go with Aunt Therese and make coffee. Mark take the little ones for a walk. A nap. Anywhere. Just away from here for a few minutes. Ed. Just make yourself scarce.” Dawn was trembling.

Louise had never seen her mother like this. It all seemed a bit over the top for a lost Christmas pudding and a broken plate, albeit her great-great grandmother’s. Louise sensed she wasn’t needed just at present and so pulled together the last of the mess into the vegetable dish. “Dad, I could use your help.”

“Sure sweetie.” Father and daughter went to the kitchen, leaving mother, daughter and daughter-in-law at the battlefield.

“Would someone like to explain to me just what is the problem between you two? And don’t tell me it’s about a plate that neither of you have a right to!”

The two women remained silent, avoiding eye contact with each other. “Jill? Helen?”



Jill was six again. She was at the birthday party of a girl in her class. Jill knew she had only been invited because this girl couldn’t ask everyone else and not invite her. The Christmas table was the birthday table. The green wax the green icing off the pattie cakes and the bon bon toys were the birthday whistles

and trinkets from the party bags. Dawn was now the girl's mother, staring accusingly at her. She had not meant to spoil the party. Just as the girl's mother was placing the cake on the table, one of the other children had bumped her and the birthday cake – a beautiful yellow butterfly cake – had taken on a life of its own and ended up all over the table. The girl was in tears.

“You just couldn't let me be part of your day, could you?” Helen broke the silence. “You ruined my birthday and now you're ruining every attempt of mine to be part of your family. Your grandmother showed me that plate when Mark first brought me over here. Said how she looked forward to Christmas and it coming out again. She loved Christmas and wanted me to be part of it. I should have known that with her gone I'd be the outcast.” Her outburst over she sat quietly down and dabbed her eyes with a paper serviette.

“Jill?” Dawn looked straight at her daughter. “Do you have any idea what Helen is talking about?”

“You don't remember her, do you Mum?”

“Remember who?”

“Helen. Helen James.”

“Helen James?”

“Helen and I were in Grade One together Mum. They lived a few streets away. I went to her birthday party and bumped the cake out of her mother's hands. It went everywhere. Don't you remember me coming home in tears that day?”

“Jill, you were six. That's almost thirty five years ago, how on earth do you expect me to remember that?” Dawn suddenly felt like the mother who didn't care, but knew if she thought that, she would be as ridiculous as the two grown women in front of her.

“Helen and her family moved away, and then when Helen settled back here that’s when she met Mark.”

“And this is what the problem has been between you? A ruined birthday cake?” Dawn’s tone clearly told them she was even more astonished at their behaviour.

The two women looked up. Dawn had had no inkling that the women had known each other. Even so, their behaviour now could only be described as ludicrous. *Oh, what Christmas can do to people*, Dawn sighed in disbelief.

“I’m going into the lounge for coffee. You two can do whatever you like, but for goodness sake when you are here under the family roof can you *please* manage to be civil. If not for me, for Mark and the children’s sake. What must they be thinking?”

Dawn entered the lounge. Therese had organised the coffee and found from somewhere fruit mince pies and Christmas cake. Ed and Louise were sitting on the floor with Mark, Sophie and Declan putting together the Duplo farm. Adriana was trying out her new nail polish, (*Don’t let her spill in on the carpet, pleaded Dawn to her mother*) while Ben refined his fine motor skills on the Game Boy.



In the dining room Helen and Jill still sat, neither looking at the other. As Jill looked down she noticed a piece of the Christmas plate that had been missed, and picked it up. It was then she realised that this wasn’t THE Christmas plate, but the second Christmas plate. There wasn’t a lot of difference in the

pattern, but in the china. She had seen the Christmas plate go onto the table for more than forty Christmases and knew she wasn't mistaken. That meant her great-great grandmother's plate was safely in the sideboard in the lounge. Had she been in the kitchen when Louise placed the pudding on the plate she would have noticed, and maybe swapped them over. But she had been determined to stay at the table, not willing to leave Helen to talk to her parents alone.

She debated whether to tell Helen that things weren't as bad as they seemed, but hadn't liked the way Helen had claimed the plate. She took the broken piece of plate into the kitchen and then joined the rest of the family in the lounge. Helen soon joined them. Dawn thinking the matter settled gave them each an approving smile.

Jill had just sat down in her Nanna's chair when she felt a slight pinch to her earlobe. Thinking her earring clip was too tight she removed the earring, but this didn't seem to help. She rubbed the spot, but the pinched feeling returned, this time harder.

"Jill!" Jill looked over to where her mother was sitting. It couldn't have been her mother speaking; Dawn was engrossed in conversation with Louise. "Jill!" the tone was more persistent. *"Make it up with Helen. She really has forgiven you for the cake. She'd practically forgotten about it until Louise dropped the plate and the pudding, then it all came back. Sometimes we're a bit much for those outside the clan until they get to know us, and even then we're still too much."*

Jill could hear her Nanna's wisdom, and knew she was right. It was just hard to accept defeat when you were six years old.

Seeing Red

Rose takes a peek in the make up mirror on the sunshade at her children. She's not really sneaking a look because they know she's watching. Once she would have been checking because it was too quiet; they're quiet now, but she checks to see that they are actually still there.

Zoe and Jacob occupy their own space. Each with their own Discmans the volume's loud enough to hear drifts of their musical choices of the moment.

Rose turns twisting her body slightly to be able to see them both through the gap between the passenger and driver seat and to make sure she's directly looking at them.

She raises her voice slightly. "It's a wonder you're not both deaf!" She wonders why she's bothered to say anything for she knows they haven't heard, but they read something in her look and turn the Discmans down just a little. Three minutes and the volume will be back up again.

She misses the trips they used to have. Games of I-spy and car cricket, although once Zoe turned ten she scoffed at the games. "Car cricket? How stupid is that?"

"Is it too easy for you?" Jacob had quipped. White cars one wicket, blue cars two and a Mack truck a hatrick.

Now the trips are made in silence. No squabbling in the back. No conversation between driver and front passenger.

“Are we there yet?” Rose says to no one.



This is the family holiday with one reluctant holidaymaker. Zoe, seventeen, thinks she's outgrown the family. *“It's just sooooo boring and if I stay home you'll save heaps on the kennel fees for Sasha and Jess.”* Rose finally convinced her that this may be the last holiday they have together, and it would be nice for them to have this time. Not that Rose ever intended to let her stay alone. The new boyfriend is nice enough, but Rose decides she won't help them into temptation. Maybe they've already been there; she doesn't really know. Zoe doesn't confide in her, and even if she did, Rose doesn't know if Zoe would tell her everything. Jacob's almost thirteen and still enthusiastic about getting away; still such a boy. He likes the surf and the thought of meeting up with the Stewarts, his holiday mates.

For the past three hours Rose has watched the landscape change from houses on top of each other to those with spaces between, and senses the change in the air. Not just the lack of pollution, but a stillness that holds its wholesomeness. The end of their journey is only four hours south of the city and they'll be there before midnight. With the kids now older, and two drivers, it's easier to travel at night and not lose half a day of their holidays. Zoe had objected to them leaving on a Friday night. She had plans. “Sorry love” her father soothed. “How about I take us out for lunch to make up for it?”

“That little seafood place?”

“Sure.”

“Thought you were vegetarian.” Jacob bowls one.

“Fish don’t count.” Zoe hits a four.

So here they are, ten thirty at night and a hundred kilometres to go.

“Want me to drive honey?”

“No. I’m fine.” Lord of the car, he likes to drive, but so does Rose. All she did was pack today and is fresher. “*Drowsy drivers die.*” plays over in her mind.

She looks across at the driver, and then back to the mirror looking directly back to the children. They’re both asleep. Jacob much too long for the small car. He mumbles in his sleep. Rose sees a little boy in overalls, pant legs rolled up: Cheeky grin. Zoe’s trendy in hipster jeans and crop top; party dresses and patent leather shoes long gone. Rose remembers rib ticklers and warnings from her mother of chills in the kidneys.

She looks back to Steve. How many miles, kilometres, hours have they travelled together in twenty years. She places her hand on his leg just above the knee. His attention stays on the road. Once he would have taken his eyes off the road, looked over at her and smiled. Once he would have put his hand over hers and moved it slightly higher.



Rose wakes with a start. She’s dozed for fifty kilometres.

“How far to go Mum?” Zoe’s awake too.

“Just fifty k’s love.”

“I’m starving. Can we stop for Maccas? Fillet of fish of course.”

“Didn’t you see the sign?” Steve joins the conversation.

“What sign?”

“The hamburger with a big cross through it and next fifty k’s underneath.”

Exasperation from Zoe. “Dad, you are *sooooo* daggy sometimes.” She gives the back of the driver’s seat a good-natured push with her foot.



They cross the bridge into town. Almost there. Rose looks for the turn off. The small sign that usually marks their way is obscured by a large billboard. New since the last trip? She can’t remember. She used to be so good at taking in the detail. Now the everyday has taken over. They turn before she has time to read what the spotlight billboard says. They drive the last kilometre. Finally here, or is that there?

Jacob jumps out of the car.

“Shotgun!” he yells. Rose raises an eyebrow in question.

“The bedroom,” he states in a tone that says she should know exactly what he means.

“No. I’m the eldest. I’ve got the bedroom,” comes from the backseat. Zoe expects her status as the older one to grant her privacy. She doesn’t hurry to get out.

“Everyone has their own bedroom this time. No-one has to sleep on the sofa bed. Just be grateful.” Rose wants to go on, “*Just be grateful for the holiday, for a roof over your head, for a bed that’s a*

bed”, but pulls herself up. “Just grab your things for tonight and we’ll get the rest in the morning.” She’s tired, but doesn’t know what from.

The rest. Two boogie boards, rollerblades, skateboard and board games, or as Zoe has christened them “bored games.” Rose doesn’t know why they packed all this stuff. At least she knows Jacob will use his boogie board. He’ll be up at seven and ready to go. Rose wonders if they lived nearer the beach whether he would actually get up earlier instead of rolling out of bed and into his school clothes just in time to grab his bag, head out the door and catch the bus. As for Zoe, Rose doesn’t know what she’ll want to do. She’d hoped they’d spend some time together shopping, coffeing, doing the mother-daughter thing she loved to do, and Zoe had once loved to do. But now time with Zoe’s limited, even though Rose is one of the few “stay at home” mums. For Rose, being home when the kids get home is important, although lately she wonders why she bothers. Many afternoons she finds herself alone. Jacob’s fleeting presence can hardly be counted as company. He announces his arrival with the sliding of his schoolbag from the back door to the corner of the family room, and Rose just sees a blur of blue and white as he whisks by the biscuit jar, removing its lid and a handful of biscuits in one motion. Around mushed biscuit she catches that he’s going to the skatepark to meet his mates. As for Zoe, the boyfriend and school occupy most of her time. Rose remembers herself at the same age, and is startled to think that by the time she was eighteen - just a year older than Zoe - she’d met Steve. They married in their early twenties, saved for their first home, then started their family. Life moved along according to some plan, or was it simply convention? Whatever. They’re here now.

“Zoe.” Rose tries to get her daughter’s attention. “Can you give me a hand with the beds?”

“Can’t Jacob?”

“Zoe. Please. We’re all tired and the sooner we get the beds made up the sooner we can all sleep.”

“But *why can’t Jacob?*” Rose’s tiredness drops to exhaustion. *Why can’t Zoe* just help her make the bloody beds! But she answers as civilly as she can muster at this hour of the morning. “Jacob’s helping Dad get the bags.”

Zoe trudges into the main bedroom. Mother and daughter stand at either side of the double bed and fit the sheet around the mattress. Rose remembers hospital corners, sheets, blankets and eiderdowns. Now they have doonas and fitted sheets. Rose still insists they don’t sleep underneath just the dooner.

“What would you like to do tomorrow?”

“Sleep,” Zoe answers glibly. Maybe she’s tired too.

“What about lunch? Just the two of us.”

“I’m having lunch with Dad. Remember?” Glibness becomes irritation and her mother’s lapse of memory.

“Oh, is that tomorrow? Sorry. I forgot.” Rose decides not to push.

“Mum. Can you wake me early?” It’s Jacob in satin boxer shorts. In them he looks even more boyish.

“We haven’t made your bed yet love.”

“No, we haven’t made your bed yet love,” Zoe mimics.

Jacob ignores her. “No probs. I’ll just sleep under the doona.”

“Want a pillowslip?” Rose can’t be bothered enforcing her sheet beneath the dooner rule.

“No. She’s cool. Night Mum.” He bends down to her and plants a kiss on her cheek.

Zoe picks up her linen. “I think I’ll go to bed too mum. See you in the morning.” Zoe puts a kiss on top of Jacob’s. Rose finishes making the bed on her own with thoughts of all of the kisses that have passed between them. Kisses to mend cuts and bruises; kisses to mend broken hearts when friends fell out; kisses to say you’re the best mum. Fewer kisses from them now, and even fewer hugs it seems. She’d read somewhere the number of hugs shared between parents and children decreased proportionately with the increasing age of the children. She wondered if the person who created the bumper sticker, “Have you hugged your child today?” had read the same statistics.

She goes outside and sits with Steve at the stylish outdoor setting. It’s replaced the sturdy plastic one that was there last summer.

“Should be fine tomorrow,” Steve observes. “I might take Jacob fishing after I come back from taking Zoe to lunch.”

“I think Jacob has plans to spend time with the Stewart boys. You’ll have trouble getting him away from them if they’re here. Better ask him what his plans are.”

“Will do.” He almost salutes her, but she doesn’t feel like the general anymore, marshalling them in their different directions. These days she feels more like the corporal with no authority. Steve leans down and kisses her on the cheek, in the same spot as the children have.

“I’m stuffed. Think I’ll go to bed.”

“Night.”

Rose listens to the stillness; its noiselessness has its own sound. She’s so accustomed to the sound of suburban traffic, she

doesn't hear it anymore. This is the sound she loves to hear. The sound she hangs out for all year. The lack of sound. And she can see the stars instead of the haze of lights. She stays with the sky for a few minutes then turns her gaze towards where she knows the shops are. She sees a light she doesn't recall from last summer, then remembers she *has* seen it before. It's the spotlight on the billboard she saw when they turned off. She finishes her coffee, goes inside and quietly slips into bed beside Steve.



Jacob's up before the phone alarm beeps. Rose is already awake and decides to join him.

“Thought you were going to sleep in Mum.”

“Had enough sleep. Thought I'd go for a walk.”

She cooks him breakfast – eggs on toast. He tears a piece of the toast and dips it into the egg yolk. She watches it disappear.

“Do you think they'll be up Mum?”

“Who?”

“The Stewarts. Michael and Jack.”

“Might be nice if you wait until eight. It *is* holidays.”

A knock. Two young men she doesn't recognise signal hello through the screen door. Rose guesses it's the Stewart boys. In any other setting she wouldn't have recognised them.

“Hey man.” Jacob greets them as one. “See ya Mum. Back for lunch.”

“Visitors this early?” Steve emerges from the bedroom wearing boardshorts. It's his holiday luxury away from the shirts,

ties and suits he normally wears. Rose looks at him. He's a bit more than the man she married, but still in pretty good shape. A little heavier around the middle perhaps, but his shoulders are taut and muscular. She still fancies him too, but doesn't seem to know how to tell him anymore.

“Just the Stewart boys. Coffee?”



By 11.30 Rose is alone. Steve and Zoe have left for their lunch. Jacob's returned just long enough to say he's having lunch with the Stewart boys, and he'll be back for dinner and ask what they're having. She decides to walk. Even though she knows where it ends, she's always loved the track through the ti-trees from the units to the highway. Ten minutes and she'll be at the beach, toes in the sand and then in the water. She flings her towel over her shoulder, puts on her sandals and sets off along the track. She's only walked a few minutes when a fence blocks her way. This definitely wasn't here last year. Maybe they're revegetating the area. She walks along the fence a little way looking for a gateway or new path, but instead finds the supports of a sign. She steps back. It's the billboard she spotted last night. Rose climbs through the fence and makes her way through the low scrub to the front of it. She walks backward until she can clearly see and read it. Large letters proclaim the opportunity to buy a piece of "Heavenly Waters." Forty-five townhouses to be built in this new "paradise".

“New paradise?” Rose feels her heartbeat increasing with the disbelief that anyone would want to change the paradise that

is already here. This is her paradise. Her once-a-year haven. She loves the scent of the ti-trees and gums, and the sight of the rosellas flashing blue and red through them. How could anyone think that *this* could be paradise without these? Houses so close to each other you'll be able to hear your neighbour snoring. She keeps a picture of this place in her mind from October each year just to keep her going. The billboard's a big enough blot on the landscape. She couldn't even envisage the place covered in pale brick. How did the development get this far? Surely someone had objected? She hasn't felt this outraged about anything since the pre-school tried to ban the children from taking cakes to school in their lunch boxes! She remembers how a group of them had sent in protest letters. "Home made lunches are our children's link to their homes. Home made lunches include home made cakes!!" It all seemed a bit silly now, but the push for political correctness in everything went too far sometimes. But she questioned her right to put her two cents worth in here. This is just her paradise for one week of the year.

She's lost the desire to walk to the beach now and heads back to the unit.



"Do you know they're going to build townhouses on that block where the turnoff is?" Rose is serving salad. Steve's at the barbecue in his "Feed the Man Meat" apron. Jacob's having dinner with the Stewarts. He returned just long enough to drop off his boogie board. Rose thinks it would be nice to eat together

– something they rarely do at home these days – but they have the rest of the week to do that.

“So, that’s what that sign was.” Steve turns the prawns. “Guess they need more holiday accommodation.”

“But surely not at the expense of that lovely reserve?”

“That’s progress.” Rose is disappointed Steve so easily dismisses the development. His lack of passion now evident in so many things. He puts the prawns onto the plates. There’s just the two of them for dinner. Zoe’s not hungry and has gone for a walk.

“How was lunch?”

“Great. I can’t believe how much Zoe’s grown up.”

“Really?” Rose can’t see the point in being angry with his not caring about the development, smiles and puts more salad on her plate.



Rose wakes to a quiet house. She hasn’t heard anyone leave. The radio clock clicks over to nine. She lies in bed and reads for a little while. It’s a holiday romance, and the only one she might have this vacation. Not that Steve isn’t affectionate, just not romantic in the way he used to be. It’s almost a sibling love, but she doesn’t need a brother. She didn’t sleep well, her dreams underscored with a song from the sixties about little boxes. She remembers them being made out of ticky-tacky and all looking the same. The houses in *her* dream are made of cardboard held together with blu tac.

In the kitchen there's a note. *"Left you to sleep. Zoe and I at the beach. Jacob at the Stewarts."*

Rose decides today she will go the beach. Her head's full of last night's dream and she needs to clear the images and melody of the song from her head. Needs to dive head first into the waves; to clear the indignation she feels about the development. She checks herself again. What right does she have to stop others enjoying what she enjoys, albeit just one week of the year?

She's in the bedroom changing into her one piece. She has the figure to wear a two piece, or even a bikini, but Zoe's remarks and disparaging tone from a year ago still smart.

"Mum. You can't wear THAT!! You're too old!!!!!" But she'd wanted to wear her two piece. Wanted to remind Steve that she was still attractive. She might be forty-two, but she knows she still looks good.

She begins the walk again knowing about the fence, the sign, the tacky tacky development, but is determined none of it is going to spoil her holiday.



The beach is crowded. Rose keeps an eye out for Steve and Zoe, but can't see them, so decides to enjoy the thought that she's actually there alone and answerable to no one. She's back in dreamland! She undoes the knot of her sarong and walks to the water's edge. The water's cold. She walks a little further and then dives in under a wave the way her mother taught her to. She

doesn't let the wave take her back in, but swims strongly under her own steam back to the beach.

Rose lies on her towel and feels the sun on her skin. She loves the strength of it, risk of skin cancer and all. It's like someone's plugged her into an energy source and its potency releases her from the fatigue she's been feeling. Sun dried, she wraps the sarong back around her and heads to the shops.

At least this is familiar. All of the same shops and cafés, but then she's struck by something different. It's not the tables and chairs on the street; they've had outdoor tables here for ages. It's the smell. It's the coffee. It smells of the city which, strangely, disappoints her a little. Well at least you can drink it without the background noise of traffic. Rose stops at the newsagent and buys the local paper, then takes a seat outside the "Caffe Espresso". She knows she'll only order a coffee but reads the menu anyway. She can't believe someone's found yet another way to spell cappuccino. A smiling waitress comes and takes her order. She's about the same age as Zoe and for a moment Rose wishes Zoe was here sipping coffee with her. She chides herself. *"You can't force these things. Just enjoy the peace."* She flicks through the paper and goes to the ads. In the announcements section all of the courses you can do to improve your life, especially if you've retired, (and there's a growing market here for that), and in the real estate section ads for the new development. The ads repeat the billboard message, only they're more seductive with an artist's impression of how the townhouses will look and pencil line people sipping drinks on the balcony.

"I bet they'll look nothing like that!" Rose closes the paper and sharply folds it to half the size.

"Sorry?" The waitress puts her coffee in front of her.

Rose is embarrassed. She hadn't meant to verbalise the thought. But she but continues anyway. Even if the girl isn't interested, she's probably local and should be!

"I was just looking at these new units, sorry townhouses they're building. They look very cosmopolitan."

"Yeh. I s'pose so." Rose hasn't expected a response from the girl. "Not everyone's happy about them. Some people even protested – signs and everything. Someone even put grafitti on the billboard there, but they just painted it over again. Can I get you anything else?"

"Really? No. No thanks. Nothing else." Rose knows exactly what she does need and finishes her coffee. She's walking past the surf shop and sees a red two-piece in the window. A bit more modest than a bikini, but daring enough. It can't hurt to try it on. Then she'll go to the paint store.



It's Thursday already and less than 48 hours before they'll leave and head back home. There's still a week before school goes back. Zoe's starting Year 11 and Jacob Year 8, and Rose will return to her routine for the next twelve months, but she has a feeling the next year might be different. She plans to put more energy into things and organise life more her away. Tonight they've managed to all be at home for dinner together including the Stewart boys.

Rose has on her new two-piece with her sarong now tied around her waist. She walks up behind Steve and circles his waist

– well almost manages to circle it – and places a kiss on his bare shoulder.

“I was thinking honey...When we get home I thought we might give a few things around the house a bit of a coat of paint. You know, use the week we have left productively. Maybe paint the pergola, and the outdoor setting’s looking shabby.”

“Mmm.” Steve turns the steak and Zoe’s vegie burger. “Good idea. Any thoughts on colours?”

“I bought a spray can of a deep red for the wrought iron setting, but just picked up a paint chart so we can decide on colours for outside.”

“Sounds good.” He turns, sees the new top and gives her a smile of approval. Rose isn’t sure whether the smile’s for the painting idea or her new costume, but doesn’t care.

They all sit around the table. They’ve only just relaxed into the holiday and it’s almost time to go home. Rose sits next to Steve and puts her hand just above his knee. He grabs it playfully and moves it slightly higher.



It’s almost 10. They’re waiting for Jacob. He’s just gone to say goodbye to the Stewart boys. Rose thinks they’ll have outgrown that name by next year.

Everything is packed, and Rose wonders again why they bothered to bring half the stuff they did. The weather stayed fine and they didn’t get bored enough to play the games. Jacob’s skateboard has been in the laundry the whole time. They drive

out onto the road, past the billboard and are waiting for a break in the traffic to turn onto the highway.

Rose looks back toward the reserve and the billboard. Steve catches her.

“Forget something?”

“No. Just want to see what I’m leaving behind.”

T-shirt Blues

That I had worn my t-shirt back to front two days and not discovered the mistake until I was halfway through each day perhaps should have concerned me. Maybe the mistakes were simply “senior moments” arriving earlier than expected, or maybe they were simply an outward manifestation of the back-to-frontedness that I was experiencing (although a true reflection of how things had been lately probably would have seen me attempting to wear them inside out as well as back to front!) Or was it topsy-turvy? Rollercoaster? Maybe it wasn’t me at all. Maybe it was just the world.

It had been a strange year, and it wasn’t even nearly over. Events close to me and world events had travelled down the satellite and into my living room. War. Bombings. A mother convicted of killing her own children. Three young people murdered in their family home in Brisbane. Senseless happenings? Actions of those perhaps deprived of something critical in their childhoods? But were there ever excuses for this type of behaviour? Were some of these people just bloody-minded, convinced the world owed them something, or were these simply the actions of those so driven with their own truths? Now there was even commuter rage, said to last half way through the day if you were a young man. I had no energy left for rage of

any kind, and no idea why so many questions bombarded my thinking. Too many questions on any day, and this *was* just any day of the week. Up. Shower. Dress. Breakfast. In the car. Work. Leave work. In the car. Supermarket. Home. Cook dinner. TV. Bed. *“It’s just another day.”* The Beatles got the experience right.

I tried to tell myself there had always been bad times. War. Depression. Man’s inhumanity - or just sheer indifference - to man. I tried to conjure Pollyanna and her glass prisms to bring rainbows into my world, but neither the little girl nor her rainbows would materialise. Pollyannaless, I headed home from work and decided that apart from picking up a few things, I needed to call into the supermarket tonight; be in the throng of the everyday where there was always the chance of bumping into someone who would put me back into a familiar environment with an everyday conversation about kids, friends and the things that do matter. But the supermarket aisles were devoid of anyone I knew, even inconsequentially. Fine. This was obviously meant to be a quick trip, but there were still the decisions. Decision One: Should I buy eggs from caged birds, the supermarket’s own brand, or free range and recommended by the RSPCA? I looked at the cardboard packaging, trying hard to send images of crammed chickens in steel sheds packing. I looked at the price. I eased my conscience for the plastic bag I was about to have my groceries packed in, (once again I had left the environmentally friendly calico bag at home), and picked up the free range eggs, even though I had a sneaking suspicion they probably came from the same hens! What was two dollars in the scheme of things? Decision Two: Should I clean the bath with a mix of bi-carb soda and water, or the gel that clings to everything and risk

eternal damnation for clogging up the waterways? In went the gel, my conscience only slightly eased because I use a no phosphorous washing powder. Next. Which cereal? Yes, I know muesli is good for me, but just this once I didn't want to think about my internal workings and I opted for the snap, crackle and pop of my childhood. Decision Four: White bread? Grain bread? Rye? Too hard, so the one nearest to me went into the basket. I couldn't face any other decisions and headed to the checkout with my four items. The misnamed "Express Lane" was banked up back to aisle four, and every other checkout had queues so long that you couldn't tell who was at which checkout, nor who was trying to exit an aisle before entering the next one. It was almost my turn at the register when I remembered I'd forgotten the milk, cat food and, I was sure, at least five other things (the weekly list I made was at home on the kitchen bench with the calico shopping bag). There was no snap, crackle and pop without milk, so I left the queue, made my way to the fridge section, and there I found Virginia.



At first I wasn't even sure if it *was* Virginia. She was standing there, no children in tow, and the fatigued look she wore when I saw her last was absent. She had also swapped her doctor's wife denim skirt, Liberty blouse, sensible shoes and pearls for a flowing peasant skirt, off the shoulder blouse and sandals. Her bobbed dark hair had grown long and was just held in place in a loose ponytail. Her dress and demeanour announced

a new freedom. As she came toward me I realised I had been staring at her. I broke my trance. “Virginia?”

If her new attire surprised me, her response to my barely there greeting really startled me. She hugged me, placed a kiss on my cheek, then stepped back and began her own inspection.

“Helen. How good to see you. How are you?”

‘Intrigued’ I wanted to reply, but “Fine” was all that left my lips.

“It must be.....how long? How have you been managing? I heard about your husband. I’m so sorry.”

I answered her questions in order.

“Just on a year. All right. Thank you. And how are things with you and John and the children?”

“John and I aren’t together now, but the kids are fine,” she announced simply.

If I was perplexed by life’s events before meeting Virginia, now I was just plain surprised, although I really shouldn’t have been. I had had this same conversation at least half a dozen times in the last few months. Couples that on the surface were weathering the relationship storms around them, with no forecast of conditions strong enough to force them from each other. But who knew? Sometimes the undercurrent had been there for a long time. They called it “*drifting apart*”, but all that confirmed was that people were navigating separate craft. We continued with the script.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I hadn’t heard.”

“Please don’t be .”

“The children? Are they with you?”

“Yes. Mostly.”

“How old are they now?”

“Jessica’s thirteen and Michael’s ten.”

“How are they handling things?”

We continued the conversation until all of the lines were delivered.

I had, as always, one more question I wanted to ask; actually there were several. Why? What had changed? Was there anyone else involved? The break up was supposed to be more complicated if there was, but I didn’t know. All I knew was that from the moment of my sudden forced renewed single status, life had had little pattern. I was lonely, and sometimes just beginning the day was difficult. Part of me was angry with these women I met who were walking away from marriages and relationships looking for whatever it was that was missing. They still had their men. I chastised myself. I didn’t live in their lives. Glass prisms began to drop around me. I would be grateful for the love I had known.

I guessed Virginia’s reasons were the same as those now documented ad-nauseum in magazines, mini-series and movies. Not so much boredom with their partners, but a frustration at handling things alone. Popular culture told them they could have “everything.” Reality showed them that “everything” wasn’t all it was cracked up to be, and achieving it was like walking on eggshells. But if they hadn’t trodden so lightly would their presence have been more apparent, so that when they voiced their frustration at their load at hearth and home they were heard? All that tiptoeing might lead partners and children to believe that fairies magically and noiselessly cared, cleaned and cooked for them. Better to crow noisily like the rooster, she thought. What use was there anyway for an eggshell once the chicken had hatched?

While talking, Virginia and I had moved from dairy, along the meat section, back toward the fruit and veg and right away from the subject of her separation to safer ground of who we had and hadn't seen for a while, and what her kids were up to.

"Jessica's in high school?" Not having children of my own, I was guessing just a bit as to where sholastically Jessica might be up to, and too I hadn't really been paying attention when Virginia had told me the children's ages. I was still digesting the news that she and John were separated.

"Yes. Loving it. She's a happy kid. Crazy about boys and clothes like we were at that age." Virginia put chillis into a plastic bag and added the bag to the other things in her trolley.

Although Virginia and I weren't close friends, (I was still trying to fathom the greeting she had given me), I sensed that given an opportunity without the time constraints of the grocery list, we might become good friends. And I didn't want that relationship to pry into her life, but to explore the connection that was evolving today from a chance meeting in the glare of the supermarket lights.

I was about to suggest we meet for lunch when a young corporate-attired woman approached us. She was slim and immaculately made up. Other women looked at her. Some admiringly, but most wondering how she had the gall to look this good at this end of the day. She acknowledged me with a smile and then moved closer to Virginia. The woman, who I guessed was in her thirties or thereabouts, placed an arm around Virginia's waist and kissed her lightly on the mouth.

"Helen. This is my partner Eloise. Eloise this is Helen."

So, I had the answer to one of my questions, but I was going to go home with a non-environmentally friendly bag full of others!

The Cleaning Gene

Three in the morning. Winter. Frost on the windows. Outside it's black with no moon to light the valley below the house. The only light on is in the kitchen. Sarah sashes the mop in the bucket. Not the plastic sort with the slotted cone to twist the water out of the flat fibres of fabric that now pass for a mop. The bucket is solid steel with a foot lever and rollers. Sarah presses down hard on the lever and draws the stringy mop up through the rollers the way her grandmother did as she kept spotless the corridors of the girls' school she worked in. A cleaner proud of the service she offered: never servile, washing away the scuff marks, daily dirt and girls' secrets from the hallways. Throwing it all out with the dirty water.



Sarah had been dreaming. A red hot air balloon rose from the valley. She was watching through binoculars from the kitchen

window. She had been looking at the waterfall cascading down the escarpment after the heavy rain when the balloon's movement caught her eye. Her mother is in the balloon. Sarah can only see her upper body. She's wearing a 1950's style cotton dress. Pale pink with a cross over bodice and capped sleeves. Her mother is tanned and healthy just like she is in the photos Sarah has. Honey blonde hair to her shoulders. An open smile.

The balloon's tethered, but only loosely. Sarah's eye goes back to the balloon and follows the length of the rope. It's tied to something behind a large pine. No, not something; someone is holding it. A figure comes from behind the tree. Sarah can't tell if it's male or female, but the figure is holding the rope slack, like a skipping rope held between two children in a playground. Even through the binoculars she can't make out who the figure is. Sarah focuses again, but as she does, the figure drops the rope and the balloon begins to rise and drift. Her mother begins to wave. Not frantically. Not even a wave goodbye. Just the slightest shifting of the hand. It's almost regal.



Sarah had woken, pulled her doona tight around her, and tried to return to sleep. She had not slept well for almost a week now. This was the third time the balloon dream had come to her. She was too scared to try to read meaning into it. She shook herself. It was only a dream.



It was impossible to sleep. She got up and made herself a cup of tea in the teapot her grandmother had used each day at the girls' school. As the tea brewed she cradled the small brown pot. She saw her grandmother in the cleaners' tearoom. Sarah had visited her once or twice at the school, and remembered the pretty pinnies her grandmother wore. Remembered the noisy girls in box pleat uniforms, blazers and straw boaters, running through the hallways. Her grandmother would simply give them a disapproving look and they would slow to a more ladylike pace until they were out of sight and then they would run again. Sarah poured herself a cup of tea, and held the cup fast, letting its warmth flow through her hands. As she picked the cup up, still in both hands, a shiver ran through her. The cup dropped to the table and rolled to the floor, spilling its chamomile brew. It did not break.

The spill was small enough to clean up with a dishcloth, but Sarah thought she might as well give the kitchen floor a good clean, (even though she had only mopped it a few days ago). She brought the bucket to the kitchen and filled it with the jug. It was far too heavy to lift into the laundry sink.



Sarah begins to wash where the tea spilled. She wonders if along with her eye colour and child bearing hips she's inherited the cleaning gene. Stronger perhaps in her grandmother's and mother's day. Maybe no need for it now, yet the carpets still get dirty and the surfaces dusty. Maybe the gene is in her and not so much recessive as reclusive, coaxed out only in times of stress.

Sarah has always cleaned when stressed. She remembers sweeping out the debris from a broken relationship. Turfing out its trappings – cards, letters, photos – not concerned at any regret over her thoroughness. She even threw out clothes she had worn when she was with him. They didn't really belong to her. He had cluttered her life with his thoughts and opinions, all in the name of improving her mind.

Since her mother's cancer had been diagnosed her house hadn't been spotlessly clean, but cleaner than usual. In the days between test results, the little silver she owned had shone, and even the furniture was vacuumed. The walnut finish on the piano buffed until her reflection was clear in it.

A song from the radio reminds Sarah that tomorrow, no today, she has to drive down the highway and to the village to see her mother. They call it a village, but it's really just part of the city now. The sprawl of the suburbs has surrounded the village, wrapped its tentacles around its ruralness, and then strangled it out until only brick veneer remains.

She can't leave too early. The fog on the mountain highway is thicker than her grandmother's pea soup at this time of year. Her dreams have made her anxious. She knows the reality, but can't accept it. She knows her mother is going to die; even that her mother is ready to go. The last visit, just a few days ago, she sensed the letting go. Her mother had said goodbye to everyone, putting *her* house in order. But its orderliness would leave Sarah's house in disarray. No one to chip her about the way she kept house or going out without a coat into a winter's evening. "Your mother's cold. Put your jacket on love," her father said. She shivers again, pulling her old cardigan closer around her shoulders. Sarah tries to shake the morbid thoughts. It's for the

best, she tells herself. Her mother is now too sick to stay. She has prayed for her mother to get well; now she prays for a quiet release. There has been enough pain.



Sarah's thoughts go around. Round and around in circles; round and around as she mops the same spot on the floor. She doesn't want her mother to die. She wants her here, and well. She wants coffee. Girltalk on the phone. To know exactly what her extraordinarily large extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins and all of their offspring are up to. She wants her mother to *not* be dying of cancer. She's almost ashamed to admit it, but when her mother was diagnosed she thought about what that meant for her, Sarah. Jumbled statistics and information. One in five - a family history shortens the odds. She grasped onto the hope of new discoveries with even though a cure might be years away. A gene for each cancer. She could be tested. But what would she find? Might she just discover a new fear to take through her days? Sarah didn't want to live with more fear. She knew these were selfish thoughts. She swept them away and tried only to think of her mother and what it meant for her. What did her mother feel? Was she scared? Sarah never heard her curse the cannibal cells. Never heard her curse the unfairness of it all. Never heard her say "*why me?*" But did her mother say these words as she polished all of the souvenir spoons in the spoon rack from around the globe? Did she yell as she vacuumed the carpet with such intensity it was almost sucked up with any dust that might have dared to be there, knowing no one could hear?

Sarah doesn't know, and suddenly realises there is *so* much about her mother she doesn't know.

Sarah decides to head off now. It's almost four o'clock and she can leave while the sky's clear and there's no sign of fog descending. She changes in front of the slow wood heater, then throws some clothes straight off the timber clothes horse and into a bag. Everything else she needs is in her bag. She's had it permanently packed for the past fortnight like a mother-to-be, waiting expectantly, but not for a new life. Sarah's scared; she's never seen anyone die. She curses the culture that shuts death away, making those who have never seen it fearful, rather than an acceptance that it is the natural way of things.



She drives out from the farm and down the narrow road to the main highway. Sarah travels through the towns of the Great Western Highway, a feat of pioneer engineering. Only a few lights show in the houses on the way. She navigates Lapstone Hill and drives to the junction that takes her to the road to the village.

It's a section of a journey from her childhood travelled by her family in a variety of cars. They drove over the mountains and back again to visit family. Sarah only found out after they moved almost a thousand miles away why they were named The Blue Mountains. Before she knew their colour was a trick of nature, she just thought they were sad. They travelled this road then along Cowpasture Road to their suburb and its sheep streets:

Corriedale, Shropshire, Leicester and Border. Street signs the only reminder now of its former pastoral inhabitants.

Lost in that other journey, Sarah almost misses the final turn. Images play through her mind frame by frame. She sees her mother in her every role: daughter, sister, wife, mother, carer, friend, confidante, antagonist and grandmother. She sees the nurse, midwife and now the patient. But did she ever really see her?

Sarah rewinds the footage in her mind, stops it and begins at her own earliest memory and forwards it through her own life. Her mother is teaching her the practical things in life – to cook, to iron, to knit, to sew. She is teaching her to nurture – how to heal with hugs and kisses. Her mother teaches her about faith, hope and courage. Sarah prays she will never need the courage her mother has. She has come to the present and the final frame. The hot air balloon drifts out of view.