

The Naked Breast

We share 'stories' today. It is a by word that has taken on a new sophistication, the buzzword that is supposed to guarantee empathy. In fact it is considered a gift that we have access to the stories that come to us through moving images, art, song, brief tweets, solicited and unsolicited news, friends and vague acquaintances that tick the friend box on our Facebook feed and those whom we would like to silence. But there is nothing to guarantee the interpretations of the audience that grows and grows in an ever-expanding pool.

Are stories a power that we have only recently discovered or have they been lingering since the days of fairytales and seaman's tales? Is there some hidden power in stories that convince when plain cold facts would be ignored? Oral stories were good enough for thousands of years to hold societies in place, to teach little children to avoid the billabong and grown men to avoid the siren's call.

One thing makes two things true – the disaster that is for one a calamity, is for another the beginning. Both realities are true. History reports a different story dependent on which side the line is drawn. How many nations have been built on the calamity of the past: And how many of we simple folk living what we hope will be our simple lives, have taken new twists and new directions because of the moments that bring us to our knees in prayer or to our feet, boxing gloves ready at the defence? What stories will we report when the battle is over and the gloves are off and we sit safely in the corner, the referee's whistle blown and the roar of the crowd hushed. Do we have to be the victor? Is it all about the prize? It is after all dependent on your point of view.

I can't whisper in every ear, you can't all join me around a cozy fire or on the terrace on a warm mid-summer's night. I can't offer you glass of wine and a nibble or two so there is no option, but to tell you my story through the written word. I don't know what sort of an audience you will be. Maybe you are only motivated to plod through the pages if there is a promise of a mystery to be solved or maybe a sex scene that will make your juices rise. Maybe you are hoping for love that makes everything right or some inspiring story of self-sacrifice that makes human behavior all worthwhile or simply just a reflection of your own experiences. A validation that someone else shares the same page!

No doubt you will view my story through your personal bias, but I offer no apology for mine. Sure we make our choices along the way and sometimes everything turns out just fine, but there is always the choice that takes you where you never hoped to go. That backs you into corners or surprises because the morality constructed by the world of your childhood couldn't exist without the set of rules that you believe makes everything functional. I can't imagine teaching a child to steal, but a thief can. I can't imagine teaching a child violence, but people do. I wouldn't bear my breast without a suckling child in public, but people do, and in fact they celebrate the response they receive.

There is no point in starting at the beginning of my life except to say that it was remarkably smooth. There was no family violence or lack of love from my parents. I was blessed in fact. I see that clearly now as I am exposed to the stories of others who were abused through threats, violence or neglect. I was never without a meal, academic support or encouragement for my achievements, or even exposed to all the ugliness that mars and stunts the world. I see now as the world moves around me how lucky I was. I can take my childhood as the great gift it was, but it leaves me now with an understanding that my parents did not prepare me for anything less than the fairytale ending. I don't see them as responsible for any neglect, but perhaps it is true that we lived in a time and place when news of the outside was restricted to limited broadcasts, saccharine sweet television and the view of a dominant political voice.

We all, of course, carry those little knocks and bruises that damage our expectations. Knocks that tarnish a little of the shine on things. I defy anyone to get through adolescence without angst, unless of course you are hindered by an ego that leaves you soaring above reality. One of my brothers who was plagued by teenage acne once swore to join the priesthood if my youngest sister, who sailed through her teenage years with a glowing complexion, could at least be cursed with one blemish.

All that business of keeping your virginity, of fitting in, of the belief that you are the ugly duckling no matter what reasoning your parents applied to appease your anxiety. Speaking to my grandchildren I get the distinct impression that none of that has actually changed. What about all those times when no boy was keen enough to ask you out on a date? I hate the word "date". It is like some notation on a calendar. It was an American term when I was a girl and I have always been both suspicious of it and in awe of its use. It was a time when only men were permitted the privilege of calling the shots. Feminism hadn't even started to raise its head, and really we had no concept that it ever would. They have dating sites now devoted to the notion that a "date" can be a pastime or the means to an end. I do think the old fashioned dances worked well as a process though, boys met girls and soon enough they were all paired off and headed for the altar. And we all actually believed that the default settings meant that we were headed to life of happy ever afterwards.

I guess you have to be old enough to have a little giggle at yourself for ever believing that magazines and literature had all the answers, that you were the only person in the history of mankind that could never be desired, that couldn't quite fit all the criteria for desirability. Maybe that is just a personal experience and that adolescent angst didn't cripple everybody. I have to concede that my parents did a good job because the teenage years only remain as a statement of the past.

There was however one thing that my parents left me with that turned out to be untrue. You get back what you put in. That is really the point of the matter. Who said that in any universe you actually deserve to get anything back? Is there such

a thing as what you deserve and what you don't? It's okay when we all cheer because the villain gets his just desserts, but what if you are simply denied recognition of your commitment and the world simply goes on turning, ignoring your best efforts. I guess that's the lesson. What I thought I was putting in was actually only viewed by him through his own personal lens. If he were to tell his story there is no doubt you would be swayed by his bias, by his arguments, by the truth as he saw it.

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Chapter 1

What power lies in a story? Does only oral history have power? If you write it down does the story lose its power or gain traction? Two things are true – that a disaster is for one a calamity and for another a beginning. Both realities are true. History affects different parties in different ways. You can't all join me around a cozy fireplace or on the terrace on a midsummers night, so there is no option but to tell you my story through the written word.

There was no view of a future in a cyber world when it was my time to confront my sixtieth birthday. In 1998 we ordinary folk were still blissfully unaware that the Y2K apocalypse was lurking maliciously just around the corner. The millennium was an abstract thought that caught the imagination of a crowd much younger than I, although even they would have found it hard to visualize a future when you could tie yourself to any world you chose through a device in your pocket. We had graduated to the CD to deliver our entertainment and the pitfalls of gender binary were really only part of a new debate. There was no strong voice to raise the alarm about the world over global warming, so there was no sense of pressure that each action you chose might lead to the end of the earth and the sea wasn't thick with plastic and mile after mile of bleached coral reefs.

How would Pol Pot tell his story? After all that torture and destruction he passed away of natural causes. You can hide out in a jungle for years, but there is still a story, a reason why things happen. I don't know if the reason always provides a satisfactory excuse and I guess I will always struggle with that. Six decades behind me that were all so real, so much part of the whole, each so all encompassing at the time, but finally I had reached an age where there was no guarantee about how many decades were ahead of me. My relatives all seemed to call it quits in their early seventies and they all made their exit before infirmities took control. We're packing the nursing homes full to the rafters, now that the medical profession has come up with enough pills and procedures to slow down the dying process, but I don't know that it makes old age any easier.

My mother and father were long gone. There were no visits to a nursing home or daily calls to an aging parent. In fact my father was gone long before the Cold War finished. Kids today only learn about the Cold War if they do history at school although the Great War and World War 11 are alive in our consciousness through a growing interest in Anzac Day. I can't remember Anzac Day attracting a crowd when I was young; it was a serious business reserved for diggers and their mates. There were no live telecasts and certainly no pop bands to attract the crowds. A whole different set of problems to occupy the world.

I don't know if you have ever seen the Disney version of *Pinocchio*. It was made before the war when I was a child, but I didn't actually see it until I was twelve. I had a wooden replica of the character, which had hung in my bedroom from the time I was just a wee thing in my bassinet and it remained there as my room

filled with my three younger sisters. My parents converted the verandah into a bedroom when the first of my brothers was born and Pinocchio moved in with him. My youngest brother wasn't born until I was fifteen, but even he got to watch the little marionette dangling on his strings. No one actually ever released the puppet from his internment; he was strictly for looking at because my father couldn't bear the thought of the strings in the rough hands of children. Apparently my father's mother had sent the little wooden chap all the way from Italy when I was born, which was why my father considered the puppet such a treasure.

My father's attachment to Pinocchio was reaffirmed when he discovered that the movie interpretation was to be aired at our local cinema. He had read the story as a child and although Carlo Collodi wrote a rather dark tale of the perils of disobedience and hedonism, my father always claimed that only a dark tale could lead to any understanding. At the age of twelve I believed that I had grown out of fairytales, my father however rejected that notion and insisted that I would enjoy the film. He was unable to attend personally, but as his eldest child he believed that it was nothing less than my duty to take my little sisters and brothers.

It was in the days before television and the Saturday matinee was a highlight in any child's week. Even if the film wasn't particularly entertaining there was still the lure of an ice cream at interval. If you attended the matinee regularly you could keep up to date with the serial, however my parents felt the cost of the entry ticket made too big a hole in their budget and so my trips to the movies were limited. To me, who was really moving towards the break from childhood, it seemed a pity to waste a movie ticket on an animated film, not that there was anything really on offer for someone my age as I was only just on the cusp of adolescence.

My father sent us all in to town issuing warnings to my little brother, who was a rather lively little fellow, about obeying any orders that I would deliver. It was his first visit to a cinema so he was very excited. We sat in the canvas seats directly under the screen and stood dutifully when *God Save The Queen* was played. My father need not have worried about any misbehaviour because the screen took over, mesmerizing one six-year-old boy. He really was a movie buff throughout his life and I guess he owes that to Disney. I have to admit that I succumbed to the music, the spectacle and the endearing characters and enjoyed each moment.

However I was surprised to learn that the villains weren't punished, which didn't fit in with my concept of justice. I was a too old to look for stars to wish upon, my little brother on the other hand made it a part of his bedtime routine until he was several years older and reality was harder to avoid. Disney whitewashed the story there is no doubt about that, but a nose that grows and grows with each lie seems a fitting punishment. I can abide a white lie especially if told to avoid offence. A lie that separates you from the truth is a different matter all together. I would have to say that honesty is a value I treasure.

I'm not much of a moviegoer I much prefer to immerse myself in a book where I can create my own images. Maybe that's why I remember the occasions of films I have seen. Sex was censored in my youth. Film producers were obliged by law to separate lovers in the marital bedroom with single beds and fade outs at the first hint of anything beyond the romantic kiss. You certainly couldn't turn on your television and have sex delivered right into your lounge room. I still find all that steamy energy awkward if I stumble across a sex scene while sharing the couch with my children or a visiting friend. I don't recall what decade sex took over the telly. My children missed the exposure when they were young. I suppose they dealt with it with their own children. I hate the thought that my grandchildren were watching pornography in their bedrooms on their PCs under the pretence of doing their homework

I do remember taking my mother to see *Ryan's Daughter* way back in early 70s. The film had a lot of press at the time and my mother, who loved the cinema, was keen to see the movie with its promise of an Irish backdrop. We somehow missed the warnings about the sex scene, which I found rather confronting because of my mother's presence. The plot involves an affair with a handsome officer and the hapless Rosy Ryan who is married to a sexually repressed schoolteacher who is unable to expose his naked body despite his wife's yearning for sexual intimacy. Nobody would be removing their gear back in a Doris Day movie, at the most there might be a flimsy nightie to suggest the action. Clearly one had to accept that the times for better or worse had moved on. As we left the dark theatre my mother surprised me with her observation. "Thank god your father was a man who wasn't too shy to take off his shirt."

I had been through all that business of exposing myself on the labour table to gloved strangers at the ready to deliver my babies. I once knew a woman who proudly proclaimed that her husband had never seen her naked. It seemed incredible especially as they were the parents of three children. Mind you in my day husbands didn't attend the birth. A lifetime hiding under your clothes seems like a life sentence and I am glad I was never burdened with such a strange guilt. However I do recall that standing naked in front of my husband wasn't easy at first. It took a little time for me to accept that I wasn't going to be rejected. Maybe if I had been part of this modern idea of sexting I wouldn't have been so shy, but I am not part of that young generation, so I don't know if they are all full of confidence as they send off images of their vaginas into a cloud somewhere.

In the year I turned sixty a Liberal Government held the reins. There wasn't much appetite to exchange our ties with the past for an unsure future. There was a lot of debate about devaluing the flag that had seen us through two world wars and of course you couldn't pick up a women's magazine without a front-page tribute to the royal family. A referendum to convert Australia into a republic was suggested. The following year when we all headed off to the polling booths to make our decision clear, Australians voted against the concept of a president. Populism was still to be invented or at least the idea, the naive belief that a leader has only the concerns of all ordinary people at heart. There was no Donald Trump upon the stage. We can't put all the upheaval down to a verbal blunder. Lies are lies and yet millions believe Trump's story at the expense of

those who are suppressed by his lack of concern for those who don't fit his agenda .You might be a supporter and disagree with my diagnosis, but I can't get past the concept of Fake news! What an invention. I don't know how the Blue Fairy would respond to POTUS. I will only tell you my story in the belief that mine is a factual report.

I don't think I will ever be up to tweeting, I don't really care to know everyone else's opinion on everything that goes on in the universe. In fact I don't know that I trust any communication without the advantage of a face-to-face discussion. I still do my banking with the nice girl down at my local shopping centre, she is able to answer any queries without me having to find the information on a web site. My children assure me that I am missing out on the convenience of the Internet and maybe they are right. Some octogenarians might be up to idea of taking the whole age of technology on board, personally I find it all rather daunting. Although I can see some of the advantages of being a digital native, I don't know that the laws are keeping up with all the technology.

In the past the media didn't intrude into our lives as much as it does now, but on the other hand the intrusions have given me cause for reflection. My knees packed it in about fifteen years back, maybe it was the physical jolt that was necessary to slow me down to a manageable pace. It leaves me with a lot of time on my couch. I accept any pains and creaks as a part of old age and I have become used to assessing a situation and deciding that it is no longer for me. I can't say that I feel defeated by life at all. At least the thinking part of me still works and it has been the feed from the media, which has kept me up to date. I don't bother with the newspaper anymore. I rely on my telly. I wonder if in the future 'front page news' is a term that will have to be explained to the young. While Fake news hadn't been invented in 1998 it probably existed, it is just that we were a more trusting society. It is a bit off putting when age catches you up, however there is the consolation of having plenty of time for reflection.

I have friends who choose to ignore the world outside their doors and many of them who refuse to accept that there was ever a better time than the time of their youth. "Back in those days" is the way they start any conversation. I'm sure my parent's generation would have expressed the same sentiment and their parents before them, and the mob before that, all the way back to the person who lit the first fire in some cave somewhere. I know I am guilty of clinging to the past myself sometimes, but really you can't look at the now without the context of the past.

Mind you despite all that reflection, there are a lot of issues that have not been resolved in my lifetime, and instead new ones sometimes seem to be sprouting like weeds in all the places we don't want them to grow. At least nobody has mentioned the scourge of Communism for years. I wonder if terrorism will one day be part of some past history. One thing's for sure, we are stuck with our personal relationships, they informed so much of me.

Chapter 2

My husband is a short stocky man who has lived a life of proving himself, of standing up with the big guys. Funny, that I should label him still as my husband, as if that time still exists. He was part of the great bulk of my life I suppose and that is hard to forget. He once came home with a black eye, which he offered sheepishly for my inspection. I was surprised that he hadn't offered the proof of his encounter with his usual brazen swagger. However, he recovered from his initial coyness with a textbook remark,

"Wait 'ill I see 'im next time."

My response after a pregnant pause, "So you are going to back up for another dose?" silenced him. It's emblematic how you can recall the exact words that were uttered a whole lifetime ago. So much else is lost and just the general sense of things remain. I didn't challenge him too often; it was part of the unspoken agreement that he was the boss. He knew that I knew how much he liked to push things. Always prodding at the boundaries, which was a trait that initially attracted me. Made him seem a real man at the time. Not that I came from a family that ever considered landing a punch. It was more that my family never felt compelled to defend themselves at the expense of inflaming their tormentor. Diplomacy had always served them well and they prided themselves on that. I guess it all depends on what your parents taught you. But for some reason my response really hit home, and he uttered not a word in self-defense.

My admiration for his confidence was in the time when the stars were glittering in the dazzle and haze of falling in love. At the time I had laboured under some naïve notion that his strength would be my protection, but that was in the needy and fizzy early years, before the old times of sand had done what is always threatened, and enough years of inspecting the other under the microscope had illuminated all the nasties invading the petri dish. I know that he sensed that I was privy to the same microscopic view, no matter how much he wished it wasn't true, and by the time our children filled our house he had an understanding that I had grown a little more discerning. You have to pick up something about the other in the journey. By the time he presented with his shiner in my kitchen I had learnt that pig headed assertion, more often than not, did not serve him well.

I met him at a dance. It was quite the way to meet your life partner in those days. It wasn't the sort of country-dance where mothers and aunts hovered in the background with plates of food for supper. Rock n Roll had ushered out the big bands of my mother's era and kept the older generations from the dance floor. I spent my Saturday afternoon with my hair in rollers and if I had been lucky enough for mother to thread up the sewing machine, I would have a dress to hem. It was a long way around the base of those enormous skirts, but my mother insisted that a hand-hemmed skirt was a sign of quality. There were no Asian factories churning out mountains of clothes on their well-oiled machines.

The time spent with needle and thread and decisions about buttons and trims is probably why I remember what I was wearing the night I met Owen. I always think of that song from the musical *Gigi* in which Maurice Chevalier recalls the outfit his lover wore when they first met and Hermione Gingold playing the lover contradicts the memory. I don't suppose too many readers recall the number now, but it made an impression on me. I never quite had the courage to ask Owen if he could recall what I wore on that fateful evening because I am quiet sure he would consider it of no significance. Isn't it strange that we look at old images of fashions from the past and we laugh, but at the time you remember feeling right up to date in your outfit. I guess women felt the same in their bustles. I am glad that we don't have to wear gloves and hats to church any more although I don't actually go too often these days. Firstly there is the problem that I have to organize a lift, which can be done, but really some of the mystique has been knocked out of me lately.

The dance was a public affair. My girlfriends and I attended faithfully every Saturday night. It was no nightclub, there was no bar and girls perched on bar stools drinking their shots. A milk bar at the entrance served iced drinks that they drew from a deep well in their countertop if you worked up the need for a drink. A mountain of dirty glasses usually swamped the sweaty dish pig taunted by the boss who would bark orders to hurry up if the movie house next door was about to release its patrons for interval. I had first been allowed to attend on my seventeenth birthday, and I considered it essential to my social life. Mainly there were lots of single folk at the dance hoping to meet the boy or girl of their dreams, although there was a small minority of couples that came simply because they loved to dance. No official competitions existed to attract a competitive crowd, but there was always a couple or two, who had clearly practised all week, unconcerned by the admiration of a crowd.

Many a marriage can be attributed to those dances, and certainly many a pregnancy inspired by the energy of the evening. I was never a champion dancer myself, although I could keep up with the crowd, and I loved the music that set us apart from my parents' generation. My father loved the deep bass baritones of Paul Robeson, and as much as I must admit to seeing his charm, it was hardly the sort of music for rock 'n' roll.

The dance hall was a large enough space to allow a pretty big crowd, which clustered into groups on the periphery of the dancing couples. There were no drugs. No psychedelic swirling lights, just a mirrored ball hung from the ceiling that I thought was the epitome of sophistication. There was a stage and sometimes we were lucky enough to have a really good band that performed the cover numbers that we played on our records. Television hadn't delivered *Bandstand*, it was still a couple of years off, so there wasn't really a model for our expectations. We taught each other any new moves and by the time I met Owen I was nearly nineteen and considered myself up to date with my peers.

Young folk came from the surrounding suburbs so there were always groups of boys and girls that you had never met. The leather jacket crowd seemed to stick to its own kind. They were a pretty small contingent so they didn't make much

impact on the scene. They probably interrupted the town copper's chats with the ticket seller, but actually they always arrived with their own girls and spent the night dancing before they roared off on their bikes at the end of the night. I've never been on a motorbike so I can only imagine the attraction to all that leather and noisy bike engines. The thought of coming off the bike at high speed has always put me off.

There were faces that had become familiar because they turned up every Saturday night. There were the blokes that never seemed to stick to the one girl and the nerdy types that hung in the shadows with a mate or two, but never plucked up the courage to actually ask a girl to dance. There were girls who were never asked and sat like the traditional wallflowers on the long forms that bordered the hall. The wallflower group always looked like certain suicide to me. Usually I scored one or two dances in an evening, so that there was something to discuss with my girlfriends on our journey home on the bus. The reality was that none of the boys really appealed to me. That physical attraction simply wasn't there. My girlfriend Betty had an older brother who danced with all of us for the pure love of dancing. Although he was a nice bloke I could only ever think of him as Betty's brother. Apparently some ten years later he moved in with a partner of the same sex. It makes sense now; all that time he spent hanging out with the girls. While I enjoyed the dancing, and all the images cast up in my imagination by the beat and the lyrics, really my one hope was that one star struck night I would meet Mr. Right.

I suppose the boys were really young men. In those days a boy would leave school at fourteen and be through his apprenticeship by the time he was eighteen. It had only been just over a decade since boys their own age were sent off to war. Most of them would be married by the time they were twenty-three. They would have thought of themselves as blokes not boys. Nevertheless they certainly didn't sail through those years without a little Dutch courage. Usually they turned up at the dance with enough grog on board to get them through the evening unless they were part of the nerdy group. A hip flask was a very useful item. There were no objections to the cigarette smoke that filled the hall, and there were troughs supplied to collect the butts. I remember when an ashtray was a fairly standard wedding gift, before all smokers were banished to the land of the outcasts.

The floor was pumping when I first noticed him. He was right up the back of the hall near the entrance. He came in with a mate who was clearly staggering, but Owen was busy getting into his suit jacket as he smoothed back his hair. Clearly there had been a fight and he had brushed it off as the business for outside in the alley. He presented as a get up and get on with it sort of guy. Fighting was rather acceptable. The town copper paid no attention if the blokes disappeared out into the night to settle some disagreement down the side alley. Fights very rarely started inside the hall so the copper on duty usually had an easy night. There was no One Punch law to consider. Movie audiences applauded Audie Murphy who made it to Hollywood on the strength of his war medals and they revelled in the brute strength of John Wayne who fought his way bare knuckled through the Wild West. Not that the audience was actually in danger of viewing any graphic

details of blood or pain, and the hero always won. Kids played cowboys and Indians, and America's First Peoples were just numbers to be mowed down for entertainment. Plenty of blokes considered a successful night of socializing was evidenced by a skinned knuckle. You had to feel rather sorry for any bloke who couldn't take it on the chin. Strangely nobody ever seemed to die as result of all that steam. I am pleased to recall that I never witnessed any evidence of women fighting, it would have been considered most undignified.

I sometimes look back and wonder if I was the only girl that would dance with him. He was short, which reduces the size of men when you are wearing your high heels and he had been unsuccessful in taming his hair, which hung in a persistent curl over his forehead. There was nothing dapper about him at all. He had a tear in his shirt pocket and his suit jacket was decidedly dirty in fact there was a distinctive footprint on the back. I was slightly taller than him in my shiny heels, but he didn't seem perturbed. Down the track I learned that I was his first steady girlfriend, although he didn't actually arrive in my life as a virgin. I was always too shy to actually ask what his experiences had been. He was neither handsome nor ugly and I liked that about him. There was something reassuring in his ordinariness because, although I knew that the curlers had done their job and my new dress allowed just a hint of a cleavage, I always felt as if I was after all just ordinary. One of my girlfriends was never without a dance partner, however she was not only a true beauty, but was possessed of a personality that lit up any room. It was that lack of confidence, the misconception that only beauty could attract a man that made me so willing to accept his invitation to dance

He didn't say much, but the conversation was difficult with the music blaring and although he was hardly an expert dancer there was still enough concentration required to maneuver a partner through the twists and turns of rock n roll. I thought him rather endearing when a line of sweat broke out on his brow, he won my heart when he lost time during a twist and simply stopped for a moment to laugh at himself.

He probably had the same expectations that I did. You meet, you go out for a respectable period of time, you get engaged and then you marry. It was a pretty simple formula really. Divorce hadn't really come into the equation and nobody questioned that it should be any other way. If you had any objections to the process you could always join the church although I had never given it a moments thought as an option. At least with the marriage route there is the romantic beginning, which is something to hold on to no matter how it turns out.

There was process to those dances, an orchestrated movement towards the imagined reward of an imagined future. Having worked the couples into a sense of nirvana any couples still on the floor were left with the decision of the last dance. They have even written songs about it. Maybe it was that mirrored ball. The last dance was always a slow number and he was with me still when they dimmed the lights. I don't know why I can't recall what number it was, but I remember the footprint on the back of his jacket. You would think the romance of it all would be ingrained in my memory.

Tinder dates had not even been invented. Who could ever envisage a dating web site in those days, I can't imagine how they work; however, my grandchildren seem happy enough with the process, but really if you think about it he was as anonymous as a Tinder date. There had been no introduction by a brother or a cousin or even an old school friend, he had arrived freewheeling into my world. He asked me to the movies, which was very appropriate as coffee shops didn't exist and the pub was not considered. I was thrilled. My very first date (even though I hate that word because it sounds so business like) just as I had always imagined.

I went off to work on Monday morning to type the letters that Mr. Grimes dictated to me, with a sense that the future was as rosy as it could ever be.

Chapter 3

I know that the pace of my story must move along enough to keep you all engaged. There are readers who can only ever react to a fast pace. I get it. There are readers who insist upon non-fiction as if it is the answer to all their questions. But for me it is really how the story is told, I want you to experience it too. Maybe you are old enough that it is all too familiar, but on the other hand I might be delivering a glimpse of the past that you didn't know existed. I think we all look back to try and trace the steps that led to our destinations and I need to dissect the journey in order to understand why I couldn't see it coming.

First dates are nerve-racking affairs. There is always the possibility that the date has had time for reflection and you are getting your hopes up over nothing. It's as if the rest of your life depends on what you wear. The face you present must be a perfect example of what you perceive was the cause of the attraction in the first place. You only had to pick up a magazine to know this as a recorded truth.

The presentation process started that day well before lunch and was exciting enough to overcome the disappointment of a lack of a new dress. There had been no communication since the dance the weekend before, so there was the worry of a no show. I sometimes think about those blokes who arrived fully prepared for the first date only to be rejected by an antagonistic father or a girl who had changed her mind. It is a ritual that has died with the past. I presume young women today don't automatically have to endure the back up family group waiting for the knock on the front door. My baby brother was the first at the door.

Owen survived the onslaught, which I saw as a plus. The sister two sisters down reported that he had arrived in his Holden. This in itself was impressive information; while my own family had a car it was not unusual for a family to be carless in the late fifties. There were no teenage drivers lining the streets with the vehicles they earned at McDonalds. The family was impressed.

I struck it lucky with my father; he was able to free himself from the perceived role of the protective father. Not that any of us presented him with a no-hoper, but he trusted that there was no need for true concern, believing that he had done his best to model the role of a good family man. It really wasn't until much later in life that I realized that he was a progressive thinker. My mother tempered him and introduced the idea that indeed he no longer lived in a world where girls must be chaperoned and present with a dowry. He took it all in and was a very fair father

My father didn't really have a list of expectations that a prospective husband must conform to apart from being of good moral character. Actually he never pushed for a husband at all, he was quite happy to accept that the process might require patience. I don't think my father was ever rude to anybody in his life, so he certainly had no intentions of being rude to my first date. After the formal introduction, Owen escorted me to the Holden in shower of rain that had

threatened all afternoon and held off, and held off, until my hairdo caught the first few drops.

The movies were neutral ground. There was no possibility of getting drunk and disgracing yourself, or even having to reveal your preferences in religion or politics and, on the other hand you got a real sense of your partner's references by the movie he chose. We arrived for a screening of *Bridge Over the River Kwai*.

It was a movie rooted in its time and place, for an audience that had a collective memory of the war. There were very few families who had not been impacted by the loss of life, or a traumatized father, uncle or brother. My mother had lost a brother in New Guinea, although she really didn't allude to her loss. I guess it is so long ago now that most of the generations impacted by that war have moved on. It was rather overshadowed by the Vietnam War that came in my twenties, but thankfully my baby brother was far too young to be included in the devastating lottery that eventually called mothers to march. My mother expressed her gratitude for keeping her first son with a novena of First Fridays. Maybe it was that puppet that kept him safe. I guess I will never know.

Owen had said goodbye to a father who waved farewell as one person and come back as another. He didn't actually express it that way at the time, I only learnt that in later years. No wonder he watched the film with his undivided attention. I wonder now if he was looking for his father in the stiff upper-lip of English stoicism. At the time I didn't think about any of that. I worried I might not be presentable enough. He made light of the fact that it was a first date and gave me a huge smile at interval as he handed me my icy cordial and I thought him absolutely charming.

We were really big on romance in those days. I can't speak for the men of course. It was a right that we young women believed was somehow owed to us. I guess there are new waves of hopeful young girls who are seeking their prince charming. It would be just great if the world actually operated that way. There was no question of a checklist beyond a charming smile and the fulfillment of the dream. All a man had to offer was a box of scorched almonds to an appreciative maid, and all was right with the world.

The kiss didn't really happen until the second date. I know that you might be a reader who is amazed by the very concept of a kiss in the car on second date because you are part of my era or some religious group that keeps a tight rein on premarital sex. On the other hand you might be a product of the free love generation and find the concept terribly coy. It was the idea of the kiss that appealed to me most. There wasn't a romantic movie that didn't end with a pristine kiss. None of that tongue kissing or hot sweaty stuff, just the romantic clasp and a violin suggesting the emotion. I considered Owen a perfect gentleman precisely because he didn't pounce, but instead delivered me safely home to my front door.

There was a follow up the next weekend after a western, which is a genre of movie that I take no pleasure in at all. Owen took delight in every hackneyed phrase, but I put that down to it being a blokie sort of thing. You know I don't ever recall going to the movies with Owen from that time to this. He says it is really not his sort of thing and besides eventually television took over and he said there was no need to dress up when you could relax on your couch. Three dates in and my parents suggested that it was time to really meet Owen. The dinner invitation was issued. All he could do was accept or make some excuse to move on. I would have to say that it is possible that his decision may not have seemed so crucial to him, although I am pretty sure he recognized the significance of the invitation. I don't know if he had simply decided that he had found the next fork on his road, or he truly did fancy me as a partner in his world.

My mother, like Naomi Watts, decided that you couldn't go wrong with a lamb roast. It was in the era before anyone was even aware that vegans and vegetarians even existed. Dinner invitations are a far more complex affair these days, actually my mother had only to choose between the traditional Aussie family meal and some of my father's cuisine. She didn't want to go putting off any young man with the offer of an olive or a bowl of pasta with a strong foreign cheese. We would dine with the good dinner set and the best tablecloth and homemade mint sauce to accompany the matching gravy boat. It certainly lent an air of importance to the occasion, and the younger children had to be given several warnings about being on their best behaviour as the sweet smell of the roasting joint invaded the house. While I was rather preoccupied with my hair rollers my mother pointed out that there was no joy in a roast without a baked potato and I was set to work with the peeler.

Owen arrived promptly at the appointed hour and my father settled into the lounge with a beer. We women remained on duty in the kitchen, but I could clearly hear the ensuing conversation between the men. Apparently Owen had completed his apprenticeship as a cabinetmaker with a well respected business in town and there followed a lot of talk of dovetail joints. Particleboard had only come into use and most households required the services of a cabinetmaker. My father declared that it was a good steady trade giving it a stamp of approval. Apparently Owen was ambitious and was hoping to eventually build his own business. I had never really placed any importance on what Mr. Right did for a living, although I couldn't see myself as the doctor's wife, I really wasn't interested in status. Ordinary was all I ever sought.

At dinner Owen paid due respect to my father's jokes and praised my mother's cooking. He oozed confidence given that he was outnumbered by my clan, however I sensed that my mother was a little more cautious about making any judgements. Years later she confessed that she found him to be rather brash. There was no discussion of politics or religion or any other prickly topic, I do admire that my parents didn't feel an obligation to grill the prospective boyfriend. On the other hand maybe it is better if they do and a lot of questions are answered. Actually I was too naïve to even imagine that such issues were of

any importance. A bloke that fancied me and was a willing participant on the trip to the altar is all that I required.

There is that sense that nothing else in the world matters in that moment when you decide that you have fallen in love. I was sure I was not mistaken. There was a surreal joy watching him acknowledging my family, his workers hands relaxed upon our best tablecloth. When he bid us all goodnight even the remaining pile of dirty dishes seemed to reflect the glory of the evening.

He was invited to the family meal in the months that followed, however, apparently he felt that he had done his duty. On weeknights he was unable to attend because of his early morning starts at work. Friday nights were strictly allocated to a night out with his mates, and so I had to content myself with the dreadful longing all week for Saturday nights. He had mates and I had girlfriends who had decided on tying the knot, so there were engagement parties to attend with linen, or toasters, or kettles wrapped in silver paper to launch the happy couples on their journey. Occasionally he took me to a cabaret. Don't imagine Liza Minnelli straddling a chair, it was more a term to describe the seating and a singer or maybe a musical trio. It was a progression from the weekly dance because there was alcohol and Owen would order me gin and squash. I really felt that I had reached adulthood watching the ice swirl in my glass. It did of course lead to a little more than a kiss on the journey home although, heavy petting was as far as the gin allowed me to go.

What did we really talk about? We certainly didn't discuss how many children are enough, or who should wipe the dishes. Who gets to drive the car if the man of the household is drunk? Who takes out the garbage or whose duty it is to respond to a crying baby? They were topics that I didn't even realize were to be discussed. I had my expectations of how it would all work and no doubt Owen had his, and probably we were both on the same page because our roles had been clearly mapped out by the generations before us

It is good these days to see the shift in responsibilities, or at least an acknowledgement that a man can push a stroller and a woman can work, but it simply wasn't like that when I was nineteen. Although now there is all that business about which emoji to send and when it is appropriate to message, and how often is too much and how often is too little. Not that I know more than how to send a basic text. The grandchildren taught me. I do know how to do a smiley face and I feel very proud of myself

I knew that Owen lived at home because occasionally he would mention some job he was obligated to undertake for his father. Apparently there was just the two of them in a house that had once accommodated a housekeeper. He never spoke of his mother, and it was not until after the birth of our first child that I learned that she had left him in the care of an elderly aunt when Owen was only seven. He spoke neither ill nor well of his mother, but simply stated that she was gone. He led a free-range life with the elderly aunt until his father returned from the war when Owen was ten, and the damage of shell shock dominated the

house. I was curious, however I was not to meet the mystery man until our engagement dinner.

I had imagined a moonlit night for the presentation of the ring, but in fact it poured and poured so that the wipers in the car could hardly keep up with the deluge, and my hair had flattened into a damp mop in the humidity. Owen had primed himself for occasion with quite a few whiskeys, and his breath was overpowering in the confines of his car. Not exactly the romantic scenario I had in my head, nevertheless the presentation of a wee sparkly diamond was on offer and I didn't hesitate to accept. Owen didn't linger on the moment for too long as we were expected at his mate's to celebrate a twenty-first. None of my friends were there so I had to wait until I arrived home to seek the admiration of my family.

It was decided that a small family gathering was all that was required to mark the engagement. Owen maintained that it was all that his father could handle and given the fact that my family was not a wealthy one it was agreed that a small gathering would suit the occasion. My mother insisted that her sister and family attend, especially as I was the first of the cousins to be successfully launched. There was the argument that if I invited one girlfriend I would have to invite them all, so we stuck to the plan to keep it small.

Five months had passed since the roast lamb eaten around our best tablecloth and now my mother passed around the canapés as my father poured me a gin and squash, and I proudly displayed the ring to my mother's family. Owen seemed less assured than his usual self as he introduced me to his father. I didn't know why he was apprehensive because his father greeted me warmly and welcomed me to the family as he sipped on his lemon squash.

Chapter 4

At nineteen I feared the dreaded term spinster or the equally terrible old maid. It was a label to be avoided. It implied that the bearer was somehow inadequate, hadn't quite made the grade. How could anybody be happy with a single life? There was no possibility that any woman would deliberately embark on life without a partner. What about the children she would be denied? What about the support of a breadwinner and someone to mow the lawn? Careers for women were not even a thought bubble so there was no evidence of any reward on this earth except for mothers and nuns. Maybe if I think about it now there were women that broke convention, however news of their success was not really celebrated.

I was actually proud of the fact that I had made it to the altar having never missed a period as if it was some virtue that belonged to only those of us who were true believers in a concept that you could save yourself for marriage. It is amusing now to think we were saving ourselves from something we had never experienced. Heck. What if you found out after the ceremony that you just didn't connect in the bed? Today if you so choose, you can wear a white wedding dress just moments before giving birth. Social dictums then declared that white was strictly for the virgin or at least the pretence of virginity. Back then it was important to throw around the confetti before the baby bump ruined a wedding album. In fact I don't ever recall a bride in those days who presented a bump to the congregation.

Fate had thrown Owen and me a lifeline because it transpired that he had been baptized in to the one true faith. It was the last thought in my mind when I accepted his offer of a dance. My parents were as pleased to learn that he had attended a catholic school, as they would have been if they had learnt that he owned his own home. He was no longer an attendee of mass on Sunday mornings; on the other hand in a world where you were either catholic or protestant, he sat on the right side of the fence. I have witnessed a few marriages based on a binding religious view, and while some have endured seemingly happy with their choice, there have equally been marriages in which the religious glue has apparently has not been enough to hold the whole thing together. None of my children have chosen a partner by religion, so I guess the concept has become somewhat watered down these days. Although I can't imagine that I would have a lot in common with an atheist, and I guess they would reject me.

My mother spent weeks constructing the dress and one for my sister who was to be my bridesmaid. Like the engagement a small wedding seemed prudent, so there was a visit to make the arrangements with the parish priest, and an agreement that the wedding breakfast would be held at home. My mother called her sister in to clarify the catering arrangements. A neighbour, who was renowned for her expertise with fruitcake and fondant and her skill with sugar roses, which had earned her plenty of blue ribbons at the annual show, was happy to show off her talents to a new audience. Owen had a work mate who was

able to don a suit for the occasion as a witness on that little piece of paper that made a certainty of the union. Strangely I haven't seen the chap for years. A couple of years after our marriage he disappeared into a new life in North Queensland, and years later someone reported that he had his own wife and a tribe of kids, but if you wanted to look him up he could be found on any evening in the local pub. At the time there was not much more I could hope for really. It all seemed perfect.

I was nervous as the big day drew nearer even though I had no doubts that I was on the right path. There had been enough Saturday nights for the petting to have induced more than a slight curiosity about the wonders of sexual intercourse. Such a formal term, and yet one my mother had been reluctant to discuss it with me. The only time she had even touched on the topic was when my first period arrived when I was eleven, with all the shock and bewilderment that it holds for the unprepared. There were no adds on a television that was yet to exist to give any inquisitive child even a sense that there might be some changes ahead. I was an early bloomer, so my peers at school were not really interested in the topic, although in retrospect they were probably as ignorant as I. Maybe if we had grown up on a farm we might have had a little more of an inkling about the birds and the bees. Incredibly as we watched our mothers bellies grow with each new babe the method of conception was not a hot topic.

It is still a topic I wouldn't want to discuss with my mother. I often wonder if she had enjoyed a satisfying sex life or a sense of duty. Guess that's one good thing about all the openness about sex today, at least the young know that a female is entitled to enjoy sex as much as a male. Just imagine having to grin and bear it with thoughts of Mother England. I know now that sex was not always like that. I think I may have landed in that period in history that was frigid with taboos.

My girlfriends added nothing to the conversation. Certainly none of them ever described a night of erotica. It would be interesting to go back and survey them all now. I am quite sure they would all have the same experience to report, and anything else would have been buried in guilt. The treat of pregnancies was a pretty good contraceptive, and those who got caught out were headed for the altar like it or not. Single mothers simply didn't exist unless you were a widow. I went to school with a few kids who had lost fathers in the war, or least that was the story, but nobody who was actually the child of a single parent.

We don't bat an eyelid these days; I understand that the prime minister of New Zealand has only recently announced her engagement with a baby in arms. No one has ever suggested that she has been living in sin, and I can't say that even I have thought of her that way. I wonder if the term living in sin still exists. In retrospect, Owen must have had the same value system because he was able to call a halt when the petting started to steam up the car windows.

My mother gave me a manual courageously entitled *Sex Satisfaction and Happy Marriage* by Reverend Alfred Henry Tyrer. I don't know if she actually read it herself, or with the use of the word 'sex' in the title she imagined that the book might suffice for a frank conversation. Maybe she believed it, although it is too

late now to ever ask. What a gem, and yet I read it without questioning the dictum that sex in marriage was all about duty. Certainly there was no suggestion of anything more than the missionary position and total subjugation. I believed it for years. Took it as gospel that the only way to happiness was the total sacrifice to the needs of one's husband. Thank goodness Owen was not a man to actually wage a conscious war against his wife, not that I ever gave him any reason to feel that way. No indeed, I was determined to play my part and build a happy marriage.

The solemn light stained by glass,
The nervous grin of my father's pride,
The tear escaping my mother's eye
The blur of gold on priestly robes.
The folk in pews seemed hardly there
The noise of some child confined.
The restriction of veil, forgotten.
Owen, his curl under control
and me in my flats.

I saw only the poetic in it. An achievement in which to feel I had completed a journey like the sun just before the stars come out to fill the skies with moon filled dreams.

I had the happy portrait of that wondrous day on my bedroom wall for years. The original was captured in black and white. The photographer coloured in the rosy bits at great expense in his studio, which gave the portrait a surreal appearance. My dress is as white and as crisp as any virgin bride in contrast to my sister in apricot crepe. He didn't capture the slight touch of strawberry blond in Owen's hair although the curl is plastered back on a freckled brow. The image has been banished to the bin, it doesn't matter that the physical evidence of the happy occasion no longer exists because the image is so clear in my mind. There are no photos of the honeymoon. I wonder if it is still clear in Owen's mind.

We had four days in a charming old hotel in the hills near home in which to celebrate the union. I arrived in my going away dress and Owen in his suit, and at midafternoon, as his Holden decorated with a bumper full of flowers pulled into the driveway, I couldn't help but feel a little conspicuous. I'm glad I am not part of those cultures that send in an army of witnesses to inspect the bed sheets for proof of consummation; just the knowing glint in the receptionist's eye was off putting enough.

Owen suggested a walk followed by a few drinks before dinner and although I had spent the afternoon in a mix of anticipation for the great moment, I was equally a little anxious that I might somehow be a disappointment to him. There had been no last minute words of advice from my mother who I suppose felt that nature would simply take its course. I am sure Owen was free of doubts because I have never since known him to be considerate of my feelings, and he certainly wasn't the sort of guy who was impressed by romantic gestures. It's all so clear in my memory because the woman in charge of the dining room played The

Platters on the record player twice so that I can never hear them again without being reminded of the evening. I washed all that romantic music down with four gins and squash so by the time it was time to retire for the evening I was ready to be parted from my going away dress.

In retrospect it is a pity that Owen believed that petting was unnecessary when I was up for the real deal. I understand that it could be considered foreplay these days, however Owen felt no need to delay any of his own gratification. There was certainly no instant orgasm for me, but I was happy enough. Happy enough to listen to his snoring afterwards seeing only the romantic in a honeymoon suit and a man upon the pillow next to mine!

Response to your role in a marriage is really part of your conditioning, the era you grew up in, and you have no control over the random moment that the universe chooses to land you in the midst of it all. There was advice to women on keeping their husbands happy. Keep the house clean. Pour him a drink. Present the glamour. I'm not sure how you present the drink while bathing the children. I don't know that anyone ever gave advice to husbands on how to keep a wife happy.

Today I am told there is advice with a simple Google search. Advice on sex toys, masturbation, G-spots and things I had never heard of. How unimaginable that the future would bring a reality in which celebrities can create fame through their sex tapes. It now all sounds so obtainable, but I was too far removed from the very idea that women can have a say in their sex lives to even question what was in it for me. I have always felt that the missionary position was well named. All that male dominance! I wonder who coined the phrase? Certainly it was the only position that ever serviced Owen. I can't say that I really blame him for his approach to our sex life because after all he was as much a part of the times as I. I must confess there were times when I lost interest. A crying baby and lack of sleep is a passion killer.

Chapter 5

The Holden had to deliver us somewhere after the honeymoon. Owen was due back at work, but my days of taking dictation from Mr. Grimes were over. Owen was adamant, as most men of his generation were, that my future lay at home. He dreamt of one day building his own home, however neither of us had much of a bank account and certainly not enough to use as a deposit on anything that might lead to an intro into the property market. I had to agree that the only option was to take up the offer of a bedroom in his father's house.

Harry Bradshaw welcomed us without any sense that we were imposing on his life. In fact he assured me that I could call him by his Christian name, which was unusual for the times as most of my friends referred to their in-laws with the respectful use of their surnames. Harry it transpired was rather pleased to have a cook as an addition to the household because apparently Owen's skills in the kitchen were rather limited and Harry himself was minus his right forearm, which had been left behind in the horror of war in Bougainville. That's as much as I can tell you because Harry had clearly decided long ago that he wished to bury his memories of war in the past and there was never any elaboration of how he had lost a limb. At least there would be no competition in the kitchen and I was pretty happy about that because it allowed me free reign to prove myself as the perfect wife.

A war pension kept the wolf from Harry's door and Owen was not bringing in a lot. We lived on a modest income but I didn't really need that much. There were no such luxuries as an overseas holiday or a second car and you didn't need to pay for gym memberships or day care or takeaway meals. A hand me down couch still afforded the opportunity to sit down. I remember how happy I was when I got a Mixmaster. Harry had a vegetable garden and chooks that he attended to diligently, and in fact he always looked at peace with the world when he was pottering around his garden calling to his 'girls' or hoeing the earth in preparation for a new crop.

Despite the modest income Owen went off to the pub after work each evening. It seems it was a man's right, and public bars were packed with men many of whom also lived on small budgets. We didn't have any rent to pay and Harry took care of the rates and the utility bills, and I guess in retrospect I was still pretty naïve to the existence of such obstacles. Harry on the other hand never went for a drink not even to see past mates at the RSL. The war had taken more than a limb from poor Harry, and I guess today we would all understand his post-war stress for what it was. He was at heart a gentle man, however I soon learned that that there were triggers like a car backfiring, or an unexpected knock on the door or even the simple clatter of a saucepan lid on the sink that could send him into a rage or alternatively into some dark place. I didn't understand it then, although I do now, and I appreciate his generosity in allowing me into his sanctuary because realistically all he knew of me when I arrived at his door was that I was Owen's bride.

There were no photos of Owen's mother anywhere in the house, nothing to indicate that she had ever lived there, and yet I knew that Owen had lived there all his life. The only photo was of Owen as a toddler with a rather scruffy looking dog, taken in the backyard long before a vegie patch existed. The photo revealed a rather solemn child with a mop of light curls. Harry was dark with dark eyes that protruded nervously from a rather gaunt face. He was very different to Owen and I deduced that Owen had inherited his mother's features. It seemed an unwritten rule that the mother was never mentioned, not by Harry or by Owen. The absence of Owen's mother added an eerie presence to a house where the curtains and bedspreads had long seen better days. Clearly the home had not benefitted from a woman's touch in years.

Actually Harry and Owen didn't really talk that much at all, except if there was a repair that required Owen's attention or some errand that required a man. My family spent every moment together competing for the floor in a non-stop chain of conversation. I found the silence a little unnerving at first when I was home alone with Harry, and the contrast between my family home and Owen's surprised me. I wondered if Owen had also inherited his mother's personality. I was too ignorant of the impact of the war on Harry to even speculate if he had once been an outgoing personality. It wasn't until the eighties that Owen opened up on the topic and the change in his father, and as society began to acknowledge the impact of the Vietnam War, I learned that Harry had once been a man who filled a home with laughter. I don't know that you are either interested or even care about any of this. I guess I just have to sift through it all in order for my story to make sense.

I only ever thought of our first home as Harry's house. I never felt it was appropriate to put out my little bits and pieces or add a favourite cushion to the couch. Harry's pipe permeated the building mapping each room as his, only the kitchen was free of his ready rubbed tobacco. My own father smoked cigars on occasions and it was only when we moved in with Harry that I realized how distinctive the smell was. Owen stuck to his tailor made fags, which never had the same impact. I always connected the smell of tobacco with a sense of protection, of a man around to keep any imagined dangers at bay, rather like the smell of incense at church. Owen doesn't smoke anymore; he managed to kick the habit in the eighties, after a long struggle that required a lot of patience from the family.

The house was built in the Old Victorian style and the hardboard floors had long ago developed a creak that threatened to awaken the dead if you needed a trip to the loo in the middle of the night. Owen explained that the fretwork that formed the breezeway between the bedrooms was what evoked his interest in carpentry. I had to agree that they had their charm and they did keep the air circulating on a sticky summer night, however I will always think of them as a passion killer. I am afraid that sex for me became a simple matter of duty as each night I lay under Owen as he huffed and puffed his way to a climax. The thought that Harry might be tossing and turning in his bed, listening to our nocturnal activities, was enough to make me blush in the darkness, and Harry of course never went out. Maybe if Owen had been a more imaginative man he might have

suggested an occasional night ride to look at the stars, but I can't really say that he actually paid that much attention to the bride in his care.

Despite all that our first child was conceived just two months after the wedding vows. I guess that is part of the mystery of sex that you don't actually have to be having the time of your life in order to produce the children. It is a far cry from today when the message that women have the right to enjoy getting it on for the pure pleasure of it without any obligation to procreate. I could never have spoken about these matters back then. Owen was probably unaware that a breezeway made me apprehensive, and he was equally of a time before our sex life was open for discussion. On the other hand it wasn't all negative because I was thrilled with the outcome and so indeed was Owen.

I could never have imagined my life without children and now all these decades later with a tribe of offspring to my name, I guess I never will. I suppose it's just my life I am imagining because clearly there is plenty of evidence that childless people can be perfectly satisfied with their own journey. I sometimes wonder if I would have felt the same way if I had been born in a different time, faced with different choices. We have had a female prime minister in the last decade and the possibility of a woman governing the country would have been unthinkable once.

When Francis arrived bawling and purple from his exertions of pushing his way into the world, it was my first experience of a sensation that years later I was able to identify as orgasm. The experience was not repeated with the birth of my subsequent children, but it remained as a secret that I felt compelled to hide from the rest of the world. It lingered like a rosy glow long after the pain of childbirth was forgotten, and I treasure it still because most of our secrets are guilty ones, reminders of some transgression, but I long ago lost the guilt. I like to think that it was a pleasure just for me and so there is no need to share it with anyone else.

Owen slowed down in the bedroom with the arrival of Francis. He probably found the presence of the crib at the foot of our bed a little off putting and there was naturally all that lack of sleep that comes with a newborn. I don't know how poor Harry went on the other side of the breezeway, but he didn't complain. For me the days were long, nappies rolling through the wring top machine and never any thoughts except the work that occupied each day. Discussions on shared housework were decades off, and I could hardly ask a one armed man to hang out the washing. I would have considered myself a failure as a wife and mother if I hadn't managed it independently. Mind you there was no pressure to meet the girls for a coffee, or even to make it to Playgroup. My parents lived on the other side of town so it was too far to push the stroller and although my mother did drop in from time to time to offer a little support it was by no means a daily occurrence.

I was lucky with Francis because he was a contented little soul who slept well between feeds. Harry did his best to be of help, and he would bring me a cup of tea or a glass of water when Francis let the household know that it was time to suckle. After a moment of admiration for his grandson Harry would slip

discreetly away before my naked breast could be revealed. I was grateful for the privacy as it was a time when breast-feeding was never conducted in public. I never discussed with Owen a painful period of cracked nipples that I endured, which was purely a conversation to be had with my mother. You do know you are alive when that dear little rose bud mouth latches on to split nipple. Breasts it seems were secret women's business.

I weaned Francis at nine months and a month later, without even a moment to come up for air I was pregnant. Everyone was pleased; we seemed to be on track as parents and it prompted Owen to declare that it was time to launch out on our own. He had taken on extra work on the weekends as a cellar man at our local pub and he felt there was enough income to find a flat and pay rent. He didn't mind his work at the pub because it afforded him the opportunity to do some networking with the locals, and I suspect that although he loved Francis, he found the evenings and weekends at home rather dull especially as his position as cellar man allowed him more than one or two beers. Harry said nothing one way or another about the plan and I often wondered if he was lonely after our departure, or glad to have his house all to himself.

We found a ground floor flat with access to a fenced backyard and a space in the bathroom to create a laundry with the luxury of an automatic machine. What more could a young mother possibly desire? If you weren't part of the era or you are from a comfortable middle class perhaps you would laugh or scratch your head in wonder that anyone could consider our two bedroom dwelling a palace. Harry donated the bed on which his grandsons had been conceived and the wife of Owen's boss at the cabinet factory bought a new lounge suite just in time to hand on their old one to us. Owen built the dining room furniture himself, although it took a very long time and we ate off our laps on the couch until he produced the piece that was greatly admired by all. I was deemed a very lucky wife and I have to say I was proud of his work. It carried us through our lives, a witness to tragedy and happiness. He has it still.

Anthony was not an easy birth or an easy baby. I was glad that Harry couldn't be disturbed by the anguish of a reflux baby. The upstairs neighbours must have had to endure a lot of sleepless nights because Anthony never seemed to stop crying. Strange that the things that trouble you so much at the time dissipate with the passing years. Owen took to using little wax earplugs that he kept beside the bed. I felt no resentment about that because I knew he had to be up for work in the morning even though I would also be at work raising a toddler and managing our baby. It is the isolation of motherhood that has the most impact. The endless days where you watch the clock tick slowly by willing teatime and bathtime to deliver the reprieve of bedtime for your babies. There was no time for news of the outside world just nursery rhymes, mashed vegetables and nappies soaking in the bucket.

There was however one vital bit of information that filtered through. The nineteen sixties brought The Pill! Being of good catholic stock it also brought the dilemma of the battle with a catholic conscience. There was no halfway message from The Pope, it was a choice of The Pill or The Church. Rationally I believed

that if God had given us the intellect to build planes that defied gravity or bridges that crossed large expanses of water He had also empowered us with the ability to take control of fertility. The battle raged for years with the church declaring that sex was purely for procreation, which would make you wonder why we women have a clitoris, not that I had much understanding of mine. I was certainly unaware that female circumcision was even a thing and I can't imagine who in my world at that time could ever have imagined such a process.

Owen took the debate out of the equation and demanded that I front up to the doctors for the script that could change the pattern that dictated the lives of our parents. After all there was a belief that a husband knew best. I don't know if everyone held that belief, but as the breadwinners men certainly held the balance of power, and at the time I was content with that. Luckily the doctor didn't question my decision because it was possible to receive a refusal from a catholic doctor, and single women had to feign marriage.

I didn't tell my parents who would never have approved, believing implicitly that their children were God's will. They were in agreement on that. They would never experience what a blessing it was to know that each menstrual cycle would deliver the flood that washed away the dread of unwanted pregnancy. It's thirty years since I went through the menopause and came safely out the other side, but I haven't forgotten the anguish after Anthony was born and before I had that script securely in my grasp.

As far back as I could remember my father had put the bread on the family table by driving a delivery truck loaded with groceries that nourished the families of farmers who lived well beyond the outskirts of our town. He had managed to buy the family home, but the business was never his. The owner, Mr. Kavanagh, was a jolly gentleman who had raised eight children on the proceeds of his business. By the time he employed my father his family had left the nest and he was slowing down. Unfortunately, when Anthony was just three months old Mr. Kavanagh came to a grinding halt, stopped in his tracks by a heart attack. The deliveries ceased.

Mercifully a reprieve came for my family with the information that a grounds man/caretaker was needed at a holiday park three hours north. There was a caretaker's cottage that came with the job so my mother and father relocated their family. It was the first time that I really felt alone in the world. There would be no more visits to my family home for Sunday lunch and my mother could no longer pop in with her reassuring presence that always seemed to sooth Anthony as he struggled with a rebellious digestive track.

Chapter 6

I guess when I look back not just on those early years, but on all the years of my marriage, the missing ingredients were friendship and an honest exchange of views. Sure Owen and I never went down the path of silence in retaliation for some perceived grievance, but on the other hand our conversations were only ever an exchange of information concerning domestic matters. He made it clear that my opinions were of no value to him. I remember an occasion when the most hectic of the baby rearing years had finally passed and he was uncharacteristically at home for the evening news on TV. My comments on an upcoming election were dismissed as entirely inappropriate on the grounds of my sex. I remember his words exactly. “ You’ve no right to talk about politics! You’re just a Sheila ” It stopped me dead in my tracks at the time and I inwardly struggled with resentment for quite some time. Time, which will never undo that statement. There was no point in asking his opinion of Edith Cowan who had become a member of parliament when my mother was a girl.

Each week I was provided with enough money to cloth and feed the children and fortunately for Owen he had chosen a wife who was frugal. I don’t know if he appreciated that fact or not, although I never tested him out by overrunning the budget. I had girlfriends who demanded regular trips to the hairdressers and a new outfit for each new occasion. I was happy to tie my hair up in a bun and my mother had insisted that I take careful notes of her sewing lessons before the family left for their life in the north. Actually the sewing became a source of pride for me. I can still recall everything I produced on my machine. Unfortunately no one seems to need my services anymore. The grand children have long outgrown the appliqued baby clothes, preferring whatever label is in fashion and there is never a request for a garment for a great grandchild. You can’t compete with the price of babies clothes produced for the chain stores these days. And besides it is a real challenge now to thread a needle. As the wife of a man on a wage there really wasn’t any need for anything else. There were no fancy dinners or engagements to attend.

What’s that old adage that married couples bring out to celebrate a jubilee? Apparently, it is all about working at keeping it together until death do you part. I reckon they would have to be both on the same page about that because I can’t see the value in just one half of the partnership doing all the heavy lifting. Sometimes I hear stories on TV about some ancient couple still hand in hand and I marvel at their lives. Mind you I guess there is something unique in the fact that they are on TV in the first place. Long marriages weren’t so unusual when I was young particularly because divorce was not an easy option. No-fault divorce was not introduced until the mid seventies and separation was no excuse. There seems to be a general agreement that is okay to try before you buy these days and I have grandchildren who have kids of their own, but have no intention of tying the knot.

Owen still dreamt of success, which he evaluated as owning both his own home and his own business. He had control of the bank account and the passbook and while I could have done the banking for him while he was at work, he insisted on

making the trek to the bank in his lunch hour. Strangely I really didn't consider him to be controlling. Instead I felt secure in the knowledge that he would take care of our boys and me. I loved him still, despite any negatives. That's marriage for you or at least that is what I believed at that time.

The house became a possibility with the death of Harry. Poor Harry! He really didn't get a good deal in life. At least he had the opportunity to enjoy his grandsons. He used to take the boys down to the garden whenever we paid him a visit. As a result Francis has always had a vegie patch from the time he bought his first house. He still claims that the carrots that Pa grew are the best ever. I had not realized how treacherous Harry's ulcer was, although I understood that he preferred a bland diet. I was sorry to see the last of Harry. Regardless of his outburst he had always been kind to me. I know that Owen felt the loss as well despite his bravado. However Owen had no desire to move back into his father's house and apart from a few tools, the only souvenir of a life with Harry that he kept, was a framed photo of a small boy with a scruffy dog.

Our town by the sixties had started to expand out beyond its original borders. Owen had his eye on a block with a view, a block that would allow for the use of a wide veranda and large windows under a butterfly roof. He conceived the floor plan without any consultation with me. It would be an open floor plan to allow in the light from the large windows. His dining room table would hold pride of place dividing the space between the kitchen resplendent in silky oak and the living space. Whatever he choose was fine with me, although I would have appreciated the opportunity to consider the configuration of the kitchen. It was back in the days before anyone had ever heard of an ensuite. It didn't matter how many kids shared the bunks in a bedroom, there was only ever one bathroom and one toilet, and a butler's pantry belonged in a palace

My biggest concern was that we would be further out of town, and I didn't drive. Owen had considered that problem and had a mate from the pub who was selling his car. A girlfriend did me the honour of teaching me in her car, which was not an easy task with the boys bouncing around in the back, squabbling and vying for my attention. There wasn't much traffic on the roads in those days. I've given up driving these days. It's like throwing yourself into some mad Mixmaster and new roads seem to pop up everywhere so I am never quite sure where I am going. If my parents were to rise up from their graves I don't think they would recognize any of the town in which I grew up.

Giving up work at the cabinet factory was not a financial option. The plan was to employ a builder and Owen would do the internal fittings on the weekends. That's how Mick became embedded in our lives. You never know when you begin any journey that you are embarking on the same meandering twists and turns of your life with some unplanned fellow traveller, or what influences are dominated by the vision of another. Mick was the right fit for Owen, hard working and ambitious. I wasn't part of any of that, immersed in motherhood. Mick had envisioned the spread of the suburbs. He was established enough to purchase the land and use his expertise to produce the dwellings and the backyards awaiting the planting of trees and shrubs that would transform bare earth into a home.

Owen was impressed by Mick's expertise and the efficiency he demonstrated in building our house and equally Mick was happy to have found a cabinet maker who would take the risk from a steady job into a vision of what could be put together with a kitchen or a bathroom that would appeal to ideas of a modern future.

I guess Mick provided a vision for all those folk that were looking to leave the past behind and move out beyond the certainty of bus stops and corner shops. Initially he paid Owen a wage, but as the trust between them grew they agreed on a partnership. Owen worked hard, happy with what he viewed as a progression from the factory floor. They would discuss business over a beer in the pub after a day's work, and all in all they were doing very well. It wasn't long before they were firm mates, and right up until Mick succumbed to a heart attack just a few years after my sixtieth birthday, they had each other's back.

It was Mick who introduced Owen to the boys' weekends spent fishing. At the completion of each build they would head off to Mick's beach shack with a couple of Mick's mates and celebrate with a ute full of beer and the faith that the ocean would provide the food. On their first trip I suggested that a few tins of beans, some eggs and maybe a steak might be needed, but Owen pooh poohed the very notion. I didn't really see a lot of Mick because he had a wife and three children at home so there was never any point in inviting him to dinner as presumably his wife was at home awaiting his return from work and the pub. I only ever met his wife briefly when they arrived at our house one Sunday afternoon because Mick had some architectural drawings to discuss with Owen.

His wife was a well-worn woman, probably in her late thirties. She struck me as pleasant personality and that's all I can report about the women behind Mick because a couple of years later Mick moved out of the family home. There was no point in trying to get the why or the wherefore out of Owen; he would never reveal the private business of a mate, that is presuming he was even privy to such information. We women like to know these things, however it seems that the blokes prefer to remain tight-lipped.

The house and the garden were completed and the floorboards just starting to show the signs of the movement of boisterous boys when the stork delivered our baby girl. Two kids was a small family so we decided on another child. Anthony had made his first trek off to school and my time at home was rather empty without a little one tugging at my skirt. She was a little princess from the beginning. You might think two older brothers would have created a tomboy, but in fact the feminine side always won out. There was a time when she was about five when she was lured by idea that shorts were the only acceptable wear for any occasion, but she gave them up when she saw her first tutu.

Owen adored her from the start. From the very first time he peered into the hospital crib. Called her May after his mother, which touched me because of the transparency of his vulnerability. Her colouring was peach just like Owen and her wide eyes were picture perfect blue. The boys were dark like me, boys with hints of their Italian heritage. They were old enough to be her kindly big brother

and while they taught her their games in the backyard they were never tough on her. I was happy to have someone to dress in pink.

May and Owen had the kind of relationship that you would want your precious daughter to have with her father. They enjoyed each other's company and both of them played their roles with love. He gave her lots of his time when she was a little thing still cute enough to lisp and lose control over the curl that hung onto her forehead. I can't say that he was entirely co-operative when it came to school concerts or the end of year ballet performance. She didn't know that I suppose. It doesn't matter really because there was always some encouragement from him to do her best. There was never even a suggestion or even a slightly vague thought in my head that he would ever want to be anything more or less than her father.

There are no memories of family holidays with Owen who was content with work and the occasional boys' weekend. Instead I took the kids off on school holidays to my parent's holiday camp. My father taught the boys how to enjoy the simplicity of camping and I enjoyed the company of my family. I can't say that I held any resentment towards Owen over his absence because he was at home working hard to support his family. He has been a good provider; I'll give him that. He paid for the children to be educated in the catholic school, even though he felt no commitment to the religion. There was always money for sporting equipment and ballet fees and I bought from the butcher whatever I needed. There was never a danger that I would ever be looking at an old age supported only by the pension.

At home the kids and I ate our evening meal alone at the dining room table because as the years went by so did the hours Owen spent at the pub. He would eat his dinner in front of the TV when all the children were tucked up in their beds and then head for his own bed. He did spend most Sunday afternoons with the boys at their sporting activities, so they saw enough of him to know that he loved them and who was boss. Not that he ever exerted his position with force; there was no smacking in our household, even though it was at that time considered a natural means of control. My children always looked to Owen as a source of guidance, their trust in him complete.

When the boss was around he taught his sons how to handle a tool and mow the lawn. He was keen to give them driving lessons when they reached the age of acquiring a licence, however he was a firm believer that domestic work was only for women. In reality I believed it at the time also. It was May and I that did the dishes and made the beds, although the boys would take turns to take out the garbage. Things are slowly changing I guess because my grandchildren all share domestic duties no matter what their sex. I don't know if today I would feel cheated by losing my status as chief cook and bottle washer, but I can imagine how nice it would be to have someone to share the relentless burden. There was never a girls' weekend for me.

I have always been intrigued by the fact that I missed the swinging sixties. It all seemed to happen everywhere else but in my world. Miniskirts, Woodstock and

free love sounded like a tantalizing mix. The music came through the radio irritating Owen who joined in the adult chorus of complaints about hair that was too long and music that came from a place with which he couldn't connect. I particularly remember his aversion to Janis Joplin. I suspect his criticism was connected to his general outlook on what he viewed as the destructive power of feminism. There was never any thought from me that I should be burning my bra, however there was certainly a hint of another life. There was no progression in the bedroom, no sixties sexual liberation to transform my sex life, but Owen seemed satisfied and that is all that really concerned me. Funny when you think about it now, neither Owen nor I were actually that old and yet so disconnected from a youthful revolution.

The biggest impact of the sixties was the death of my father who had a brief struggle with influenza and went off to join all the catholic saints in heaven before the decade was out. There was a sense of loss that I hadn't experienced before. I had lost grandparents and Harry, but none of them had been so entwined in my life from the beginning. A stark jolt of the reality of mortality! It left my mother with a child still at school and no way of maintaining a holiday camp on her own. She still had the family home that had been rented out during my parent's time mowing lawns and taking bookings, so she moved back into town. My boys were old enough to still need a hug from Granma, but May who was only twelve months out of the cot and nappies, then received the full benefits of a grandmother.

There was time in the evening before Owen directed his attention to the TV and his retreat to bed for a brief outline of domestic affairs. After that I was on my own. Sometimes I found something to interest me on television. I really don't like calling the day quits too early. I guess that's what started my interest in reading. I am glad I discovered the library; it has held me in good stead all these years. I can thank the librarian for guiding me through the classics. I started with Steinbeck and worked my way back to Chaucer. Burrows was an interesting interlude and I am still wondering if I was ready for Erica Jong. I had no attraction to the section on true romance despite girlish notions when I met Owen, and science fictions seems too disconnected from my reality.

There weren't so many self- help books when I started reading. It seems there is a solution in a book for everything these days. How you confirm that the advice is hocus-pocus or not, I am not too sure. The purportedly non-fiction expose seems to have gained a lot of traction in later years which is just in time for an age immersed in technology, providing fodder for the media. How people lap it all up! And yet strangely exposes hardly make a dint on the collective conscience judging by the stubborn refusal to change political views. It is funny how life humbles you, tempers your view that there is only one pathway. I guess there is no other course but your own reactions.

Chapter 7

Some people seem perfectly adept at recalling the anniversaries of dead relatives. I tend to put it all into a period of time. The impact, the only relevance, the date so unimportant. I concede that dates have a significance when celebrating a life and they are important when sorting out all that ghastly paperwork that gets left behind by the dying, however the year and a general sense of the time of the year is all that ever remains with me. I can remember if we were wearing our winter clothes or fanning ourselves in the heat, but that is as far as it goes.

However I remember the timing of mother's death because Owen and I were pondering what to do for our twentieth wedding anniversary and were actually planning our very first weekend away without the children. Funny that I remember the date of my anniversary and birthdays but not the days for dying. The boys were teenagers with mates to accommodate them, May was twelve and young enough still to enjoy a sleepover with Granma.

The news came through that we were dealing with advanced pancreatic cancer, which was untreatable. I knew my mother had been feeling unwell, however as she was never one to complain, it was hard to judge how ill she was. The news was a shock. I can only ponder how earth shattering it must be to receive news of a death with a knock on the door in the middle of the night. I remember my response as a physical hit, so intense that the memory of it still occasionally interferes with my thoughts. I felt it also when my mother rang to deliver the news that with no warning God had taken her husband leaving him at sunrise grey and cold in their marital bed. Sudden loss is more painful than bodily injury. When I look back on it now I can see that my family were given the opportunity to say goodbye and express our love through our support.

It quickly became apparent that full time nursing was required at home with my mother who was adamant that she would not die in hospital. My youngest sister still lived in town, the rest of my siblings had moved off into various places, and my mother's youngest who had joined the merchant navy, was well out of range. Unfortunately, very young children handicapped my youngest sister's time. I know she felt left out of things as result and I am sorry she didn't have as much time as she would have liked to spend with her mother. She was able to come to add her support during the day on weekends when her husband was home to watch their brood.

My husband was fond of my mother, or so I presumed as he never made any negative comments about her, however I was surprised that he took my mother's imminent death as a personal loss. He wept when the news was delivered as if it was his own mother that lay dying. I felt put out that he was dismissive of my pain; it seemed unjust. My mother wanted to remain in her own home, she said all her best memories were there so it was decided that I should pack my bag and take up residence in my old bedroom. Owen was reluctant to lose his housekeeper, with complaints that he would have to run the household. I spent a

day filling the freezer with meals and assured him that May would be on duty in the kitchen.

My mother's house filled with family and friends who came to say goodbye and support each other. Sometimes they slept over depending on how far they had come. Some days the time seemed short as if there was alarmingly little time left for departure and some days we were all in one of those time warps that come into your life and make life before or after feel non-existent in any other form. I marvel that such intensity becomes so embedded in your memory that the time is elastic. New babies often bring the same experience I've found. In fact it was a mere six weeks that it took to go home to my mother and lay her to rest. It is always surprising to know that when you finally emerge from the experience the rest of the world has just been strolling through the past six weeks, the politicians fighting, a war, or an injustice intruding on harmony, and thankfully reports of the deeds of some good souls to balance the world out and bring a little hope that a positive future still lies ahead..

I rang home each night to see how my family was coping. Owen was all right for the first week, thereafter he would hit me with grumbles concerning dire matters of a missing shirt or need to buy more bread or milk. I was resentful at the time because he could have been more supportive, the importance of the thought dissipated by the business with my mother. The boys were happy enough, busy with their own affairs. May was feeling my absence and of course she loved her grandmother. She pleaded to come and stay and I thought I understood why. There was no school bus at my mother's house and really no room for May to keep up with her friends. I had to say no, although with the reassurance I would be home on weekends.

The family doctor came each day to alleviate my mother's pain with morphine and check that all was well with the household. There was clean laundry and food needed for visitors; although I didn't much care what fuel I ate. My mother was stoic approaching her death, content that she had done her job and raised her children. She certainly made the job easier, it must be hard if you are laying to rest a loved one who is no longer of sound mind or unable to face their death. By some mysterious act, the sort that sometimes occurs, my baby brother arrived unannounced from the sea just in time to help with the night nursing that always seemed like an eternity. I was better during the day, there were always so many things to achieve. My mother could have her son to sleep on the floor beside her. I was comforted by the knowledge that he would spend the night on alert as really there was no relief for my mother just because the sun had gone down.

Each evening I washed my mother's breasts, laid bare for her adult child to see as she became more dependent on me to fill the role that she had filled when I was an infant. Any hopeful sign of an appetite I rewarded with vegetables that I steamed and mashed with homemade broth so that they were a pulp fit for a baby until the time came when she could no longer stomach the food. Into her weary bottom I administered suppositories so that the morphine could deliver

its balm more quickly. If there is an order to things, false modesty is not required for death.

In the end my mother's passing was a peaceful affair despite the swing in my emotions. A swing from indignation to acceptance almost in one breath. She went so willing, off to a foreign universe, so that neither my family nor I could do any thing but rejoice at the end of her suffering. She had run a review of her life just towards the end. It was a private affair in which she verbalized the sequence of the events that were most relevant to her life. My father of course couldn't be there, but she was at peace with that, looking forward to rejoining him in her vision of her next life.

When my mother died I believed that nothing could ever be the same again. There's that all prevailing feeling of distorted reality that clings to everything you do. Like trying to quit addiction while you struggle through the world battling withdrawal in an oblivious world, but carrying on with the mundane. But actually that is not the truth of the matter. Eventually life took over and the cloud lifted and I began my new life.

Life isn't the same, but it never is. Your children leave home, maybe your partner dies or you retire from work or even change your philosophical point of view. Nothing can be the same forever. Some of my family took longer than others to move on, my mother's middle child is still prone to having a drink too many on "the anniversary". Imagine if life never changed. Would it be boring? Would there ever be a need for new solutions? It is after all adaption that creates growth. I do wonder that we trust Google for the answers these days, who, controls the Google answers? The media seems to have a very vocal opinion of how we should respond to death. The message that that death equals disaster seems to me to negate the rhythm of life and death. All that emotive language that leaves no room for acceptance of death! As if humans have not had to deal with the concept since mankind first buried their loved ones in their caves.

Something out there is turning the cogs in the wheel, creating a life cycle maybe brief or maybe long, we have no control over any of that and I guess in the end I accept it. My friends today have all buried their parents long enough ago to understand that there is no bringing back the past. We talk about our early family memories often without the sadness of loss. I guess I am blest that my memories of my mother are not marked by neglect or abuse. When I look back on it now I can see that my family were given the opportunity to say goodbye and express our love through our support.

In some ways I envy my mother. Old age is not any easy path. I don't have a contemporary who is free of any broken bits. If it's not their bones that creak, then the hearing is poor or they can no longer see the television. I'm exceptionally lucky that I am not reliant on the agency to send the help to wash me and mop my floor. I have a friend who had a very controlling husband who did everything from the banking to the cooking to the driving the car. He died six months ago, but before he went he changed their landline to a mobile leaving her struggling to make the thing work. The car sits in the garage as she awaits the

cleaner. It's the lack of mobility that pulls us all up. I am afraid that one day my fate might be the nursing home. Maybe my family will have no choice. That's a burden for them all.

I wasn't yet forty. My time with my mother revealed that in fact my own household would cope without me chained to the sink and the ironing board. Owen was really the only stumbling block. May was old enough to catch a bus to school, and in high school no mothers are required for reading. She was growing up, past that need for a mother to hover amongst her friends. The boys were happy with a meal on the table, Francis already preoccupied with his first girlfriend at night and at work as a plumber by day, Anthony labouring for his father while he considered university. There was really no need for nursery rhymes or someone to wipe the vegemite from grotty faces.

There have been very few times where I have put my foot down. It took Owen somewhat by surprise that I refused to bend to his will. He had a million excuses about why I should stay at home safe in the role he had given me. The thought of my own bankbook and the possibility of new friends and renewed sense of my own self-worth spurred my determination. I found a job cooking in the local pub that needed an old hand at producing a mixed grill and white sauce for the silverside at lunchtimes, not exactly the job of my dreams, nevertheless an entry into the world of workers. The job allowed me time to run my own domestic affairs. I can swear to the fact that Owen was never without a clean shirt and a meal on the table.

It had been twenty years since I had taken dictation for Mr. Grimes and I was competing with fresh young girls half my age. I really did get the impression that the general perception was that motherhood somehow drained me of any skills; no wonder young mothers have to get back to work today as soon as their maternity leave is up. It seems it is unforgivable to have a gap in your resume that suggests that you have put work behind family. In my day you had a job; today you have a career. Time spent nurturing children has created a gender pay gap and the jury is still out on a solution. There were at that time women who had decided on a career, but they still weren't the norm. Careers for women were still ahead, the age of power dressing in the eighties and the emergence of women in charge was still in its infancy. If you had told me at forty that there were many women my age just starting to contemplate motherhood I would have been incredulous.

I did worry that work would have an impact on May although how I came to that conclusion is not logical at all because it was only on weekends that she might possibly be home at lunchtime. I could set up breakfast for her knowing it would be nearer to lunchtime before she emerged from her bedroom. There were friends to meet at the shops and hours they spent walking from one friend's house to another, coupled in conversation about all their secret things. She was sullen at home, in contrast to her former gregarious self. At first I put it down to the loss of her grandmother and then as time wore on I attached her behaviour to the hormones that were transporting my girl from childhood through the bumpy road of puberty. The little girl that adored her father became the big girl

with whom Owen found endless fault. There was always an argument about the length of her skirt or a plunging neckline and in the end she decided the only way out of the house to the pool with a forbidden bikini was to conceal it from her father's view.

Owen's criticism of May seemed to me to be a poor approach to their relationship because it only made her more withdrawn. However I was willing to concede that he nagged out of his love for her, protective in the only way he understood. I can't say I ever actually asked her directly about how she felt about her father. I assumed things because she kept it all in, and I had no reason to ever suspect that the disharmony between them was anything more than the process of May asserting her own independence. I don't concede that all fathers are set on the same default setting. My father wasn't and yet I am sure that there were times when he held his tongue.

Chapter 8

I am not really bothered by magazines that promise that your house can be a show piece. I like clean but I never hanker over the latest trend. In the mid eighties Owen and Mick moved into building the shopping centres that were required to service the growing suburbs. They made good money from the venture without the heavy labour because they had reached the stage of having a reliable army of subcontractors to carry out the heavy lifting. Owen decided that it was time to abandon the butterfly roof in order to relocate further out of town. Suburbia had caught up with on our hill, although I don't know that really bothered him as much as the need to flex his muscles and build again.

Mick and Owen built whole universes where people pushed their trolleys, children cried or sat wide-eyed in their strollers, and my husband built my world. It was hard to talk him out of designing a house without flouro lights, although the practical flooring made my domestic duties easier. He was never interested in soft furnishings. He had no use for art and he hardly noticed what I hung on the walls. All building materials were acquired at the right price with no concession to the aesthetics even though I found something cold and ugly in the hard surfaces. I don't really claim to have any artistic expertise, but Owen was devoid of any. He was happy to build a commercial building in juxtaposition to five acres of bush, which I always found a little incongruous. The house was a long way out of town, which limited the visitors and sent me on a mission in my car to travel to work in the mornings. In retrospect I guess the aesthetics of the building didn't really matter because it was our home, and in the end I managed to transform it into a domestic landscape.

The dining room table with its dints and marks came of course, even though there were few children to sit around it any more. The first of the grandchildren had arrived with the disappointment that Francis was usually too busy to deliver his family for a visit. It was a contrast to the family roasts my children had shared with their grandparents. Owen ran out of enthusiasm for the house, citing lack of time as the excuse for never really completing the job of finishing the cabinetry. It seems that plumbers wives learn to change the washers themselves and a leckie's wife sits in the dark. The unfinished kitchen cupboards always caused me irritation. At least there was a shelf for the pots and the plates.

The house doesn't matter anymore because I live in my own cozy space. My art and the family portraits sit upon the walls and the little mementos of the children sit on top of my bookcase where I keep some of my favourite books, just in case I might be tempted to reread one or two. Not that I ever do; the library down the road is full of new publications. I no longer have the lounge suite that the children grew up on because it doesn't fit into my reduced living space. It is adequate and I have room for a visitor and that is all that matters. I don't need the dining room table any more because I am no longer concerned with the entertaining.

May was the only child to have lived for any long length of time in the house Owen built, although that is a loose description of her presence. She had a

plausible excuse to leave the acreage behind on weekends for the attractions of town. The boys had been easy; May was another matter. To this day I don't know how she managed to get through school. There was no attempt to put in any effort until her last year when for some unknown reason she decided that school might be worth the effort because she had friends at uni. The party would begin on Friday night and was ceaseless until she dressed in her school uniform on Monday morning. Her drinking worried me, there was something joyless about her approach to life. It seemed more than the usual teenage experimentation. You just can't grind someone out of the disturbances in their life even though that was Owen's initial approach. There was a lot of subterfuge that May deployed, the classic sleepover at a friends house ploy, someone spiked my drink, and the something I've eaten is making me vomit excuse. In the end Owen gave up and decided to distance himself from the problem.

I felt it was a victory when she had finally successfully enrolled in university. We had to my knowledge negotiated the most tumultuous years intact. I had recognized her burgeoning sexuality by the time she was fifteen and understanding that it was not a topic that was open for frank discussion with Owen, I had taken her off to the doctors myself to obtain a prescription for the pill. To my knowledge there had been no slip-ups. In retrospect I am sure she would have kept such information from me. Uni involved May moving out of our home and off to flat share in the city. Maybe that was what motivated her final effort with the books. The nest would be empty, which is a time for contemplation of what emptiness may lie ahead of you, a certain sadness that time is up. An underlying fear that you may never be needed again. Maybe if May had been happy at home transition for us all would have been more painful and while I was sorry to see her go I could only hope that surely she would find some greater purpose and a fresh start in a new life at Uni.

I particularly recall the preparation for my sixtieth birthday even though there had naturally been other notable occasions. The bulk of life had been conquered; old age was clearly looming in my mind. The ups and downs of menopause were in the past and I while I was conscious of the possibility of retirement I considered it to be years off. There were no more children to support and Owen had given himself a deadline of five years before he would put his feet up. He reasoned that both he and Mick were in good health so there was no need to retire just because most blokes did at his age.

I enjoyed work despite the fact that I had to admit I was beginning to feel the effects of slowing down. Life seems to be full of self-imposed milestones. I remember thinking that as soon as this baby can sleep through the night my life will be back on track, or that I just have to get them through school and the success in life would be guaranteed. When you watch them walk down the aisle, is it all over? I have found it hard to draw the line between the responsibilities for motherhood and the reality that my children as adults are totally responsible for their own lives. I dread the thought of ever having to relinquish my role and hand my fate over to my children.

I am only really telling you about my sixtieth because it was significant in two ways, after all there seem to be enough of those birthdays where you are faced with a new decade. And to think I dreaded forty! Seems a bit pointless that I ever feared the first wrinkle, not knowing that eventually you can accept the evidence in the mirror.

I was cooking because of the pleasure it brought. I miss those times. I really don't entertain anymore, although I still like to cook for myself. I have friends who are dependent upon meals delivered each day by a cheery changing kaleidoscope of volunteers or who have lost all interest in food. Sadly my boys would not be attending. Francis was in the USA on a sabbatical leave, building on his knowledge of history. He had done well in the world of academia and I am very proud of him. I know that my father would have been proud of him. All those years delivering groceries and mowing lawns had filtered down to a different future for his grandson.

Owen found it hard to legitimize Francis's chosen profession, skeptical that a career that wasn't aimed at making a maximum amount of money had any value. I suspect that a lack of a girlfriend had tempered Owen's view. Francis never produced anyone as a partner so his sexual preferences were all speculation really I don't care what Owen thinks I am only sorry that he couldn't give our son the encouragement he deserved. I hope Francis understands how I feel. In the end it is Owen's loss and at the time I felt sorry for both their loss. I know that Harry would have been more accepting of Francis, so I don't know where Owen developed his attitude. Maybe it was pure homophobia. And there ain't no cure for that!

I am also proud of Anthony, he has worked hard and has three sons who all seem like happy well-adjusted kids with happy kids of their own. There has been a marriage or two that produced problems, that is unavoidable, but in the grand scheme of things they are a privileged lot. His wife is dear girl. who has managed to juggle work as a teacher with a commitment to her boys. Anthony and his clan were also away because the family had made a booking for a holiday on a cruise long before there was any thought of my birthday.

May was back in town at the time, although not living at home. Unfortunately uni had not worked out. I don't know when she actually threw in the towel. It was twelve months in before she announced on the phone that she had found a job behind the bar. Owen was furious, complaining that he had invested his money in an education that had taken his daughter nowhere. There was no reasoning with him that education is never wasted and I could never convince him that his aggression only served to keep May at bay.

She did come home for Christmas once before the husband. Sadly there was a sense that her heart wasn't in it. It wasn't anything that she said, rather her lack of enthusiasm for all the little traditions that had been part of her childhood. Usually there was an excuse that kept her from the family circle. At Christmas or Easter and other significant events there would be a phone call, but never a visit.

Who knows what life she led? I can't even report if her reckless approach to the bottle had been tempered or not.

I will admit I was disappointed that she didn't consider family events of any importance. As a mother you understand that your job is to give and provide support, however that doesn't mean that you can help harbouring a secret hope that all your efforts will be recognized. But what can you do? You can't live someone's life for them. I could only ever hope that she was safe and happy. I worry now that in fact I had missed all the clues.

It was several years after she dropped out of uni that she produced a husband. There was no consultation with Owen and I. Not that I believe that it is up to me to pass judgment. After all you just can't know what someone else needs or wants in their life. What are you going to do if you see the faults in the arrangement? Put your foot down and demand that an adult follows your dictum? He was probably a perfectly okay kinda person. He was a fully employed engineer so I was glad that she had the possibility of a secure financial future. There was never any report from May about abuse or neglect, I am sure it was never an issue. The only real negative was that I was disappointed because I would have liked to have been part of her wedding. Nothing more than that.

She did bring him home for a weekend after the wedding and he certainly came across as a perfectly well balanced gentleman. He was in love with May and she was clearly at that time smitten with him. That in love period is such a powerful thing. She was happy in that period, which was clear to anyone that saw her with her husband. Apparently they both had an ambition to travel, and it wasn't too long before there was an announcement that they were headed off to England where his ancestry had allowed him to take up a new job. They were happy days those early days.

But it didn't last. Just a mere five years! Probably time for the honeymoon period to have run its course. I had no inkling of why. No indication of why it fell to pieces. Certainly there would never be an expose' from May. She stayed on in England and came home just before she turned thirty. I was so glad to have her back, to have more than the occasional telephone call. I didn't feel that she should actually move back into her own bedroom, because she was after all a fully fledged adult. She would sometimes meet me in town for lunch or give me a call, but she never actually lined up for Sunday lunch. I had no suspicions about why she avoided the family home, never once really connecting her reluctance to a visit as anything more than the results of a busy life. Owen complained from time to time that her connections with him were rare. I put it all down to the timing of two busy people.

May rang to say she was sorry she would not be attending my sixtieth. Some excuse about work. She had no time to speak to Owen because of some other vague commitment. There seemed a plausible explanation in her excuse. I had come to accept what I believed was her selfishness, as a mother I acknowledge that as a flaw, it could be accepted. There had been so many disconnected years

that I was I just grateful that at least she had bothered to make the call. She wished me all the best and you can only take that as an expression of love.

I thought she was wrong, or at the least ungrateful for finding no time to speak to Owen because after all, even if he was a nag he had paid the school fees and the ballet fees and she had never had to go hungry. I am aware that as the years passed by he had become harder and harder to please, I accepted that was the deal. But I also understood that it had become a pattern stemming from his criticism of her in her teenage years and really I didn't stop to think about all the occasions when she had avoided contact with her father. Why didn't I? Was it some sort of naivety? Sometimes it is apparent that no matter how much you care as a parent you can get it wrong. How do we get so far removed from the baby that needs every moment of your careful attention, not a movement unnoticed, to miss the signposts? Surely you can't be a helicopter parent forever, there is no growth in that.

After all those years of marriage my role hadn't changed. I reported the phone call to Owen, neglecting all it implied; instead I lied and reported that there had been a call from her friend to say that May was laid up with a temperature. You wouldn't get away with the excuse today because even small kids seem to have a mobile phone to hand, so really you can ring from your death bed if you had the mind to. Actually his response demonstrated he was happy with an evening without May, or at least there was no pretense that he was disappointed that she would not be part of the celebrations. I was sorry that their relationship had been reduced to an acceptance of absence. There was no future in dwelling on the situation.

I always recall what I cooked for some special occasion as, if the planning and then the execution of the task has locked it into my long-term memory. I wonder if there will come a time when I forget? I enjoyed the planning; it gave me an opportunity to practice and deliver the skills that occupied years in the kitchen. I don't understand folk that reject the notion of cooking. It is both relaxing and challenging at the same time. I can't say I have ever served anyone fish fingers and I have never been tempted to purchase instant mashed potato. How fashion in cooking has changed over the years, the television full of cooks that encourage an adventurous attitude, the supermarket shelves full of short cuts, but it isn't the same as conceiving an evening at table from your own imagination.

I know it all sounds so very domestic, I did warn you that there would be no tales of espionage or earthquakes. The second matter involved Mick

Chapter 9

There was a magpie on the fence outside my kitchen window. It was a large window and I was never too sure whether it was letting the outside in or the inside out. The magpie appeared each evening just before the last light fled into the night and it watched with its quizzical eye, my movements in the kitchen. I understand that a magpie either accepts or rejects your presence; they know who is friend and who is foe, although I don't know how they make that decision. I guess they judge you as a non-threat. I think my friends saw me that way. Bowerbirds intrigue me because they collect bright things to make their nest attractive to a mate. I don't think I was one of those, I thought of myself as more of a magpie, although my close friends were an eclectic mob.

I didn't want a big party for my sixtieth; I prefer the intimacy of a small group. I find at a big party as the hostess you have to spread yourself too thin so that in the end there is no real contact with anyone. I was sorry I would be without family, but on the other hand it allowed me to set the table with my mother's crotched cloth for a night of conversation. I can't give you dialogue because the events occurred twenty years ago and only some lines remain with us long after the essence is gone. I know dialogue helps to tell a story well. But there would be no truth in it even though I can imagine exactly what each character would say there would be an inaccuracy. Who wants a stilted version of the truth even if it entertains? A little bit of Sheridan or even the eloquence of The Bard set out in poetic terms would be a defection of the truth, like a rainbow landing beyond the horizon. Excuse me for that- I don't want to distract from my story. I must be fair with any quotes.

My dearest friends at the time came in pairs, and I wonder at that now. I can't really say that I had a widowed or single friend. These days most of my friends are single. Maybe the most threatening funerals were still ahead of me and from what the newspaper reports there are some dangers when you get to sixty. It intrigues me that the list of people you call your friend can change over time as life morphs into new scenarios. A relocation or a death can change the whole landscape. Folk that were part of my life in different periods still remain in my memory, even though they have moved on. The magpie keeps its territory clear of intrusions, so I guess it doesn't have to adapt to change.

Time has moved all of them on. Friends that were so important at the time, so essential to your view of yourself were maybe only ever on loan. Sometimes you have the privilege of randomly running into an old friend from way back and there can be that connection, the thing that brought you together in the first place. However I am no longer surprised when I find that time has created a chasm. It's usually only the memory that I cherish because really in the end you are on your own journey. My father used to say that if you live a long life and have one lifelong friend at the end you have done well. I guess a man that had to leave a whole life behind in Italy knew what he was talking about.

I am the eldest of six children and you would expect that the family would remain as bedrock to a continuous connection. However three of my siblings had succumbed to the grim reaper through ill health and misfortune before I turned sixty. We certainly weren't endowed with the longevity gene. It was always rather sobering that people younger than I could actually die. We remaining three wept at the time, at what we viewed as a too early departure. My baby brother has evaporated into a life of obscurity in Southeast Asia, the time I hadn't heard from him in over twelve months so I had no expectation of him turning up for my sixtieth despite the fact that he often surprised me by demonstrating that he actually knew when my kids had a birthday. Must be some strange twist in his memory that he recalls such matters. I know that he would have appreciated the fact that he was not required to front up to a sit down dinner with my friends. The only one left was a sister who doesn't drive and as result moved into a daughter's household interstate. I guess that is what makes the memories significant, when you get to eighty and you know that time is running short, the past seems sharper.

My silverware was shining and my crystal glasses gleaming set out upon the Owen's dining table, the scuffs and marks hidden by the splendor of my mother's cloth when Sen and Ben arrived. I always amused by their names because they sounded like the rhyming characters names in *The Flower Pot Men* from the early days of television. My kids used to watch them and imitate Little Weed whenever they played in our garden. Apparently Sen is a Vietnamese word for a lotus flower and my friend fitted the description perfectly.

I could always count on the couple to arrive promptly, which is important when you are preparing a meal because the timing is imperative. I had opened my cream, which was required for the entrée only to discover it was well past its use by date and a last minute call to Sen resulted in her arriving cream in hand with apologies in case her timing was out. Owen always complained that I overdid things when it came to entertaining. If it was up to him, it would be a barbeque for every occasion, although I note that he never actually objected to dinner party conversation.

I had requested no presents. There is a point where your house is full of everything you need, the jewelry case rarely used any more, no need for yet another scarf or bottle of perfume. Owen and I had given up on giving each other presents years before, calling a truce on the gift giving. Sen arrived however with a pot of Vietnamese mint to add to my herb garden. I was unfamiliar with the herb at the time and she knew it would spark my interest. I remember still my introduction to its pungent hint of Asian mysteries. Like me, Sen enjoyed cooking and she had taught me many of the secrets of a cuisine that had grown in popularity with the arrival of the first Vietnamese boat people after the fall of Saigon. She had endured a perilous journey in order to escape war to be confronted by a foreign language and a foreign culture at the age of eleven. By the time I met her in her early twenties she had command of it all.

It was unusual for Sen and her uncle to have ended up in a regional town. The rest of her family had perished in the war so I suppose the pair had no ties to any

of their compatriots in our cities. Pauline Hanson hadn't created her One Nation Party, nobody that I knew was even aware of some perceived threat of an Asian invasion. By the time Pauline was sprouting her bigotry Sen had been totally absorbed into her new identity. I understand that Muslims are now in the firing line so hopefully this wave of hatred will be diluted by time, although Pauline now has social media to strengthen her views, all in the name of free speech. I don't know if there is a difference between free speech and hate speech, but at least Sen is not in the firing range anymore. I think it is a shame that it took so long for a Vietnamese restaurant to open in our town, after all we had all been eating Chinese food forever, but I guess there was no one to cook it. So much for an invasion!

Sen's uncle worked as a farm labourer to put her through school where she made some good friends because of her positive nature. I met her when I went to work in ladies wear in a department store in town. She never complained of hard work, which struck me as unusual amongst the rest of the staff in the store. She could charm any customer and you could be sure that no customer ever left empty handed once Sen had them in her sights. Despite our age gap it didn't take long for us to become the best of friends.

Sen was part of an emerging era for women. Work was being promoted as every woman's right by the eighties, which of course altered the traditional view of women's role. In my day and all the days before my time, women were expected to remain at home tending their offspring. I had no other experience of motherhood. It was tough those years when the days never ended but I was proud of my efforts. You would have been hard pressed to convince me that there was any other way to bring up your children. In fact I regretted that I hadn't breastfed my children for longer. Sen had insisted on feeding her children until they were two. It seemed hard to imagine a child at the breast who was able to demand and argue their case for nourishment with a limited use of language. Sen said it was an agreement between her and her babies. And through it all she continued to work.

Daycare had become a big issue with the majority of mothers still at home in the eighties. Most of us viewed motherhood as a question of morality, a duty with the job description set in stone. Sen was both privileged and unusual because she had a secret weapon at home called Ben. I don't know of any other father at the time who was willing to swap roles with his wife and take up fulltime parenting. Most blokes believed that a househusband betrays the sacred role of men and in fact many women felt the same way. He didn't do the breastfeeding of course; Sen pumped by day and fed them the comfort of her breast by night. A true lotus flower, delivering her nourishment! I guess that even today there aren't too many men than can endure a long day with a sick or teething baby and since that time Daycare centres have proliferated allowing both parents to work.

Ben was a real friend, the sort of friend who was never too busy to help you out with the heavy lifting in the garden or around the house. He was an amicable bloke who got on well with any company. As a non-drinker he was never likely to be found in the pub with Owen and Mick, but he never knocked them for their

drinking habits. He knew enough about what was going on in the world of football and cricket to keep up with the bloke's conversation and when to remain silent when the conversation focused on making money. He wasn't that interested in making money himself; he had more of a passion for saving the world. He and I often discussed issues of social justice. He had a shaky start to study as a uni student in the days when students took protests as a passionate commitment, full of hope of changing the world. By the time I met him however he had settled into life as a landscaper, which was only interrupted by the time spent rearing his babies.

I know he often smoked a little pot at home, not that he ever appeared at my house with a joint in hand. Owen would have found that unacceptable being of the opinion that pot smokers are likely to crash through your front door with fury in their eye swinging an axe. Ben always played it cool at my place and stuck to a brew of the limes that he grew in his garden sweetened with honey and a generous serving of icy cold water. I can't see that his pot ever did any of us any harm despite the country's punitive approach to drugs policy. In fact I never mentioned Bill's cannabis use to Owen, imagining the fuss that would result.

I don't know if my children ever smoked pot. I would assume that Anthony was as straight as the face he presented. I am pleased to say that he was able to conduct his plumbing business without resorting to nightly visits to the pub. I have never discussed why he avoided mixing the pub with business. I suspect it is a reaction to his father's nightly absence when he was a child.

On the other hand I am not too sure about Francis and May. They certainly never make their habits public at home. And they all left home early enough to establish their own lives. It was possible to leave home in those days. Today's offspring seem to stay home long after the time that my generation would be starting our own families. Homelessness had not developed into the sad crisis that is reported on my television at an unnerving pace. Before the turn of the century it was an issue that we could barely imagine. It was only folk infected with mental illness or addiction that slept on the streets. I am glad that I have been spared the burden of worrying that any of my family will ever end up searching for a bed on a cold winters night.

We have ICE addiction to worry about now. I don't think I would have been able to break bread at my table with a diner full of crystal methamphetamine without it coming to the notice of the rest of the folk at the table. In 1994 the Australian National Task Force on cannabis noted that prohibition caused more harm than the drug. In retrospect we had such minor worries and yet each generation grapples with their own boogey man.

You could in fact describe Ben as a hippie, a child of the sixties who had never lost his belief in an alternate way of life. I think Owen thought of him as a "greenie", but it was my birthday and my choice to invite whomever I choose. I actually admired the fact that Ben kept his mouth shut at my dinner when Owen and Mick discussed clearing a new swath of land in preparation for a new estate.

I guess he recognized that there are some minds that cannot be changed through emotive argument.

Probably the thing I enjoyed most about Ben's company is that he was a reader. It is great when you find someone with a shared interest. Owen only ever read the Sunday paper, although there was an occasion years back when Owen and Mick came back from one of their fishing trips and I found a book in Owen's bag. It was a very short Western, which makes sense. He was for some reason embarrassed by the find as if he had been caught out in some dreadful felony. Really! It's not like I dismiss people because they don't like reading, I just feel they are unlucky to have never accepted the experience a book can bring. Anyway, Ben was a good friend who always passed on a book that he felt was worth reading.

He arrived with a tattered copy of *Cloudstreet* which I had been interested in reading for some years. Funny how sometimes it takes ages to get around to reading a book despite all the advice that it the work is well worth your time. I liked the fact that it was his personal copy, I knew there would be random stains, shreds of tobacco and other evidence of Ben's reading that make the volume something shared.

Chapter 10

I was on my second glass of champagne before Jeannie made her entrance with Mick in tow. I can never recall an occasion when Jeannie arrived on time, however she had an uncanny knack of arriving at the precise moment to create a commanding entrance. Also I have never known her to arrive without a smile that encompassed the assembly and her bold laugh that drew attention from even the most disinterested of parties. I think she would probably have made the same entrance if she'd just extricated herself from a car crash on her way to the gathering. I always admired her positivity, her ability to turn everything into fun. She was the perfect guest for a sixtieth celebration, particularly as I wasn't too convinced that turning sixty was a glass half full moment.

I don't know that the rest of the world appreciated Jeannie as much as I did; she was a pretty forceful personality. She had the hugging virus, which like herpes can put people off. It wasn't always fashionable to go around hugging people and I'm not too sure when it became an acceptable social more, but Jeannie had landed me with a hug when Mick first introduced her as his fiancé in the early eighties. Despite the fact that I am ten years older than her we became the best of friends. You could easily mistake her for looking 20 years younger than me. She always oozed class and even though I haven't seen her for years I bet she still does. In the 80's she had the widest shoulder pads and the biggest hair. Her hairdresser should have been able to support a tribe of children on the money spent keeping Jennie's hair up to date. You never knew whether you would be confronted with a blond, a brunette or a redhead, although I can't say I really liked the hot pink era.

Really we were very different, but maybe that doesn't matter when you have a sympathetic ear. Jeannie was always ready to listen and on many an occasion she had dismantled my perceived concerns with her sense of humor. She was thirty-five before she produced her one and only child, which in the early eighties was considered a very late start. She used to joke that she would be mistaken as the grandmother and given the fact that I had friends who were indeed grandmothers at thirty-five, it was a possibility. No wonder she treasured the thought that she could still compete with her daughter in the looks department and I have to say she deserved the compliments. She was the sort of girl that managed to look glamorous first thing in the morning, or emerging dripping wet from a pool. She wasn't even red faced after a jog. I always felt frumpy no matter what I wore when I was with Jeannie, not that she ever deliberately made me feel that way. I have never lost the layer of fat that clung to my waist and my hips and grew with each pregnancy. Maybe it was a protective layer unconsciously shielding me from any thought of the advances of any males that might be on the prowl, or maybe the belief that it didn't really matter to Owen. Whatever it was I didn't ever really go into battle in the glamor stakes.

Mick for all his bravado and business acumen was more of an appendage to Jeannie. He completed the side of her that she liked to present to the world. I often wondered at the fate of Mick's first wife and family who remained

unmentioned by either Jeannie or Mick. Certainly there was no question of having to blend the families and anyway Mick's kids would have been adults by the time Jeannie was on the scene. I know there had been a string of girlfriends in between his families, but Mick never bothered to introduce any of them to me. He was a short guy, just like Owen. Maybe that is what he and Owen had in common. A determination to show the world, who was who. Mind you Jeannie never deferred to Mick's height by wearing flats, and was never bothered by the fact that she was half a head taller than her husband. But he was a successful guy, which clearly appealed to the ladies. Owen never bothered to report on any of the girlfriends and the only reason I met Jeannie was because she did the books for the company, in which capacity she appeared at a staff Christmas party one year.

Despite his unimposing stature Mick did come across as the silver fox. I love that expression it says it all. I suspect that that he plied his status with the women he met because he dressed like the white shoe brigade. He openly admired Christopher Skase and Alan Bond until they fell into disgrace. In fairness to Mick I can't say he ever did the wrong thing by Owen and me. He was ten years older than me, however I know he still tried his hand at winning the hearts of the ladies. I had seen him in action whenever an attractive woman came within range. If he was ever successful, Mick kept the information to himself. Perhaps Jeannie knew, but she had her own secrets to guard. Jeannie was fortunate that her daughter was the spitting image of her because there had been some confusion about paternity. However Mick was able to let his doubts go because he had not one but two glamorous girls to present to the world in which appearances were imperative.

The glossy couple had arrived with more champagne and a drink was needed before they sat down to table and I approached the kitchen armed with the cream to sauté the scallops. I take great pride in organizing a dinner party so that all my prep is done in advance and I am barely absent from the table. After all who wants to miss out on the conversation since that is really the most important part of the event, and I would hate to make my guests feel obliged to leap from their seats to offer a hand.

I once attended a dinner party where the hostess remained invisible behind a wall that separated the kitchen from the dining room table. The intermittent sounds of clanking crockery and clanging pans was only punctuated by the odd cursive remark from our hostess who in the end failed to even join us at the table. Her husband had a hard time of it keeping us all entertained while slipping into the kitchen from time to time to see if there was anything thing he could do to assist. We all gathered that his input was not appreciated and since Owen and I were unacquainted with the other couple at the table there were a lot of awkward silences. The hostess did appear for our departure, which we made the moment the husband cleared the dessert bowls, and as gracious guests we all thanked the poor women with what could only be described as an over abundance of enthusiasm. I guess she unwittingly created an evening that kept Owen and I entertained for days afterwards. Lucky she had appeared at the end or we would have remained convinced that she didn't exist at all, and we had

been part of some stage play involving a murdered wife and a guilty husband covering up his dastardly deed.

Jeannie is not a big drinker. She is one of those individuals who is able to extract maximum entertainment from any social setting without the need for alcoholic lubricant, but in deference to the significance of the occasion she and Mick had caught a cab to my place. I remember when the children were little and Owen would have more than his fair share of booze in the pub with Mick after work, not that they got legless every night, but there were certainly enough incidents when Owen would comment the next morning that he had in fact been drunk behind the wheel. I thought nothing of it at the time. In fact it was seen as something a man could pull off. Thank God we all got through that period unscathed. One thing the tightening of drink driving laws and the advertising campaigns did was deliver Owen home to do his drinking. I don't know if there are too many folk out there now that would seriously praise the expertise of a drink driver.

When Jeannie lined up for her third glass of champagne before I had even pulled the Asian pork out of the oven, even Ben was responding to her enthusiastic observations on graffiti art. Politics and religion were by agreement banned from discussion. I was very glad about the rule knowing that in fact Mick was a One Nation supporter. That fact never seemed to bother Jeannie who actually had no interest in politics at all which I found rather remarkable. How could you have an interest in art to the exclusion of politics? Maybe Jeannie only ever viewed the world as a decorative backdrop. Mick tended to take a back seat whenever Jeannie held the floor, which is just as well because I could not have borne the thought of Mick pontificating on the issue of invading Asian hordes with my dear Sen at the table. Mick had not met Sen and Ben before, but I trust he understood that he would be way out of order.

I appreciate that the boys refrained from discussion about sport because really I can't claim to know one code from another even though I had raised two boys. Owen always took care of that stuff, I just sounded enthusiastic, washed the uniforms, applied the band aides and kept the home fires burning. I am sure if you mentioned a ballet to Owen, he would not have a clue about what movement was which and really as a partnership that worked well enough. Jeannie actually didn't mind a bit of sporting talk, she was after all concerned with anything connected to fitness and she had the brashness that made her an asset for barracking for a team. Sen's were musical kids; she and Ben had a house full of guitars and a piano that took centre stage in their lounge.

I was surprised when Jeannie continued to offer her glass up for a refill, however you couldn't deny that she was enjoying my birthday. Although religion was off the table for discussion George Pell had been dominating the news with his Melbourne Response. Jeannie brought the topic up with a laugh that she found it difficult to believe that anyone would be gullible enough to consider attending church. I guess it was a surprise to me during that period to learn that the issue of sexual abuse of children had even occurred. I can't say that I was ever a witness to such horrors and in fact none of my peers ever reported such matters.

Of course time has revealed that George Pell himself was convicted of sexual assault on two choirboys, and although the conviction was later quashed, the fact remains that the church had distanced itself from any real responsibility for the problem that continued unchecked year after year. It certainly divided the faithful but in nineteen ninety-eight I was still naïve enough to believe that the percentage of clergy that offended was so small as to be understood as an inevitable part of any large organization. Ben was adamant that the solution was to avoid all religious institutions and I guess if I knew then what I know now, I would have agreed.

The nineties had ushered in a lot of changes. I was too old to be influenced by grunge fashion and Hip-Hop. Luckily I wasn't required to sell anything remotely youthful at work. Sen had moved off into the world of real estate after our initial connection, a stepping-stone into the world of capitalism. There is no point in flogging your point of view about the pitfalls or benefits of capitalism because we are all obliged to use our talents, regardless of any other philosophy. She was smart and good at it. Ben accepted his good fortune in life even though he was as far removed from a salesman, as you would ever get. Sen had become about as Aussie as you could possibly be. Real estate had opened up a connection between Owen and Sen and I appreciated the fact that they got on well together.

I rejoiced in that decade when Nelson Mandela was released from jail and when the first Australian female premier was elected in Western Australia. Sadly we lost a great talent when Brett Whiteley finally succumbed to the needle, but Jeffery Rush was named best actor of the year for his portrayal of man plagued by schizophrenia. The Mabo decision had at last created some hope for indigenous Australians and all the tensions of the Cold War which had hung over so many of us for so long was resolved. Mostly though these were all events that had little real impact on my life. I had joined a group of women who sewed soft toys for the local hospital, and we would gather at the organiser's home for the company, as much as for the need to feel that we were contributing to some greater good. I always made sure that I was at home on the nights that Seinfeld aired on television. Owen declared after his first viewing that it was American crap so I always had the couch to myself on Seinfeld nights.

Labor lost to the Liberals half way through the decade, which suited both Owen and Mick who considered themselves to be firmly on the right. I however had been heavily influenced by my father's faith in labor policy. I could never see any point in arguing with Owen who believed entirely in the self-made man. There was no gain in pointing out that not everyone comes from the same level playing field or even has the ability to make it to the top. I know many people who have done nothing but work hard all their lives, conscientious about their duties to both their employers and their families, nevertheless at the end of each week they are confronted with an empty bank account and no way of increasing their fortunes

Anyway we avoided the direct political debate and it wasn't until we were finished with the dessert and pouring the liqueurs that the topic of the MUA emerged. There had been a long and bitter strike by the Maritime workers,

which had impacted on some supplies to the business. Sen and I kept out of the discussion, Ben advocated for the rights of workers and things were just starting to get a little heated when Jeannie interjected. "It doesn't matter anymore because Mick is selling out," she blurted out. I am sure it was the grog that had loosened her tongue, because by the look on Mick's face she had divulged a move that he clearly hadn't discussed with anyone else, certainly not Owen.

There was nothing Mick could do under the circumstances but admit that the statement was fact. He did try to smooth it over with his rationale that it was time for him to retire and enjoy life before it ran out. Jeannie was aglow with the news that they had a very long overseas trip planned, ignorant of the fact that both Owen and I had a lot to digest. Fortunately Owen held his tongue, although I could see he was shocked. I can't blame him. He and Mick had been in partnership for so many years, so really you would expect news of retirement would have come from the horse's mouth,

Mick got Jeannie out the door pretty soon after that. She stumbled on the front steps when the cab arrived, however she drifted off into the night seemingly unaware of the bomb she had dropped. Sen and Ben disappeared pretty quickly as well, and that was the end of my party. You can see why I remember it so well. I'm sure there couldn't have been more impact if someone had yelled out 'fuck' during a quiet moment in church, or we had been woken in the middle of the night by the siren of a fire engine heading for our house.

Chapter 11

This very evening I have been out on my verandah under a full moon and it was the light on just a few leaves that attracted my attention. Not the whole tree illuminated in some ghostly representation, just a few leaves that caught the glittering light. Sometimes it just those small pinpoints that make the most lasting impression, that create the atmosphere that lingers long after the whole scene has dissipated.

I don't think I have ever seen Owen as drunk as he was when he rolled into our home on the night after the party. I had gone to bed before pub closing time because Owen was not yet home and he had left for the office early enough in the day in order to confront Mick. I had hoped that he might call and bring me up to speed on the situation, after all my future was also at stake. But no call came. His evening meal was under plastic film in the fridge when I decided that clearly he was at the pub and I would be better off in my bed.

He had no hope of managing the lock in the front door, which was what alerted me to the fact that he was at home. He must have had his weight on the door when I opened it because he crashed through on to the floor with a sickening thud. I attempted to help him to his feet but he pushed me away and half-crawled half-rolled to the rug on the lounge room floor. I wish he hadn't aimed for the rug because he was so drunk that I was immediately confronted with a vile mix of whisky and beer that came gushing out from somewhere deep within that anguished soul and drenched the mat. I have to admit that I felt some animosity towards Mick in that moment.

All I could do was coax him off the mat and on to the couch where I left him for the night. He seemed unaware that I was even there and immediately fell into a deep sleep. I was concerned that I hadn't seen the last of the whisky and beer mix, however I left him on his side fearing that he might choke lying on his back. Like the small pinpoints of light on the leaves in the moonlight, our hall light caught the sodden mat its shag pile flattened by the burden of vomit and Owen. I threw it out the next day when a cleaning attempt failed to remove the smell.

His hangover the next day kept him in bed until well after the office doors were due to open. I did feel sorry for him, without warning he was facing a change he hadn't foreseen, Apparently Mick had decided to find a replacement for himself as an offering when he announced his retirement. I guess I could see Mick using that sort of logic. They left on good terms; Owen's initial indignation appeased by Mick. I was glad of that because in fairness they were mates. But it took its toll and before any further reflection, Owen went to the pub with the intention of getting very, very drunk. Personally I have never found inebriation to be a solution in times of crisis because the world looks considerably worse through the lens of a hangover.

There was no real discussion about the future until Owen had time to digest the information and so it was a couple of days before he made his decision. We had never really given any serious thought to retirement. You know it is coming, an

inevitable end to life as you know it, but somehow it doesn't seem real, especially for Owen who not only lived and breathed work, but also enjoyed the challenges it produced. I can't say I ever heard him complain about having to work, although I know there are plenty of people who view it as the price that has to be paid for Original Sin. There were signs that both of us were slowing down, which is something you try to ignore at first. Of course if I knew at sixty what I know now I would have appreciated the process.

We had made no plans for a future without work, no dreams of travel or a sea change, no dreams of endless days golfing or even fishing, no dreams of gardening or bowls and there was no way that either of us was up for a game of bingo. I don't know if we both buried our heads in the sand or were still too energized to think of retirement. There was at least the consolation of being financially secured. It must be a hard road if the bank is empty and you have no roof over your head. The business had survived the recession that ran through the late eighties and into the early nineties and the Great Recession was still ahead of us. We were savers rather than spenders, as Owen often liked to point out with a smugness that lent no opportunity for me to ever indulge myself without a sense of guilt.

I had my own income from work and although I was by this time only working part time I had enough money to buy birthday presents for grandchildren, or to invite my friends around for a meal. Work gave me the opportunity to engage with the outside world and return home at the end of the busy day, satisfied that I had done my best to make the cogs of the universe turn so I could understand how for Owen it was necessary for a sense of achievement. In the end he decided that without Mick there was no point in continuing.

Mick was somewhat disappointed with the decision to close the business. But it wasn't like he had a son or a daughter ready to take the reins and in the end he had to be content with the knowledge that he and Owen had run their business with integrity and had left a legacy of a solid reputation. There was a job that was still nearing completion, so at least there was time for their employees to come to terms with the change of circumstances. There were a couple of blokes who had worked for the business for years, and Owen felt that he was letting them down. I suppose someone would have filled the gap in the market opened up by the closure. It seemed so important at the time; in reality for most of the workers Owen and Mick would by now be a distant memory. Mick decided that a couple of kegs and a steak barbeque was warranted when the job was complete, and I understand that the workers did the kegs justice. I don't know if they put on a keg when they close a factory down, but as a result all of Mick and Owen's workers remained on the best of terms with them.

Jeannie rang while the course of action was still being debated. She apologized for the disturbance she had caused, vowing to keep well clear of the grog in the future. Really the news was coming no matter how it was delivered, so while I had initially wrestled for a brief moment with the notion that she was somehow to blame for unraveling my birthday party, I had come to the conclusion that it was an unjust judgement. I wonder how many events remain wedged in our

memory precisely because they end on a sour note. Today every moment of every possible occasion mundane or not, is recorded in digital images. Seems there is more value in the image than the actual moment. I am fascinated by coverage of folk at a concert who have paid to attend and experience a performer in person, but view it all through their mobile phones. There are very few photos of me as a child because very few people owned a camera, and yet the few images that do exist still have the power to transport me back to memories just as powerfully constructed as thousands of photos on someone's phone. I wonder if all those photos will in the end be proof of a life or construct a reality that never existed, after all people seem to avoid taking a snapshot of the negative moments.

Work did not hold the same interest for Jeannie, who in reality found doing the books for the business an interruption to her busy social life and there was the thought of travel. She had years before there would be any indication that it was time to slow down and as she pointed out, she and Mick had a teenage daughter to look after. Apparently the daughter would be staying with Jeannie's mother while they were away, so with everything under control she was already planning her travelling wardrobe. I wished her well. Who knew what the future might hold. Maybe Mick would remain a sprightly old gent well into old age, or maybe not. You never know if the commitment of marriage might lead to nursing a dementia patient or getting a stroke victim back on their feet. I guess it is all a punt, but for all her frivolity Jeannie was in fact devoted to Mick.

Was there ever a wonderful night for a *Moondance*? It seemed like it at one point in my life. In fact I'm sure there was once a full moon and my feet danced with my heart, but after forty years of marriage I couldn't claim that I was devoted to Owen. The irresistible curl had long since been replaced by a bald patch, which reacted to sunlight with alarming results. Not that his physical charms were in any way relevant after all that time. However it is a testing time when a man who has been occupied by work no longer grabs his packed lunch from the kitchen bench and heads off into his own world and is now suddenly under foot. There is only so much time that you can devote to reading the newspaper and the grass doesn't need mowing on a daily basis. It's not like Owen was ever likely to offer to help with the chores or suggest a trip into town for lunch. He wasn't trained for such things.

Retirement made Owen irritable and restless. Not restless enough to consider completing the kitchen cupboards, however he did bring out the paint and brushes and give the house a badly needed lick of paint. At the time it seemed like we were stuck in a groove with no way out. In reality it was only six months. Fortunately a reprieve was offered when Owen discovered a Men's Shed and a degree of harmony was restored to my life. The Men's Shed still left more time at home together than both of us were accustomed to spending. You would think after all those years of marriage you would be glad of the time, however I think the years of the women's movement may have rubbed off on me over time. I continued to play the role that Owen had given me, but I could no longer view it as fair. Gone was the young barefoot and pregnant wife fulfilled by the opportunity to wait on her husband. All those youthful notions of wanting to be a

“good wife”! And I suppose that also I no longer had small children dependent upon me to keep me on track.

I wonder if Owen ever gave the women’s second-wave movement any serious thought. I had considered a few avenues over the years to provide some stimulation and expand on life as Owen’s wife. Actually it was only at work or in the sewing circle that I can say I had my own identity. Reports of mature aged students that enjoyed the opportunity of a free university education introduced by Gough Whitlam, inspired me to dream at one point of studying literature. It was only a brief dream because Owen vetoed the very mention of the possibility. Perhaps I was after all born into the wrong generation. Too old to take a stance, still half believing in the manual delivered by mother on my wedding day, and yet tempted by the possibility of a different direction. I have to admit I conceded to his objections without a fight, it would have after all been pointless.

I know that Owen could not surrender to the thought of a wife with an education, frightened by the idea that it might challenge his authority. I guess that is why the women’s movement is still fighting the battle for equal pay and a sense of equity. I don’t know that there will ever be a balance of power in any situation as long as people can justify their own value through the use of power. It’s the same in politics, in the men that run the churches, in international affairs, in the distribution of wealth and anywhere else that one party can subjugate others to their own benefit. Why would a man come home from work and do the housework and share the work load of his children when he can insist that his working wife accept the entire burden? I don’t know that love or concern ever comes into any of it. Reports of folks or nations or powerful people that demonstrate the generosity to consider others, are always uplifting moments. I am sure Owen never thought of any of it in that way, but I know he was glad to be born male. He often said so.

I can’t say that I was angry with him for his thinking. I put it down to him being a product of the time in which we were formed. I had enjoyed the privileges of breast-feeding our babies and really as a woman it satisfied all my maternal needs. When my babies were little I often felt sorry that Owen could not experience the deep satisfaction of a child fallen into a restful slumber at breast. And he did after all bring home the bacon. I didn’t have to worry that money that would put food on my children’s table would be squandered in the pub or lost at the racetrack. They say the secret to marriage is to understand the process of give and take; in fact my mother pointed that out way back when I was disappointed that Owen could not attend our trips to the holiday camp. But actually my mother was never interested in doing a uni course and my father died long before he retired. I wonder if my father would have been difficult in his retirement. No! I loved him too much to ever consider such a possibility.

My own sons had grown up with the women’s movement, although they did have their dad as a role model. I have seen Anthony with a tea towel in hand and I know he put in a lot of time with his kids when they were growing up, but actually I have no idea if his marriage enjoyed a balance of power and responsibilities. My daughter-in-law was hardly ever likely to complain to me.

The television reports that in fact in most cases women still do the bulk of the housework so actually nothing has really changed since I was a girl, except that now women are expected to work as well. My daughter-in-law always worked from the time her babies started school so at least there is some other level of satisfaction in her life and unless it is some terrible job with nothing to offer but endless drudgery, I can understand the value of working for more than a pay packet, despite the responsibility for the housework.

It is so very different to what we believed were our obligations when I was a young mother. I would never have believed that a woman's career was more important than motherhood. Maybe I got it all wrong. I guess there is a valid argument in the fact that a fulfilled woman can pass on that sense of fulfillment to her children. It is too late for me to ever experiment with the answer and I guess there is no definitive answer. You dear reader might believe that I am wrong about all of that. That's okay. Just because I am old doesn't mean I am right.

It has taken a long time for women to believe that they actually have a right to complain if they are getting the short end of the stick. I would never want to have been perceived as a nag, no matter what the circumstances. I only ever saw it as my duty to grin and bear it, either in the bedroom where I would never call a halt to Owen's demands no matter how I felt at the time, or with financial decisions. In retrospect I never said no, at least not out loud. I confess to feeling smug about that, proud that I had never used sex or withdrawal of any duty as a weapon. I viewed such punishments as not just as mean spirited, but lacking in any refinement, reducing a relationship to its crudest point.

Francis didn't have a visible partner, so I presume he did the housework himself. I was pleased to see him expertly manning the ironing board on one of his trips home and like me he enjoyed cooking. It was a treat if ever he took over the kitchen and produced a meal, with instructions for me to relax. He always left the kitchen spotless at the end of service, the tea towel consigned to its place in the wash basket. I would have to say I considered Francis one of my successes considering his father had never encouraged him to perform any domestic duties when he was growing up.

Jeannie always had a cleaning lady, so there was never any dissatisfaction from her about the domestic arrangements. I suspect that she always had the upper hand. As if it should be a contest of power! There was never any point in asking her opinion on a cleaning product. Ben, on the other hand, was au fait with all the challenges of laundry stains, surface cleaners, kitchen short cuts and supermarket specials. He was the same age as my boys but had clearly missed the message about male entitlement. And yet both couples appeared to be perfectly content with their lot in life.

I wonder how May had gone in her relationship? It was a topic that never came up. Actually there were lots of topics that never came up.

Chapter 12

When all the pain has finally subsided
And the midwife presents your tiny babe
Crushed, blue with the exertion of birth
Mouth open, searching for the nipple
That will sustain and deliver comfort,
You believe truly. that forever and ever,
You will never, never fail to be there

Funny how we search for own identity in their sweet little faces. As if you would love a child less if you found no recognition. It takes little time to become acquainted with your little one, for their face to be imprinted in your psyche, for them to grow on you to the point that friends' babies are cute enough, but in no way compare to the child you love. It's beyond emotion, it's more than that. I guess it's nature's cunning plan to assure the survival of the species.

Well that's how I identified with my experiences of giving birth. You might be different. Maybe birth was an interruption to where you imagined you were going. What if it was child number seven or eight, or even more that my mother's generation produced in the pre pill days, and there was nothing but a line of hungry mouths stretching into your future? Maybe you come from a culture where females are an unwanted reality and you have no sons to take care of you in your old age. I am glad that I was able to rejoice in the birth of my daughter.

When May was born I understood that I had a different responsibility to her than I had to the boys. She came into this world in the middle of the sixties. The world had changed since I was a girl, I was aware of that, but I suppose I was so busy with my domestic affairs that in reality I didn't pay the sort of attention that was required to really take it in. I was old enough to classify myself into the oldies camp. Imagine a woman under thirty today thinking they are old. I thought of it as a progression; I suppose in this era such a suggestion would be considered regression. We have celebrities today who are still glamorous at fifty. It is not just a matter of the surgeon's knife- it's what we expect.

Would I hand her a manual on the eve of her wedding? I was comfortable enough with the idea of a basic sex education, the mechanics of conception, but I wondered what advice was needed to provide any genuine support? What identity would I give her? I felt the weight of that responsibility because of my own upbringing, which clearly stood in contrast to the emerging view of women that appeared in magazines and on the screen. Harry had obviously given Owen his point of view of a woman's role and I in fact had reinforced their view. Although, it wasn't just Harry that influenced Owen: there was once a mother, I wonder who she was? There were so few clues in the information that I ever received. I would now question if any revelation by Harry and Owen had given me a panoramic view of May.

I wonder if she ever breast-fed, or had her child need her so much that she could not refuse the request. I will never know the life and feelings of the first May. But for some never explained reason, she was able to leave a child behind. People do I know, I have heard the story often enough, and I can only be glad that I was never in danger of arriving at a point that the only solution was to abandon the child. Maybe I was just lucky with my mother who modelled the rewards of motherhood. Just because I am incapable of leaving a child behind doesn't mean that it is even unusual. I suppose for Owen it was something he accepted in his childhood. I guess in the end you have no choice about the world or the family into which you are born.

Before *Pinocchio* and the warnings about untruthful children came *Snow White*. No nose that grows with each lie, but the warning of wicked replacement for the natural order of things. No such thing as a real life stepmother really existed to threaten my security as a child, although I suppose there were cases of a stepmother stepping in to take up the slack. Disney has a lot to answer for. Or maybe he was just responding to the times. Blended families are apparently the norm these days, and while I am sure that most adults that take on a partner's child are full of good intentions, it remains a challenge. I don't know how I would have performed as a stepmother, although I do know that I am repelled by the thought of bringing harm to any child.

My friends all agree that it is better to give birth to a daughter. They stay with you through their shared experiences. Sons go off somewhere and create their own families and their wives bond with their own mothers. Maybe if I lived in a different society the daughter-in-laws would become part of my household. The babies would be at my knee. But I don't; it is the way my world is structured for better or worse.

My mother had a friend called Edna. She lives vividly in my memory because she worked as a Blue Nurse and drove a car from patient to patient, delivering her kindness and her nursing expertise. I thought she looked smart in her uniform, which was as neat as her tightly permed hair. I wonder about her now, fascinated by her independence in the fifties. My mother never learnt to drive because my father believed that it was his duty to take control of the car. Edna was a single woman with a son, which was unique amongst my mother's friends. We kids were always told that the poor lad had lost his father in the war. That can't be true because he was a good ten years younger than me, and logically he was conceived long after the war was resolved. Of course at the time I never questioned the sad story.

Edna remained as a casual acquaintance long after I had my own family. I used to see her at Mass when I was still an attendee and she was in her late eighties. She never lost her tight curls or her warm smile, and would enquire after my family and my siblings. I can't recall her ever uttering a word of criticism about anyone, but for some reason one Sunday as we chatted outside the church she offered the only piece of advice that she has ever given me. I suppose precisely because our conversations had always been full of nothing but polite inquiries I remember her counsel, which was delivered in an upbeat manner. It surprised

me that she remained so clearly accepting of her life, and without any sign of regret or malice explained that it was better to have girls because no matter what you put in or how much you loved your boys, they would align themselves to their wife and her mother. Strangely she wasn't bitter about how things had turned out or maybe she was just a stoic personality. It always seemed unfair knowing what she had given to her son. But how do you change any of that?

I can't weigh in on the debate about abortion. I understand the argument that women want to control their reproductive rights. On the other hand there is disagreement about when a child becomes a result of a future designated by the fusion of egg and sperm. I don't want to set a debate off in your minds because it is truly a matter of belief. I guess I was lucky that I never had to choose. It is a modern dilemma that has moved beyond the problem of backyard abortionists. Thank god women no longer suffer at the hands of incompetent surgical intervention. Maybe it was a choice that was never offered to Edna, or maybe it was. It wasn't the sort of question I felt bold enough to ask. She went to heaven years ago now and I often wonder if she found the choice of motherhood difficult.

But for me there is something irrepressible about the sweet curl on your baby's dear little head. Such a joy! So much of it is difficult when they are little things, The compensation is the joy of watching them grow, It's a good system I reckon. Watching those fat little fingers getting their grip on the world, figuring out how to sort it out, how to make the world work. May, the one that arrived long after the first May brought a new dimension into my family's life: a change of direction from my obligations to my boys.

May was a very compliant child. She did well at school; there was never a need for a conferencing with a teacher concerned about her academic progress or her behaviour. In fact she willingly did her homework of an evening, unlike Anthony who considered his duty to the books complete the moment the bell rang in the afternoon to release the kids from the classroom. Her interactions with her peers never caused me any alarm. She was the type of girl who was happy to play with any other child, male or female, never demanding that she was the boss, content with her role in the games they played. I admired the empathy she displayed towards her friends. I considered it to be a sign of unusual maturity. I always considered myself to be very blessed when I heard of any difficulties other parents were experiencing with their children. Owen agreed, he believed that his little girl was indeed a princess.

Every once in a while I dig out the old family photo albums. The covers are rather tattered, but the memories inside are intact, the early snaps of the boys preserved in black and white. By the time May arrived coloured images fill the pages defining memories of ballet costumes, children's birthday parties, school concerts and Christmas with the trees that Owen harvested on Sunday expeditions at the beginning of December holidays. A collection of happy memories that avoid all the negativities of life! Nobody seems to take a photo of a funeral or a deathbed scene just in case they forget. The thing that always strikes me the most is May's beaming smile, it 's such a reminder of what a happy child she was. Strangers would comment on her as she waved enthusiastically to

anyone we passed while out in her stroller. It was the smile that won them over, it was a smile full of the joy of living. With two loving brothers and a father that adored her, she had every reason in the world to be happy.

That was the easy part of motherhood, but babyhood and childhood are not a permanent state and I was determined to start off on the right foot with the sex education. I didn't want May suddenly confronted with her first period unprepared. I think I got through our girl to girl talk reasonably well, although I've never asked May how she viewed it. Looking back on it my whole approach was through my own experiences of sex, and actually that was limited to my life with Owen. It really was an explanation of sex as a result of marriage. I guess I fell into the trap of believing that if I revealed too much she might view it as an open invitation to experiment with her own sexuality. I certainly didn't mention masturbation knowing that it was an evil frowned upon by the church and she was in any case too young for discussion on the pill. I didn't actually hand her a manual, however in many ways what I offered was not much better. I thought I had done well because I placed no emphasis on duty as the manual had and instead I had emphasized that sex is born of a mutual desire. She didn't ever ask further questions so I presumed she was satisfied with my explanation. At least when her period arrived she was comfortable reporting the fact.

Owen did the man-to-man talk with the boys and really I can't report on what he had to say. I am curious about it now because it must have had some impact on their thinking. He was quite strict about them using sexual expletives at home when they were teenagers and testing the boundaries. Strange that men thought it was okay to use such language when they were gathered in the pub or the locker room, but not in front of the ladies. I remember the odd occasion when Owen was with his mates and believed that I was out of earshot and fell into a rhythm of four-letter words to explain his meaning. When May took up the habit in her late teens I can understand why he was so incensed.

Today they teach children in kindy that they have a right to decide their own body boundaries. It would have been useful information in dealing with my mother's brother-in-law. How we kids all dreaded a visit from him because we were obliged to submit to a bear hug and a sloppy kiss and his breath revealed a lifetime of dental neglect. I guess that wasn't his fault and I can't say that I ever had the feeling that his intentions were anything less than that of a loving uncle. Nevertheless it would have been great if my parents had suggested a high five instead. Not that such a gesture had even been invented; in fact it wasn't even a thing when my children were growing up.

I did see that gorgeous smile when May was a teenager, but it was reserved for her friends. It was as if she was determined to leave it at the front door. Anthony and Francis always brought their mates home when they were going through their teenage years. I seem to have spent a lot of time endeavoring to fill ravenous appetites with sandwiches and home baked cakes. There was always a sink top filled with dirty glasses and for some unexplained reason the laundry basket seemed to collect washing that definitely didn't belong to my boys. I could

never understand why all the showering seemed to occur in my bathroom when all the mates had homes of their own. But May rarely brought her friends home.

I can understand why May declined the offer of a sweet sixteen birthday party at home, because by that time it was evident that drinking was essential to what she considered to be a social event and there was no way her father would ever have approved of even a well watered down punch. It was different with the boys. They were expected to be men and Owen had no qualms about offering them a beer when they turned sixteen. He argued that blokes went to war in the Great War as young as fourteen and nobody ever refused them a drink. He really saw it as right of passage for boys, but girls were a different matter. Mind you it wasn't until I was going out with Owen that I had my first drink.

Drugs were an unknown quantity for me at that time, some foreign experience reported in the newspaper so really they didn't even come up as a topic. I doubt that there are parents today who haven't considered the dangers of drug exposure and their children. I know that opium had sustained the India-China trade and laudanum fuelled the writings of English poets and novelists, but that was a world away from my life. The current opioid addiction delivered by prescription was not an issue even though it has its roots in ancient history and in any case I am sure I would not have recognized a heroin user on the nod. I don't know if that can be put down to ignorance or innocence, but either way I would have been more perceptive of my baby brother's actions if I had done a little more research on the effects of drug use. Not that I had access to such material, it's not like *The Women's Weekly* was ever likely to publish a comprehensive list of characteristics.

The boys both had twenty-first birthday parties at home. They were big events with every known relative, the boy's friends and friends of Mick's and mine; a celebration for both the child and the parent. For each event I produced a smorgasbord and Owen produced a keg. Two in fact for Francis who had a large circle of friends and one for Anthony who had a lot of friends who were overseas on their youthful adventures. I have a photo album for each occasion to remind me of how proud I was to see them almost fully grown, good looking boys, Francis full of self assurance and Anthony with his cautious smile.

May however, refused to even come home for her twenty-first with excuses that she didn't like a fuss and in any event all her old friends had long ago left town. I felt personally robbed of a special memory, I won't deny that, but Owen shrugged it off. I know I was far more disappointed about it than her missing my sixtieth. I had imagined a trip into town to buy her a new dress and I know that in reality there were still a couple of her old friends around because I would sometimes run into them when they were shopping. I remember one lovely girl who had already produced three children, which she proudly dressed up for a trip to the shops. There had been news of a couple of engagements that I reported to May who responded with a hint of curiosity, but no real interest beyond that. Eventually I came to terms with my disappointment reasoning that some like the crescendo of a grand opera, some are stirred by rock and roll, and some need silence.

Chapter 13

Jeannie and Mick embarked on their trip just a month after the business closed. As I am telling you this story it occurs to me that I always think of our friends as Jeannie and Mick, even though I had known Mick for much longer than his bride and he was only ever polite and considerate of me. I would think that Owen thinks of them as Mick and Jeannie, but he wouldn't be likely to count Jeannie as a mate. I don't know that I have ever known Owen to have a mate who was female. I know for sure that he never put me into the category. I know if push came to shove he would lay down his life for a mate, but a wife is a different matter altogether, even though the word mate is used to describe a pairing in the animal kingdom.

I imagine that Jeannie was pleased that her announcement at my party had drawn the finalization of her husband's working life to a head because who knows how long it would have taken Mick to find an interested party for his half of the business, if indeed a replacement was even possible. He and Owen had worked together for so long that it was hard to visualize the possibility of a stranger fitting into the partnership. A young bloke might be full of new ideas but he would have to convince Owen of any changes and someone older would be set in their ways.

We had them over for dinner with their daughter Jess on the night before their departure. I always admired the job Jeannie and Mick had done in raising Jess. You might expect an only child to be particularly demanding of adult attention, but it was not the case with Jess. She could certainly hold her own at the dinner table with a broad knowledge of the world, which always surprised me. Interestingly, while the child was as focused on her appearance as her mother she was nevertheless able to balance her life with her aptitude for study. She had two years before she was to finish high school and her sights were firmly set on medicine.

Jeannie and Mick never had to worry about their Jess staggering through the door long after curfew. I envied them that. Jeannie was able to sail off on her grand tour without any apprehension about her daughter. Jess seemed perfectly happy with the arrangement. Maybe May would have welcomed the opportunity for a break from Owen and I, seen it as a reprieve, not that she had a grandmother to stay with. It wouldn't have been a risk that I would be prepared to take. There was something so vulnerable about May at Jess's age.

Even if May had been an absolute nerd and my mother was still around, I don't think I would have been comfortable with the idea of lumbering my mother with the responsibility of my child. There is still a certain loss of freedom in looking after a child. There are meals to be considered when beans on toast would suffice, washing, school lunches, the messy bathroom and bedroom and worst of all the worry if they are home late. Apparently Jeannie's mother was still very active so maybe she was looking forward to the experience. I know my mother would have agreed to take on the job, but I also know that it would have worn her out.

It struck me throughout the evening how much the men would miss each other's company. They had moved out of construction of supermarkets and on to building units years before and they both enjoyed the challenge and the possibility of each new venture. There really hadn't been time for the boredom of retirement to set in for Mick with all the arrangements that required his attention in order to set things in place for their departure. I thought Mick looked rather tired that evening despite the excitement. Jeannie on the other hand was all-a-glow. The trip was to take four months, certainly long enough to leave the real world behind. Owen was interested to know of their plans on their return because he had seen very little of Mick in the previous month. Jeannie it seems had decided that they were taking up golf. Mick had agreed that Jeannie knew best so they departed from the old dining room table full of great expectations for their future.

In the months that followed the post cards from foreign places inscribed with Jeannie's neat hand inspired Owen to suggest a holiday. Not months of taking in exotic sites, just a couple of days in the hotel in which we had spent our honeymoon. I thought at first that it was some odd quirk that had triggered nostalgia in Owen, but I should have known that Owen was never a romantic. Apparently there was some good fishing in the area so he found the destination particularly appealing. It would be our first time away together since our honeymoon. Unlike Jeannie I didn't need to spend months planning my wardrobe. Owen made preparations by having the car serviced, declaring that a long drive would benefit the vehicle.

The hotel was still there. I guess somewhere between our honeymoon and the holiday someone must have paid some attention to the maintenance because it was still standing, however I could only describe it as shabby. Not shabby chic more the- be careful what you lean on sort of shabby. One couldn't complain because the tariff reflected the establishment and that made Owen happy. In any case his idea of a holiday was a week barefoot in a fishing shack with a good supply of timber to keep the cooking fire going. I used to sometimes day dream of the sort of holidays other people enjoyed, not that I felt that my life was somehow impoverished, but it was entertaining to imagine what a cruise through the Pacific Islands or holiday in a fully serviced luxury hotel must be like. I must admit that Owen and the family were never a part of the fantasy, and the scenario always started with a lottery win.

At least there wasn't the embarrassment of arriving with the just married sign. I don't think I have seen one of those signs for years. Maybe the happy couples post their announcement on Facebook these days so the whole world already knows about the event. They seem to have honeymoons in such exotic places these days; nobody from my era ever went off overseas to celebrate a marriage. Certainly no one ever dreamed that they could send off wedding invitations to guests and expect them to pay for an overseas trip to witness the vows. I imagine the big difference between my honeymoon and those who still bother with the nuptial ceremonies is that there are far fewer virgins to contemplate the honeymoon suite.

We did not have the same room as the one in which we consummated our marriage, instead we were located on the opposite side of the dark hallway. It was probably once considered to be a fine room because it had a view to the hills behind the hotel. The view of an empty swimming pool suggested a more prosperous time, a time when people soaked in the summer. If there was ever a gardener he or she had long ago given up any pretense at fighting the weeds that proliferated amongst the cracked tiles. A faded image of a tropical beach framed on the wall probably once encouraged guests to hurry down to the pool with their towel. I wondered if Jeannie would be getting her togs wet at some point in their trip.

It was clean at least, even though the towels laid out on the end of the bed were as thin as tissue. I'm glad the proprietors had abandoned any thoughts of carpet because at least you could see that the floorboards were clean. I remember admiring the old wardrobe because I had developed an interest in furniture through Owen's early days in the factory. The fluoro light muted any thoughts of romance, not that such thoughts were on my mind and Owen seemed more interested in his fishing tackle. At least there were no guests to cause us any bother and I was looking forward to reading the book that I had packed.

We went down to dinner after an afternoon nap. The decaying dining room had little to offer, but at least we had something to eat. We determined that we would seek out a restaurant for future meals. There was no Platters music to remind me of the girl I had been, and after all those years of work, children and life, we were better off with the silence. I had a work mate once who returned from her second honeymoon flushed with the awe of it after thirty years of marriage. I don't know if she was a liar, some disorientated romantic, or the beneficiary of an actual, genuine, ridgy didge example of the perfect marriage. I am now skeptical about the answer to that, I am sorry to say, although I probably believed that the second honeymoon was still possible when I was sixty. Funny how one's opinion is not definitive on any topic really! I wonder how her husband was in the bed. Maybe he took his relationship with his wife to a new level, or maybe she wasn't interested. Mind you the lucky couple didn't stay in a hotel with an empty pool.

I spent our first night reading my book because after dinner Owen took himself off to the bar. I poked my nose in when we first arrived in the late afternoon. It had that ingrained smell of beer and lives that had soaked into the floor and had risen to coat the ceiling. The woman behind the bar had clearly seen it all, and there was a small cohort of customers, as stained as the walls. There was a group of three and two old blokes with their coins on the bar, cigarette smoking curling towards the faded posters that competed for attention with a trophy shield with tarnished badge plates. There was a fresh vase of flowers that brightened it all, and a lone drinker who it transpired had retired from the building industry and kept Owen up until closing time. It seems he had no obligations to be home each night because Owen spent each evening with him and I finished my book by fluoro light.

Our sex life had dwindled to an occasional interest from Owen, and I can't say that I still found it very inspiring. I probably accepted the situation as inevitable. I had tried talking with him in later years, but I guess I didn't really know how. How odd that you can cohabit with someone for forty years and still feel shy about discussing sex, and yet it is a topic that permeates our lives. I guess I didn't want to suggest that maybe there was room for improvement in case it upset the applecart. It is supposed to be the glue that helps bind a marriage together.

Occasionally, a film on SBS offered the possibility of a lesson on sex, certainly the characters would appear to be having more fun than we did in the bedroom. I mean we had managed to move beyond the original missionary position, but there was more to it than that. Owen never bothered with the movies because he claimed that films were just a waste of time. I must admit he did get restless after thirty minutes of viewing and usually headed off to bed, so actually he never watched any of the steamy bits. I always thought it was a bit of a lost opportunity to open up a conversation on the advantages of adding a little spice, or at the very least a little romance to our bedroom.

I don't think Owen would ever understand that foreplay is as important as the actual penetration. I guess for him sex was a simple response to his own erection, a belief that as a man all he had to do was enough thrusting to produce his own climax and he had fulfilled his obligations. I know there is plenty of information out there that may have influenced our sex lives, but Owen wasn't at all interested in a little reading material or any advice that might suggest that perhaps he had it all wrong. He was quite satisfied that he actually had no problems producing an erection in the first place. Viagra had only just become available to the general public with much acclaim by those men in need of a little support in their sex lives, and of course Owen was able to boast that he had no need of any help. I don't know if he revealed such information to his mates, but then again I wasn't privy to such conversations.

I suppose in many ways I was still reassured by the sounds of his snoring, his head next to mine on the pillow. And probably I would have taken that thought to my grave. My friends who recount their lives without a hint of negativity or blame always intrigue me. I don't know if they are burying their heads in the sands or if their stories are in fact true. Maybe nothing ever actually went so terribly wrong that they have cause for complaint. Lucky them! No one ever delivers a negative eulogy. I wonder what they would have said about Hitler from the security of a pulpit. I know that we must believe in the good in everyone, but I find it hard to digest the elevation to the status of saint with which some folk label their deceased friends and relatives once they are dead despite evidence to the contrary. Maybe it's me that has it all wrong?

The fish were apparently reluctant to bite, which left Owen more time to spend in the bar. Who knows what went on his head. But I believed that he was happy with our trip because he never expressed any dissatisfaction. Most certainly he wasn't moved to acknowledge that a romantic gesture or two might have benefitted us both. I wonder if romance is a construct that must be taught when your boys are babies at your knees? All that time suckling at the breast transfers

to a focus on the sexual attraction of an appealing set of tits. Girls don't do that because they will use their breasts in a different way; first for attraction and then to provide nourishment. Or at least it was like that in my day. Nobody had even dreamed of implants when I was a girl. Apparently implants are about self-esteem, I understand cancer patients, but not influencers in revealing dress. I suppose I sound like grandma and that is because I am. In children's tales the hero only ever appears at the end of the tale to sweep a girl off her feet, the hero never seemed to be burdened with much responsibility before the conclusion. I guess adult romantic films suggest that a little wooing is necessary, but Owen never watched any of those.

I enjoyed the break with someone else to produce the meal and wash the dishes, and I enjoyed my book and the silence of our room. It was in essence a brief holiday, without thoughts of a second honeymoon, which would have never entered my mind, except for the choice of destination. Jeannie and Mick were headed for new destinations, so I guess they would not be confronted by a comparison of their early days and the now. Although I must confess the contrast passed my mind, and in the end I had to confess that in reality nothing had really changed.

When I was a fledgling bride I would never have noticed the print upon the wall. I didn't notice if the towels were thick and fluffy or thin with age. I suppose the pool was full, although I gave it no thought, lost in a romantic memory of his curl upon the pillow. That remains, no matter what.

I don't want you to think that my retelling of my holiday was in anyway a criticism of Owen. I know that I had accepted my life. I wasn't actually resentful that my life was the way it was. Owen was who he was. I didn't actually see him as a domineering character, without any thought of what would have satisfied his partner's vision of the perfect holiday. I never saw it as a deliberate choice to subjugate the women in his life, I don't think that he viewed any of it that way either. I suppose he never thought about it. You might listen to my story and declare that I was a fool, tricked by the lens through which I viewed the world. On the other hand you may be sympathetic to my thinking because after all the rest of the tale is still to come.

Chapter 14

The landline brought
The changes in my life

News good or bad
Delivered on fixed lines
Rooted to the wall

Sometimes at night
Sometimes by day
Or after a birth
Or friend's death

A voice, but no face
To convey all meaning
Down a thin wire
Twisted for strength.

By the late nineties telemarketers had really started invading my space, relentlessly of an evening as I was preparing the dinner. They seemed to pitch their spiel to me when I was hemmed in by the kitchen bench, so I always answered the phone in the early evening with a little caution. It wasn't long after my second honeymoon that to my delight I answered a call from Francis as I was cooking the nightly meal. It must have been the wee hours for him; certainly it wasn't the usual time for him to give me a buzz.

At first his excuse for the call was to request that I post him a book that he still kept on a shelf in the room he had inhabited in his youth. I used to always keep such items free of cobwebs and grime with my protective duster just in case they should one day be recalled and suddenly necessary. None of my kids were ever willing to sort out their old possessions and make the decision to cull or preserve an assortment of old trophies, books, diaries and drawers full of correspondence. May still had dresses hanging in her cupboard that for some inexplicable reason, even I was reluctant to take to the thrift shop. I'm sure someone would have snapped them up as a vintage bargain. I dreaded the thought of ever having to down size my living arrangement because I wasn't keen to relocate their discarded treasures.

The book he needed had been given to him by my baby brother one Christmas. It was a children's book entitled *The Five Chinese Brothers* and from the moment Francis tore the Christmas wrapping from his gift his face lit up with delight. Anthony had received a carriage to add to his train track and took no interest at all in a book. I'm sure the publication would have little academic merit to someone immersed in the study of Asian history, but it was the book that had kindled Anthony's interest in a world that was far removed from his own. There was no opportunity to study Asian culture at school when Anthony was in high

school and he had to be content with trips to the library and a Buddha statue that one of the girls from his school gave him for his eighteenth birthday. I remember at the time thinking that she was just the right sort of girl for him, but of course nothing came of that. I am glad that I always held my tongue and didn't actually blurt out my thoughts, because I realize now that Francis would have been very uncomfortable at such a suggestion.

I guess that he felt emboldened by our initial connection on the phone and I could hear the distinctive sounds of a man in the background asking Francis if he should pour another glass of wine. There was the sound of a deep gulp of what I could only presume was the offering of wine before Anthony got to the point. He was bringing home a partner, and they were planning to set up home in Australia. Anthony thought that the time had come to introduce his father to the person that he had chosen to spend his life with. I imagine Anthony had deliberated long and hard about his call because he announced that the love of his life was a man called David. I can't claim to be shocked by the revelation that Anthony was homosexual, what rocked me was the thought of Owen's response. Apparently I was the one to break the news, admittedly I could well understand why Anthony needed someone to test the waters.

Now this was a problem. I am quite sure that folk are born with the sex God assigns them, and there is nothing in nature to confirm that only heterosexuality is handed out by the creator. I knew a boy in primary school, who on my reflection as an adult was clearly gay. He was great to have as a friend because he enjoyed playing with the girls. His name was Kevin and he enjoyed our dress up games, claiming the title of King Kevin, which he pronounced in a dramatically regal voice. He was a witty boy, but he never used his wit to damage anyone else. I occasionally wonder what happened to him.

Anthony on the other hand played with the boys. I always thought of him as a sensitive child, but he had his big brother and his father to impress so he always played footie and all the sports the other boys played. There was nothing to affirm the rights of gays when Anthony was growing up, so I rejoice in the fact that today there are foundations to support gay and lesbian athletics. Transgender people have been slower to find their voice and acceptance, although I don't think you would ever convince Owen that gender reassignment might be necessary to fulfill someone's place on this earth.

Owen would have been cruel with any hint of behaviour from a boy that he viewed as a sissy. What a terrible word, I don't think anyone would use it these days. I must admit that Anthony's sexuality wasn't obvious to me in his childhood. In our household boys were expected to be macho and it pains me now to think what a battle it must have been for Anthony. He always had lots of girlfriends when he was a teenager and I attributed to his good looks and his charm. The only real difference that I recognized between my sons was that Anthony was studious, and that hardly defines someone's sexuality.

I wondered at what age he had come to terms with his sexuality. Did he struggle through those teenage years, or had he already determined where his path lay,

paralyzed only by the thought of disclosure to his parents? I guess it was not a topic that I ever brought up with him, blinded by my own ignorance. And yet I was aware as the years went by that there was no girlfriend in his life. He was a masculine figure who showed no traits of what I perceived as public femininity and maybe that is why it took me so long to realize that he was gay.

I suppose I hoped it wasn't true because it seemed it seemed such a hard life. There is scientific evidence today to explain intersex and XY chromosomes and there have been societies that have had no problem accepting bisexuality or trans sexuality, and you would think that logically folk would accept different sexual orientations. Apart from the difficulty of finding acceptance in all corners of society, a family at that time seemed out of the question, and I know that Anthony had a genuine love of children. I am glad to know that gay couples can adopt today, but it was never a possibility for my Anthony and hopefully he was content with life and David.

Anthony had found a life for himself, which I realize now, was way beyond my experience of him. I wish now that he had been able to tell me sooner. Maybe it would have saved some angst in his life. At least that's behind him now. How dreadful for him that there is still talk of using homosexual aversion therapy in a society where we have had a nation wide vote to accept same sex marriage. You wouldn't think the conversation belongs in the same decade, but I reluctantly concede that there will always be people with a stubborn belief in gender binary.

My own husband was one of those folk who firmly believed that God created man and woman, and there was no possibility of an in between. Owen viewed gay men as inflicted with a contagious disease. and avoided them in any situation. I wonder how many men passed through his life and he never recognized their sexuality because they didn't conform to his view of the "the limped wrist fairy". I remember my staff Christmas party one year when Owen reluctantly agreed to attend as my partner, which was an unusual occurrence in itself because it required that he wore his good shirt and trousers, and Owen always prided himself on being able to conduct business in his casual attire. He was definitely a retro sexual guy. Mick was the one who donned a tie if it was necessary. Owen did wear a suit when Anthony got married, but that was the only time I have seen him in a suit since we got married. The suit with the footprint on the back had long since been consigned to the bin.

Anyway it was what happened at the party dear reader that is really the point I wish to make. The grim reaper ads were making a resounding impact on the population at the time. I must admit they did imply that we were all going to mowed down by AIDS, but the group that suffered the most from the shock ads were gay men. There was an overtly gay man who worked in men's wear, and he had through his good nature and sense of humour, won the respect of the rest of the staff at the department store. I always liked Brian, and when he passed by Owen and I with a tray laden with dip I was keen to introduce him. I should have known better, but I imagined that Owen might be able to accept Brian in the context of a room full of people who clearly had no problem with Brian's sexuality. What a mistake! And what an embarrassment! Owen when presented

with the tray looked Brian directly in the eye and declared that there was no way that he was willing to take the risk of infection. The ignorance of it hardly mattered, it was the hurt in the gaze that Brian returned that remains burned into my memory. I could hardly speak to Owen on the way home in the car because I was silenced by the knowledge that any defense or argument would simply be dismissed and I had to live with that.

I don't know how my father would have reacted because his life view was certainly formed by his religious views. Of course I never asked him. It really wasn't a topic that was on the table. Nevertheless I don't believe he would deliberately inflict hurt on some other human being. I know the Romans were happy to accept homosexuality, but that was long before the Christian church got its foot in the door. Isn't strange that so many of the clergy are closeted gays, a denial that leaves the church out of touch with the science and certainly so many of its congregation? It is apparently acceptable to be gay as long as you don't concede to your very biology. Sex is still a stain upon your humanness, to be controlled at the risk of hell. I wonder dear reader that you might stumble upon my tale in some distant future where you marvel at what I explain, or if everything will remain unchanged? Like reading a little of Bronte and having to imagine a foreign world in which society dictated an alien society!

The plan was to come home in the next academic year because David had lined up a job in a university here in Australia. Anthony was sure that he would be able to find employment and in any case he was keen to take the time to write about his passion for Asian religions. He was excited then telling me about the love of his life. David was a fellow academic, although he was studying in a different field. Mathematics seemed a long way from the study of culture, but I guess what they had in common was their devotion to a field. Francis sounded so happy, so positive! What more could you want for your child? I was glad of that call, it created the connection we both needed.

I thought I knew how Francis and May would react. I wasn't worried about anyone else's opinion. Francis was too far removed with his commitment to his own family to really give any consideration of his younger brother's life. Besides by the time the Gay Rights Movement had settled into a decisive voice in the Stonewall riots Anthony was still a child. I didn't know then that one day my view would impact on my own family as I explained earlier I missed most of the sixties, but I knew enough to know that we must love our fellow man and the issue of gay rights was certainly a topic that was discussed between us in Anthony's late teens when the seventies had set the agenda. I think that Anthony from the time he understood homophobia was clearly able to see that his parents had differing points of view on the topic. I note that Disney has never been able to tackle the subject.

May grew up in the era of changing social mores. Sexuality was such an all-pervasive topic, however for some reason that I didn't understand at the time, she was never willing to air her views with me, and in all fairness if I wasn't able to honestly discuss our sex life with Owen. You wouldn't really expect me to be a good mentor. Not that I ever would be reduced to an actual physical description

of what was involved with all those sexual bits. I don't know that I am convinced that a blow-by-blow description is necessary. I believed that May had disconnected herself from her family so early in life that I don't know if she really was able to consider any one else, so I couldn't imagine that she had taken much notice of what went on in Anthony's life. Because I had no inkling of what motivated her behaviour I had no other conclusion to formulate. Poor May! I regret ever feeling that way; it is like blaming a two year old for a tantrum, not that you love them any the less.

Maybe it was better to come out without subjecting the boyfriend to Owen at the same time. I grappled with the best approach. I didn't really believe that Owen would react by cutting Anthony out of his life because I believed that for all his closed mindedness at heart Owen would not want to hurt his son. It would probably take him a little while to digest the information, but surely eventually he would come to terms with the notion. However I can't say that I imagined that Owen would actually be able to overcome his initial revulsion and publicly announce that his son had a same sex partner. Who knows how much damage could be done to Anthony and the unwitting David. I however, was still under the illusion that Owen put his children first.

My dear little Anthony who had suffered from reflux as a baby, that I tried to sooth with milk from my breasts, which of course overloaded his little tummy and caused a cycle of pain, but as a result demanded more of my maternal affection. That same little boy who had been so gentle with his baby sister, that I felt that my parenting had been rewarded with the most positive results! He was still my dear little boy. I reasoned that Anthony must have given David a fair appraisal of the expected reception and as grown men I am sure they had come to their own conclusions about the way forward in their relationship. Nevertheless my thoughts were only ever assumptions, because actually I can't really claim to know how Owen would react to any situation. I had a good six months to work out my solution to breaking the news to Owen.

Chapter 15

A fortnight later and a week before Jeannie and Mick were due to return, I received a phone call from May. I particularly recall the time frame because I remember that Jeannie was still away and I was looking forward to her account of the trip. There really isn't a lot said in a few lines on a postcard and Jeannie was always engaging when recounting a story. One thing was for sure, there was no possibility that the trip had been a failure for Jeannie, but I wondered if Mick had enjoyed the experience. Not that Jeannie would ever envisage the possibility that Mick would ever be less satisfied with the journey than what she had planned. I never was privy to Mick's view of their trip.

May's call was an invitation to lunch at her flat. It was a rare invitation because usually we caught up in a café or some public place. She said that she had found a renewed interest in cooking and wanted to try out a new recipe. I was pleased with the news because May had always enjoyed cooking with me when she was a child. I can still visualize her sitting on the kitchen bench, face dripping with cake mix and a smile to light up my day. I don't recall why she stopped cooking although I assume a busy life with no one to cook for may have had an influence. She said it was easier to buy a takeaway or eat out than take the time to do the shopping required to produce a meal. I was excited at the prospect of lunch cooked for me by my May.

I don't know if she ever cooked for the husband who was now long gone, or indeed if he was the one that enjoyed the time in the kitchen. Peter Russell-Clarke was a recognizable face for men in the kitchen at that time and I know of a few blokes who took up cooking in the eighties. I had a friend whose husband was incapable of cooking toast until she divorced him and after twenty- three years of marriage he developed an interest in the culinary arts and became quite the gourmet cook. My friend said it made her angry to reflect on the fact that he had so little regard for her that he would not even bring her a cup of tea if she was laid up, and suddenly he now found the enthusiasm to polish the silverware and invite his friends over for a three course dinner. I can see her point although it's likely that he feels the same way about the fact that she can now mow the lawn and deal with the mechanic without the support of a man. I don't have to worry about the car or lawn anymore because the body corporate takes care of the garden, and I gave up driving a couple of years ago when I failed the eyesight test.

Her call prompted a memory of how May looked on her wedding day. I of course only had a photo that was produced after the event as proof of the marriage. Francis's wedding photo would have stood up under the scrutiny of the most meticulous of wedding planners at the time. It wasn't actually Francis's dream that required a line up of three bridesmaids and groomsmen clad in powder blue, however he was certainly in agreement of the location on the steps of the church in the parish in which he had grown up. In contrast there was nothing formal in the shot of May on her wedding day. There was a rather nondescript building in the background, which I took to be the registry office. It is not a full

body shot so it is hard to ascertain what she is wearing, but her head is neither covered by hat nor veil and there is nothing to suggest that she chose to wear anything that would be given the nod of approval by a bridal magazine. In fact her outfit rather reminded me of brides in the war years who had no access to the luxury of a bridal dress. None of that really mattered because the image is memorable precisely because there was no smile to indicate the joy of becoming a bride, but rather she looked strangely resigned, as if she had decided on her fate and was putting a brave face on it.

The groom looked happy enough and I noted that he had donned a suit for the occasion. His family apparently lived interstate so there was no one to represent his family in the photo. I often wonder what his family was like, for all I know they have may been the very pillars of their society on the other hand he may have come from one of those disruptive families that seem to inhabit every suburban street and fill the neighborhood with boisterous or aggressive behaviour. At least there was never any suggestion that they were criminals.

May had not produced the groom before the wedding so there was none of that father of the bride and prospective son-in-law conversation. I was surprised at the time that the lack of the usual parental endorsements never bothered Owen, and if it did, he didn't verbalize any objections. In fact I would describe him as disinterested in May's marriage. The only comment that he really made was that May was a big girl, and so it was up to her what she chose to do with her life. I certainly agreed that her choices were her own. Nevertheless I didn't understand why that should preclude her family on her wedding day. Jeannie declared that there was no way she was ever prepared to relinquish the role of mother of the bride, and I could imagine her afloat in a sea of chiffon hogging the spotlight.

I always find it interesting speculating on what your friends or family see in the object of their affection. I suppose, because you actually have to be the one smitten by Cupid's bow, the attraction is not always evident. The entire process of subjugating one's self to the physical attraction of a spouse is eliminated through arranged marriage or marriages of convenience, but May had listened to all the fairy tales when she was a babe upon my knee, so I assume she was influenced by the belief in mutual attraction. Her husband was tall with dark eyes anchored under dark brows, there were no curls or freckles, but a neatly trimmed beard suggested time spent in front of the mirror. It was evident why she found him attractive.

She took his name and became Mrs. Brendan Murphy. It was unheard of at that time to do anything other than take your husband's name. I remember what a surprise it was when I learned that there are brides that keep their maiden name. When I was a young bride I couldn't wait for the first occasion to be able to announce my new title to the receptionist at the doctors and the dentist and anywhere else that my name was required. How could you possibly send your children out into the world with a mother who didn't share their father's name? Well that issue has been resolved now, and nobody gives it a second thought. I find the hyphenated compromise a little cumbersome but there you go, plenty of

kids have to master the hyphen, and they all seem to get through their early years at school in control of their double-barreled names.

The Catholicism that I inherited from my parents was still a substantial part of my existence when May took Brendan as her lawfully wedded husband. It took me years to get over the notion that a marriage was not legitimate in the eyes of God unless a priest was there to oversee the exchange of vows. I was relieved that Brendan wasn't a divorcee; that would have doubled the sin. How odd that I had been able to put her on the pill at fifteen but was concerned with the fact that she was breaking the rules with a civil ceremony. I guess some of you readers will be left pondering what on earth I'm talking about, because I admit that it does sound contradictory that one might put one's daughter on the pill at fifteen but squirm at the thought of breaking the rules for Holy Matrimony. But you need to understand that the pill was a temporary measure, and marriage was still, in my belief, for life.

Today's reality presents an entirely different landscape, and I often wonder who I would have become if I had been born into the eighties. My grandchildren are probably unaware that there was a time when you were in mortal danger of the fires of hell if you ate meat on Friday and dropped into your grave before you could make it to confession. May was free of all that, Friday meat was back on the menu long before she was even aware of the day of the week. I hoped that there would be another photo somewhere, perhaps taken on her honeymoon, where the bride wears a large happy grin. But actually if I reflect on it now, that photo never came.

I removed the photo when the marriage disintegrated, and actually it wasn't there long enough to leave even a hint of an imprint on my bedroom wall. At the rate that modern marriages seem to come and go these days it is questionable as to whether or not it is advisable to hang wedding photos on the wall. You can never be sure that you won't have to explain to your grandchildren who the characters are in an outdated photo. I'm glad that I never got to know her husband too well, I am sure plenty of folks have had to say farewell to a son-in-law or a daughter-in-law with whom they have formed a bond. On the other hand the farewell might be delivered with relief. My parents had a whole gallery of wedding photos in their lounge, so that you couldn't pay them a visit without the sense that they measured the success of their lives through the marriages of their offspring.

When your children are babies you devote your time to their every need, look for causes and effects in all their behaviours, and then do your best to apply whatever remedy seems fit. You are immersed in faces growing and thriving, in faces with a victory smile at the school athletics, in the pain of a scraped knee, in faces smothered in birthday cake, faces smeared with tears when the tutu is not enough to conquer the stage fright, or the loss in a football jersey. But like childbirth any pain big or slight evaporates, in the memories of all the successes. It is a good system really. You are pretty safe with baby photos because time can't change the past, the memories are set in stone. I had a friend who lost a

child when he was two. It was an enduring tragedy, but she naturally kept his portrait on her bedroom wall, and it was a photo that embodied the child, as an angel as indeed he was.

May kept the Murphy part of her name long after the marriage was over, although she used Ms. as the title. I understand her rationale and I have adopted the title myself, which surprisingly after all those years of owning the Mrs., wasn't that hard to do. As I pushed the entrance buzzer I noted her title on the list of occupants because at the time it always struck home as a reminder that May's life had not been the joyful journey that I had hoped for.

She was working in customer service in a pharmacy, and I was surprised that she would have the time to invite me to lunch mid-week. I know that she found her job dull, while she enjoyed the interactions with people, she was dogged by the feeling that she was capable of more. I felt that apart from the fact that she had a means to pay her bills, after her rejection of responsibilities during her uni days she had settled into a resigned sense of duty and maybe an incentive to take up study again might follow. But as Owen had pointed out she was a big girl who made her own choices, so I was always very tentative with any suggestions concerning her future. I don't think you could accuse me of being a helicopter-parent, and I certainly wasn't authoritarian when the children were little. I hope I leaned to the authoritative style, but somewhere along the journey something positive had evaporated from our relationship.

Chapter 16

I could smell garlic and ginger as I walked up the steps to May's flat on the second floor. There is something welcoming in the smell of garlic and I am sure Zen would feel right at home with the tang of ginger. I always found it strange that many of my contemporaries rejected anything that they considered foreign. The soft sounds of Ottmar Liebert guitar blended with the light that filled the stairwell. I had only recently been introduced to Liebert's skill on the flamenco guitar by Ben and it did and always has since the first time I heard him, had the power to transport me into a state of optimism. Strange that what lay ahead can still be defeated by the music!

Her flat was a reflection of May. There was enough light with the curtains thrown wide open to let a surge of sunlight in and complete exclusion from the outside when they were drawn. I was pleased to note as she opened the door that even the dust particles were visible on her bookcase where she kept her little treasures. The origins of most unknown to me! The joint was of course as messy as hell. As a mother I have to say there are some things you must accept. Either the child is concerned with growing into a neat and tidy adult or they are just not interested. I have come to view my dear May's untidiness as willingness to say, here I am warts and all. Unfortunately I am stuck with the tidiness bug, on the other hand it sure makes it easier to locate an item, and I am finding that a useful tool in my old age.

It was immediately clear that she had started my visit without me, and a half empty bottle of white wine sat on her kitchen table surrounded by the paraphernalia of her life. I accepted a glass, mindful of the fact that I had to drive home and besides I didn't want to alienate May with a refusal. She had the kitchen well under control so I was able to help by clearing the table. You never know where everything goes in someone else's house, and I did my best without becoming a pest and got most things out of the way, except for a couple of books that would take some time sorting in her bookcase.

I can't pass a book without reading the title. One I knew well; it was *Lolita*, but the other was unfamiliar to me. I didn't notice if it was fiction or non-fiction because I only gave it a fleeting glance and it was only a few years later when I read the book that I understood her interest in the work. I had no prior knowledge of the work of Anaïs Nin at the time, not even an understanding of the controversy of her experience, so it all went over my head.

Usually May presented herself to the world with a full mask of makeup. When she was a teenager we would sometimes disagree about the appropriateness of wearing makeup to school. The school never actually complained, so I gave up verbalizing my view that there was something attractive about a fresh young face. May insisted that freckles weren't attractive although there was only ever a light smattering of the offending spots spread across her nose. She used to spend hours ironing out all hints of the curls that I admired so much when she was a baby. It was nice to see her fresh faced, good to know that she was comfortable without the camouflage.

We got through the preliminaries of work and domestic matters before May set the meal upon the table. It was a good meal, I remember that, a fragrant Asian meal in which she had found the balance between yin and yang. Before we were half way through I brought up the news of Anthony. I can't say she was very surprised. It was indeed a happy thought that Anthony had found the courage to confront his life and May was glad that he had made the leap. Clearly she had been tuned into Anthony and his sexuality for a very long time. I felt a little hurt that he had chosen to exclude me for so long. But we both agreed that the problem lay with exposing Owen to the news.

"You know what your father's like!" I said expecting nothing but agreement; instead her response was delivered with a direct gaze and a nastiness that I did not understand. "Yes, but so do you!" she said. A statement that in retrospect, was accusingly aimed at me.

I won't report the entire dialogue word for word because there are only snatches of dialogue embedded in my memory. The rest are a blur. A total draining of body and soul. Bone shaking. Maybe that's a blessing from nature because the phrases I recall are painful enough to inflict a permanent feeling of disgust and devastate my sleep. They still do all these years later. I still toss and turn, although not as frequently as I did at that time. I am always surprised to recognize that I am still disturbed, even if my dreams don't directly relate to the events she revealed, they are the source of a deep angst that manifests itself in a sense of self loathing that awakes me from sleep, sweating, anxious and disturbed that the world is not right. I know you can't live in a state of heightened anxiety forever, but my God, the disclosure certainly did more than just wind me up at the time. In fact it was an avalanche that descended onto my entire world.

There was an endless pause, I remember that, but then it all came out, a revelation that erupted without further hesitation. From somewhere in some secret abyss so long buried in the wreckage of her life, May told the story from its ghastly beginnings through to the end. It stuck me as rather strange that she kept her composure as I sat immobilized by her disclosure. Her delivery was flat, devoid of emotion, and she kept her gaze upon a painting that hung on the far wall of the room so that she avoided any eye contact. I remember the key points of her story, the only ones that matter. It was like reading headlines announcing some terrible disaster. Granma dying! You left me! My father raped me! And not even just once, he repeated his abuse on the weeks of my absence. Her words revealed that all that I thought I knew did not exist. And she had begged me to allow her to come and stay at her grandmother's.

There were no tears from her, not even a hint of surrender in her body language. When she was through she remained stoically upright, but drained her glass of wine to steady herself. She must have recognized the shock on my face, actually it was more than shock, it was complete abhorrence. The abuse was intensely repulsive, but clearly for years she had held me equally as responsible as her father. She looked at me to confirm her belief that she had got that wrong. I think

it was her greatest relief that I was able to assure her that I had no idea that she had been through the netherworld and she concluded that I was thankfully innocent of willful neglect.

That was how he silenced her, he told his very own child that her mother approved of his abuse, but only silence would allow her to live under his roof. I know there are those horrible cases of men, and I suppose sometimes women too, who threaten violence or death to their victim or the people they love. Clearly his power over her had caused as much pain as the rapes. May was so young. How would she ever have rationalized the unreal possibility that I might ever be complicit in inflicting such wounds.

You know I find it hard to elaborate on her disclosure. It hurts too much. I know people who can't elaborate on a death. It had the impact shock of a sudden death for me. I had never envisaged that sex could be such a destructive force in my family. I can imagine how folk feel with the news of a fatal car crash or a fire. It doesn't seem possible. I wonder why we all feel invincible? Immune from the tragedies that only ever happen in other peoples lives. As if we are the only people in the universe who somehow deserve to be preserved from the realities of life.

She seemed so young as she emptied the weight from her soul. The burden that had dragged her into some hell that I had never recognized! It takes a long time before you let go of the notion that your children are your babies, I think that's the worst of it. I was not sensitive enough to ever even suspect that something was wrong. I don't care if I am rich or poor, I only care that my children are undamaged.

I am surprised that I did not even think to seek assistance in my half empty glass of wine. I am sorry my May felt it necessary to plead with me not to tell her brothers. I hadn't in that moment given them a thought. I am sure though that she would have given the matter a lot of thought over the years He was after all their father too. It was the plaintiff tone, a suggestion that she had come so far, but was not ready to just charge full force into the world and disclose her pain. And then she surprised me with her admission that she didn't want the public shame of prosecution. As if she had any need of shame.

Ottmar Liebert had well and truly run his course by the time I had dried my eyes. May was firm, maybe she had already shed the quota of tears that are assigned in a lifetime. I decided that it might be best if I stayed over for the night. It didn't seem possible that I could just walk out into the street, jump in my car and speed off. I'm glad I stayed! May needed me! There had been so many years when I was barricaded out of her life. Thank goodness she had finally come to the realization that I didn't belong in the same camp as Owen. I would have liked to have asked her how she arrived at the conclusion that her father had silenced her to perpetuate his power, but I concluded that she would tell me when she was ready.

I don't know where the afternoon went, but by mid afternoon we both needed a break from all that the intensity. May played *Bitter Sweet Sympathy* on her CD player several times over. But I couldn't agree with the verdict that there is nothing in between birth and death but work. The Verve had it wrong. It all makes sense when you have your children and you watch them have theirs, and so on all the way down the line through all those lives. I was glad that she succumbed to the suggestion of an afternoon sleep. I remember her face upon her pillow and the little curl that had escaped on to her forehead.

We went to the movies in the evening. May was happy to leave the bottle behind and she said that she was making an all out effort to tidy up her life. We watched some movie that I no longer recall, but I remember clearly that we were together and we were both comfortable with that. She had said her piece, devoid of any disturbing sexual detail and while there were questions that bounced around in my head, I just knew that it was not the time to press for further answers. I was grateful that the admission of such trauma came from her, all the courage that she must have had to muster to confront that moment of disclosure.

It must be far worse if a third party delivers the news, that an intermediary is required to make it all right, telling you that you got it all wrong for all those years. Mind you if some social worker or teacher or concerned adult had been in the position to knock on my door and deliver the news when May was young enough to start on another course, it would have salvaged all those lost years. I guess that no one knows how to approach any trauma if there is only silence.

Incest had opened me up to the serious contemplation of my life with Owen. It is as clear as day, the vision of him on top of me securing his conjugal rights. Funny how the face that is so much part of your life can be transformed into something repugnant. Did he never consider that when he was raping our child?

Oh how I wished I could just throw him, soul and all into hell.

Chapter 17

I don't think you can turn up at home and just launch into an accusation. There was so much information to digest. When Owen turned up at home for dinner the following night it was difficult to focus on anything other than May's words in my head. A violent confrontation would do nothing to appease the disgust. Owen was always the master in sudden confrontation, violent or not, and I wanted to wait for the moment when I could absorb the news and hit him with the question, why. Make no mistake, the anger was as deep as the disgust.

Apart from my anger, I was truly mystified that the Owen that I thought I knew, was the same Owen who had been driven by some terrible lust, or sudden mental aberration to imagine that in any way it was okay to force himself on a child and in particular the child that he had apparently loved. There really wasn't anything that marked Owen as an over sexualized being. He might have been lousy in the marital bed, but that didn't make him a deviant, and I had always been mindful of protecting his male pride. We had never had the sort of relationship where sex was a bartering tool. Owen wasn't even the sort of fellow that kept a copy of *Playboy* under the mattress. His crimes had been committed long before we had a computer, so I am sure there would never be a trail of child pornography to unravel.

In fact I always believed that Owen was really not driven by sex. I suppose that opinion was formulated very early in our relationship, in those days in the front seat of the car. I rather appreciated then that he was able to call a halt when I gave the command, when the petting looked liked getting the better of the both of us. Owen didn't even have a wondering eye when it came to the ladies and I can't ever recall a time when I felt he had overstepped the mark in mixed social settings. Jeannie had to accept that Mick never entered a room full of women without scanning the assembly for a mark. Mick no doubt only had an eye for the ladies, but they were grownups who were quite capable of telling him where to get off. A child is a different matter, a matter of power and undeniable control.

Probably that's where I went wrong; believing that the incestuous father actually exposes himself in some way to the world. Maybe there are men that do and the warning signals are there for all to see. My own father was always a source of support in my life, and nothing in my childhood ever presented itself to make me wary of pedophiles and certainly not perpetrators of incest. If I think about it now I can't recall ever warning May of such dangers. The conversation never came up, so I can see that she would have no yardstick to evaluate my opinion on the topic. Kids get plenty of warnings about stranger danger these days, although I can't see how the warnings are of use when the danger is in the supposed safety of your home.

It is awful to think that there are children out there who are afraid to go home. It is as terrible as those images of war that seem to fill our TV screens. Children dug out of the rubble of their homes or clinging to their mother's skirts in camps tentatively anchored in desert sands. The UN General Assembly didn't ratify the Rights of the Child until 1990 which at the time seemed amazing to me that it

should be necessary to spell out the obvious. The abuse of our child by my partner really rocked the boat. I know it is not about me, but I lost the naïve faith that appearances define the reality of the lives of so many kids.

I think I would be more nervous these days sending my kids off unattended to some school friend's home for a birthday party, trusting that the familiar face of someone's dad was reassurance that my kids were safe. My daughter-in-law reports that you can never have a birthday party for your kids these days without catering for the parents as well. I can see now why parents might insist on attending. All that unnerving information about child pornography rings and the internet is enough to make any parent nervous. What a simplified childhood I enjoyed! Owen never attended our kid's parties when they were young because there was always an excuse of a business meeting at the pub, and actually I don't know what other kid's dads did during parties, but I never heard of one in attendance.

Maybe a physiologist could offer an explanation? Unravel it all and set Owen straight. I can't say that I cared. I had lost all interest in his needs, superseded by the instincts of a bear with her cubs. I still don't think I am wrong about that because after all he made deliberate choices. If only you could wind back the clock. Imagine if you could actually take a considered view of a man with a footprint on his jacket. But I didn't get offered that opportunity, swept up by some unexplained chemistry.

Anyway I am so glad that I understand her now, because I had spent all those awkward years wondering what drove her to move from one disaster to another. That strangely was the one blessing in her disclosure. My May with her mask off! It was far too early to even consider how you could repair the damage. It was enough to deal with her pain. I guess I will never understand him. I know his mother abandoned him, but I still can't accept that as an excuse. I know implicitly that Harry would agree. Who knows, maybe Owen blamed Harry for his mother's departure, or maybe it had nothing to do with blame at all but rather some twisted sense of entitlement and empowerment. I don't think Owen knows himself. Plenty of other people are stuck with the worst of situations, even deal with it in their childhoods, but they manage to work out right from wrong

I am glad that I didn't just rush home from May's and confront Owen before I had time to contemplate the ghastly news. I needed time to digest the information and work through it in my head. Time to reflect on why I had been unable to read the signs that something was terribly wrong.

The older you get the more Christmases there are to remember and after enough years they all seem to roll together, but those Christmases when your children are still young remain forever. My memories were full of images of Santa's deliveries, food and of our family around the tree. Owen was usually relaxed because the building industry took a break at Christmas. On the whole they were harmonious days, even after the children had learned the dreadful truth about Santa.

I now recall the Christmas after my mother died, and I remember that we were all coming to terms with a Christmas without Granma's fruitcake, which was a family favourite. I can't recall if it was one of those very hot days that bring in the flies with the smell of the roasting turkey or one of those days where everyone marvels that the southeasterly is doing a marvellous job. Really for many years I didn't give it any more significance than the fact that it marked my mother's passing. May would have been twelve and past the need for childish presents, replaced by a wish list of clothes and makeup. That's the way I remembered that particular Christmas for so many years, but now the whole event has taken on a new meaning.

Christmas had no hope of dawning without 8 am mass, so there is no doubt that is how the day would have started. The boys had dug in their heels years before, and like Owen, usually remained in their beds until after I was home and the breakfast was served. Present opening was a ceremony that was enacted mid morning before we loaded up on the main meal of the day. Owen never involved himself in the actual process of decision making and purchasing of gifts, he had always left it up to me to take care of that part of the process. The boys were old enough to have earned some money working for their father over the holidays, so they took care of their own purchases.

May was restricted to pocket money, but she had always taken Christmas seriously so I was very surprised that she had made no effort to do any shopping. Previously she had loved the whole idea of tinsel and wrapping paper and would spend hours writing out cards for all of us. But on this particular year she seemed totally disinterested in the whole affair. I put down her lack of enthusiasm to puberty and the loss of her grandmother, so I decided that it was best not to harp on the matter particularly, as she would not respond to my questions, which she dismissed with a shrug.

On the top of her wish list was a lipstick that she had been nagging me to wear for several months. I wasn't too sure that I was quite ready to see my May with sexy lips, but in the end I decided that perhaps that was my personal hang up and after all the fashion required a pale pink, so there would be no scarlet lips to contend with. I had to ask the advice of one of her friends when it came to the clothes I'd purchased because there is no point in buying an outfit that a girl would not be seen dead in.

In the past May had delighted in the job of reading the Christmas greetings and handing the gifts to the recipients, but I took that role that Christmas because May insisted that it was no longer her job. I left her to last, savouring the anticipation of her delight when she discovered that her wish list had been fulfilled. I know that some folk dismiss the whole Christmas pressie idea as nothing but kowtowing to consumerism and plenty of people regift the same object year after year, but I loved Christmas and all that it entailed.

I had individually wrapped the clothes and the lipstick and bundled them into one big parcel that I labelled in the family tradition – To May with all our love, Mum and Dad. What an awful day it must have been for May, unwrapping her

gifts under the watchful gaze of her perpetrator and his imagined collaborator. She was happy with the clothes, so I felt the success you experience when someone really likes the gift that you present. She left the little box with the lipstick until last. Owen had just poured himself another whisky, which was his preferred drink at Christmas, and was settled into his armchair when that tube of pink gloss was unveiled.

I really hadn't considered whether Owen would approve or not. Maybe I should have consulted him, but regardless of his disapproval it was his sudden violent explosion that was so disarming. I had recognized that there was a shift in the dynamic between May and her father ever since my return from nursing my mother, but all of us were surprised by his outburst. Sure we were accustomed to him laying down the law, however until that time, his approach had always been rational. What surprised me the most was May's response. She didn't burst into tears or scream her objections, instead she stood up from the floor where she had been opening her presents and looked him square in the eye and turned and headed off down the hall to the sanctuary of her room.

My instinct was to follow her in the hope of providing some comfort; Owen however, demanded that I let her be. I knew there were fathers who find it difficult to accept that their little girl is transforming before their eyes and I imagined that was the root of Owen's behaviour. He said not another word about the incident, which is probably why the memory of that moment had faded until May's disclosure. And of course now I understand why she avoided so many Christmases and family events. The poor child had to suffer them until she was old enough to leave home and take control of her own life.

She rejoined us for lunch but she remained sullen throughout the meal. Not even the silly joke in her bonbon seemed to cheer her up. Owen chose to ignore her, so I believed that a truce had been reached simply because there was no repeat of his explosive anger. All these years later I recognize it as a strength she demonstrated. We have discussed the incident in more recent years and May told me that it was the defining moment in which she decided that she would no longer accept his dictums. Thank God that on the day of the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, from some unknown place, she found the strength to call a halt to his domination.

How sad that for so many victims they are never blessed with that strength. I wonder where it came from? I can't claim to have had in my world of ignorance any constructive input, to have provided any guidance or understanding of her plight. Maybe I am being unfair to myself and somewhere in her childhood I enabled her to find that voice. Oh my sweet Jesus, if only I had known! Only now am I beginning to believe that I had some grounding in her thinking that I was an accomplice, because of my many years of subjugation to Owen. It must have looked that way to May, and all those years I imagined I was simply keeping the peace. While I can take no credit for her defiance on that fateful Christmas day I like to think that a little tube of pink lipstick wrapped in shiny paper had been the catalyst for her change of direction. I know that she used that lipstick, never

at home of course, but when ever she went off with her friends, she carried it in a shoulder bag that Anthony had given her on that same morning.

My reappraisal of the Christmas after my mother died was indeed an exposure of the breast stripped bare. How terrible must it be to never have anything in your life but abuse? I don't know dear reader if you are a man or a woman, a mother or simply an observer. It looks so easy that breast feeding is part of a woman's connection to a child, but in reality there is such a thing as a cracked nipple- Oh my God they hurt! There is only one cure for cracked nipples and that is to keep feeding. Mastitis is no cup of tea either. However there is both the daily grind and the joy, the deep satisfaction, the undeniable connection, that keeps you going. Any physical pain is soon forgotten; I would never have produced a bottle just because of a bleeding nipple.

In fairness to myself, as a matter of self-defense, I don't really think that my lack of perspective was just about the time. Maybe the young still embark on life with their partner with an expectation that everything will turn out all right. But I can't be sure about that. It's a lottery really. You couldn't just Google a statistic on your smartphone or check for warning signs in 1960. Would it have made any difference? Would I have made the connections, or would my faith in the cozy success of my life have blinded me. Incest belongs in sordid tales of poverty, in a world of violence, of struggle, of too many people confined to a small space. I know now that it is a more complex issue. But it doesn't make it right. There is something unnatural in putting yourself before your child.

Definitely the worst of it all was her belief that I had known about it, ignored her pain and chosen to disregard reality. Maybe as child you imagine that your mother knows all and can fix it. Then as the years go by imagination gets mixed with a demonstration of a perceived reality and becomes a fact, and then you believe that any lack of action is a deliberate rejection. How could that dear little child not trust how much I loved her?

Chapter 18

I had a restless night listening to Owen snoring while the memories of years of events and moments where May demonstrated her rejection of both of us intermittently tormented me. The sounds of a snoring husband can be comforting, although I have friends who have moved into a separate room for the sake of peace, but I can't say I was ever as troubled by the snoring, as I was that night. I had a sense that I was laid out next to a sleeping monster. I wondered what other secrets lay buried in that thick skull. How could you be married to someone for over forty years and not truly know him or her?

Owen had been my partner for all those years, the person I trusted and suddenly he was the enemy. My poor May must have experienced the same emotional sabotage with the sudden unexplained abuse from a father that had reciprocated her affection as a small child. I don't for one moment believe he was simply offering misguided affection because rape is an act of violent aggression. Maybe if he had been the sort of father that had to be constantly appeased and pacified by his daughter you would be less surprised by an act of violence. Despite his position as boss of the household, the children didn't live in one of those households where you constantly walk on eggshells. Dear May did not elaborate on his approach to her abuse, but she used the word rape, so I can only envisage the use of force. As I have explained before, neither Owen nor I believed in smacking our children, so the violence in his offence must have been mortifying. I determined to find the answer once the sun was up, and we were both alert enough to consider my accusation.

You dear reader might be one of those people who is confident with confrontation, especially when you are the one that holds the moral high ground. I have always been the same, it doesn't matter if I firmly believe that I am in the right or even if a confrontation is the only course of action, I baulk at the notion. Maybe it is like the flight or fright response, you really can't look at the situation and make a judgement from the outside about a response. I had no intention of asking him if May's accusation was true or not.

My question needed to be framed so that there was some hope of an answer to the question of why. May had revealed during her sordid tale that she had struggled for years with the feeling that in some way she was to blame. As if a child is responsible for the sins of the father! Apparently there are men who blame their daughters for incest, completely negating their responsibility as a parent. There was the possibility that an answer might bring some closure for May.

I opened the conversation by mentioning that I had been to May's for lunch and a sleepover, which he dismissed as of little interest. I decided that the time was up, no more procrastination, it was time for a direct approach so I asked him "What went through your head, what could ever have induced you to rape May?"

His denial was delivered in a bizarrely flat tone. It was as if he was prepared for the accusation and had rehearsed his response. "She's always been a liar," he said inventing an image of a child that certainly never existed before he raped her. He continued with a fact that was undeniably true, but which provided no proof of his innocence, and with the surety of the accused in the stand confronting the judge added, "How would you know, you weren't there." The very fact that he had twisted and used power to silence her! It certainly left me feeling uneasily guilty that I had ever left May alone with him for so long. There was not going to be an answer, not with a clear-cut refusal to at least admit to his transgressions.

I have had plenty of years to contemplate his response, and I still don't have an answer to the why because it is all speculation. My questioning of why had clearly been as pointless as the inquisitions raised during question time in parliament. Maybe May's rapes were a punishment for my absence, maybe he viewed her as a replacement, or maybe as some men do, he believed that it was his privilege to initiate her sexually. It is equally possible that he had been harboring suppressed incestuous temptation for years and finally found the opportunity to act it out.

I don't know if on reflection he felt any guilt, he has never said anything to indicate that he did, or worse still maybe he believed that his abuse was justified. Because of his deflection there wasn't any discussion to elaborate on his reasoning. Since that confrontation, which is now years ago, Owen has continued with denial. Apparently denial is the usual response of perpetrators, even when confronted with the facts. I was sure that this wasn't a case of a false memory because of the way May clearly started to distance herself from Owen and I at the time of my mother's death. From that time onward there was never a goodnight hug and a kiss from her at bedtime, or a willingness to instigate family time.

There was no point in debating the issue. No point in listing the evidence to persuade him of the truth. Clearly he had declared the debate closed years before. He must have known that he had said nothing to dissipate my view. You can't disguise the disgust on your face. Without a further word he headed for the pantry where his car keys hung on a hook, and without a backward glance he calmly and deliberately headed out the door.

He may have been able to depart with his feathers unruffled, however all I could do was to collapse into my couch. I don't know how long I remained there, but I recall that I didn't even have the momentum to secure a cup of tea. My world had altered. I can only imagine how May must have felt when her world disintegrated.

Initially I was tempted to ring May and report Owen's reaction, however I knew she wouldn't be home to answer the phone until after work. I needed someone to debrief with because I was feeling agitated. I didn't want to just phone a friend because it was still unclear in my mind what my next move would involve. Perhaps if I had experienced years of resentment, or anger, or distance, or even repulsion towards Owen my future would have immediately been clear-cut, but I

suppose that actually I was in shock. Oh how I hated that look of one-upmanship, that he wore as left me trembling in our kitchen.

It wasn't until a couple of hours later when I had rehashed and rehashed May's story that it dawned on me that there was no way I could spend another night listening to Owen snoring on the pillow next to mine. There would really have to be some blinded commitment to my marriage to agree to sleeping with the enemy. Undoubtedly he was the enemy. A stranger and a callous one at that!

In all my years of marriage there had never been an occasion where I had banished Owen to the couch or indeed taken refuge there myself. There had been a point years before when Owen had suggested that he would like a single bed to himself, but I had always resisted the idea believing that many an issue is only resolved in the shared marital bed. I could see no other road ahead of me. I removed myself from the couch, and set about stripping my bedroom of my belongings. Owen could have the room to himself, I wanted no part of it.

Jeannie often reported that she banished Mick from their bed if things weren't going her way. Mick it seems didn't have to commit a high level crime to be banned. But Jeannie was a different kettle of fish to me. It isn't even a remote possibility that she would ever back off from confrontation. Even if Jeannie had been available to phone I don't think she would have been useful at that point in helping me make my decision. Moving out of our bedroom was more than a big move, it was more than a statement, it was an acknowledgement that an irreparable rift had torn my marriage apart.

The thought of Owen reappearing in our home was daunting. I could hardly stand as a sentinel at the front door because after all it was also his home. The more I thought about it the more sure I was that I wasn't prepared for a follow up conversation, not at that moment in time anyway. With time to fill before May finished work I decided on a trip into town to kill some time at the shops.

Shopping has never really interested me that much, any thoughts of retail therapy were always overridden by guilt and years of careful budgeting, but I needed to get out of the house and surround myself with the faces of strangers. I did buy a handbag for May, so the thought of her delight in a new bag cheered me up. I had forgotten about the bag until recently when I saw her using it and it prompted my memory of that day. It was good purchase because it is still a classic and still in good shape.

May was surprised to see me waiting outside the chemist when she finished up for the day. We set off for a nearby bar for a drink where I delivered the handbag. I explained that I was in fact I was trying to keep out of her father's pathway, and so after a drink she invited me back to her flat. I knew that I would have to go home at some point, but I hoped to get home after Owen was in bed. When I reflect on it now it is ridiculous that I was the one avoiding further confrontation, as if I was the rapist.

Despite my sense of confusion there was a point that I felt I should make clear to May, and that was that we would approach the future as a united voice. It was all that I could offer as a consolation for all the tormented years that she had endured alone.

I know that she was glad of the news that I had relocated into the boy's room. She didn't elaborate very much about how she felt about the move, but physically she visibly relaxed. I hope she hadn't been dreading some terrible news, words of confrontation, of me siding with her father. And of course it was news that the family she had always known was on the edge of bottomless cliff, unstable and ready to drop into a world that was never part of their sense of balance.

I didn't tell her what Owen's response was; she didn't need to hear those hurtful words. I am still glad I made that decision; her wounds were too raw! But I am also glad that I was able to report that I had left Owen's bed. I knew that I had to go home to my single bed and there could be no procrastinating. She hugged me when I left just like she did when she was a child, I left her with her bottle of wine, there was not much else she could do at that point after years of self-medication.

Owen was up having a whisky when I got home. He seemed to have accepted the fact that there was no evening meal prepared as if it was a natural state of affairs. I thought the whisky might have made him a little testy but no, to my surprise he simply ignored me. He had no response to an offer to make cheese on toast and instead retreated to the couch and sat transfixed by a program in which he had no interest. I had spent enough years with Owen to understand that I was witnessing uncharacteristic behaviour, that he was equally making a statement, asserting his rights as he saw them. Insisting that I made some move towards supporting him. I had already chosen my side, I don't think he truly understood that, but I saw that defiant look of determination on his face as he tried to bury the moment in the television screen

He had possession of the couch so there was no alternative but to head off to bed. The boy's room was at the back of the house so there was a sense of division between it and my former room. I am glad I hadn't moved into May's room because not only was it straight across the hall from parental bedroom, but also I could only now think of it as a rape scene.

Her room can't still exist. Someone must have bought the house and transformed it from the personal tastes of a teenage girl into their own. It was a contradiction of a room, it had offered her sanctuary on a Christmas morning and rape in my absence. Jimmy Hendrix till cast his poster face down upon the jewelry box with the ballerina who danced to a musical tune and kept children's jewelry safe inside. I wondered how she must have felt entombed in a room just across a wee hall from the pedophile who defiled her and a mother that accepted his head upon the pillow next to hers. Oh what a frightful image that all now becomes!

I am not Owen! It is as simple as that! I can never tell you dear reader anything about his rational because there was never anything between us that would

allow for such a discussion. And even if there was, I personally am unable to look beyond my first response, which is and was to the needs of the child that suckled on my breast.

After all there can never be a discussion when one party refuses to acknowledge the need for communication. Doesn't mean that I have to forgive him, but maybe it means that he had an opportunity to confront himself, and he blocked it out with the blue light of a television screen.

Chapter 19

My baby brother once came home for a visit and brought with him a mate who was apparently without any permanent address. My brother always seemed to have a collection of odd bods and on reflection my brother was a bit of an odd bod himself. Nothing weird, just nothing mainstream. After my mother died I became the symbol of home for him so every now and then he would appear unannounced for a dose of home. Usually he came alone, but on the occasion of this particular visit he brought a mate. They had met on their travels through Asia, and enjoyed the connection of shared adventures. The mate certainly wasn't the sort of bloke that Owen would bring home for a cup of tea, and I remember that I was equally fascinated by the visitor's orange dreadlocks, which he wore coiled on the top of his head, and his luggage, which consisted of a small shoulder bag containing a passport and a bankbook. He certainly wasn't troubled by the need to carry a change of underwear, or in fact even in a change of clothes, although he did trouble himself to cart along a rather smelly afghan coat that he declared had saved him on many a cold night. He went by the name of Sunshine, although I am pretty sure that was not the name his mother gave him

Sunshine was one of those characters who was immediately at home no matter where he went. He said he was happy to sleep on the floor because he could lie on his coat. He didn't however knock back the comfort of May's old room and a comfy bed. He accepted the offer of a towel and directions to the bathroom without comment, although when he moved on a week later the towel remained unsullied on the end of the bed. He was an upbeat character, and I put it down to the fact that he was untroubled by the daily rituals that the rest of us deem necessary for a happy existence.

Owen's whisky bottle certainly had more appeal than the towel. My brother replaced the bottle daily, and with the addition of cartons of beer, Sunshine and my brother settled into a holiday with the advantage of my supply of home cooked meals. Owen was still at work at the time, which was just as well because I am sure there would have been quite a few complaints from him about his house guests who managed to make it feel like they occupied the whole house. The boys and May had left home by the time Sunshine came for his visit so I often felt the emptiness of the house and I enjoyed the company.

I had never had the opportunity to meet a character like Sunshine before. He was the sort of bloke that you might occasionally pass in the street or glimpse in a story about folk who had forsaken the rat race and taken to the hills to eek out a living growing vegetables and chanting mantras. He was willing to divulge his life to anyone who looked receptive, and the flow of whisky and beer kept him well oiled. He seemed a little disappointed that we were not a household of pot smokers, but he decided that the alcohol would suffice to keep him fueled.

Indeed I have to say that I enjoyed the results of the fuel. Sunshine was a man who had spent his adult life weighing up philosophy, politics and the general hurdy gurdy of existence. I can't say that everything that he pontificated upon was within my parameters of expectations for an orderly life. He was older than

my baby brother, I estimated that he was in his late forties, but that was just a guess. Apparently he had left a wife and child behind for the freedom of the road. I don't want to be judgmental about that that even though I found that hard to understand, I forgave him as you do with anyone that can deliver such a statement with wit and a twist of their orange dreadlocks. Maybe you dear reader would respond differently, maybe the dreadlocks would put you off, but that is how I responded to a flippant tale of abandonment, I could see how a child might be better off without him, even though children are usually the most forgiving of creatures. His statement that his child was better off without him made sense, when he explained that he had chosen his life style and it was no life for a child.

I was impressed by the honesty in his admission that he was a junkie and he accepted that. I suppose there is some decency in that thought. Look what happened to Pinocchio. Does honesty make it all right? His antinomian view of the world was framed by a reference distorted by years of drug use. Apparently he had been educated by the Christian Brothers, and had a very ordinary childhood free of any violence or neglect at home. I could imagine him as a chirpy redheaded child testing the resolve of the Christian Brothers.

I recall reading *Fear and Loathing in Los Vegas* some time before I met Sunshine, and admit that I was rather shocked by the revelations of a drug provoked road journey, but after all Raoul Duke was an antihero intent on exposing the American Dream and all its flaws, and Sunshine aspired to nothing more than a hedonistic lifestyle. Sunshine explained that the medical profession invented a drug to block the effects of heroin – apparently it works, but where were all your mates if you freed yourself from the bitch? No, Sunshine was happy in the world in which he had chosen to belong.

One thing was for sure, heroin was clearly not the automatic death sentence that was portrayed in the antidrug campaigns. Maybe there are more destructive forces than death and they would have made a better argument for the campaigners. The loss of a family and a connection to the mainstream would always have been enough to convince me that drugs weren't a viable alternative to reality. I think a soft pink or a vivid orange sunset drawing a close to a day of work completed, or sounds of your children splashing in the bath before they emerge rosy and glowing to be cocooned in a night of sleep needs no enhancement. I wonder what makes some of us happy with the simple things and others restless, searching for some other level that they believe can be achieved with a chemical solution. In many ways as a junkie he was to be pitied. The baby some mother had loved ripping through all the expectations she had for her son - dissipated, but it was the real anguish it caused his family that weighed most heavily into the debate. What dilemma had his wife been presented?

Sunshine had buried many friends during his heroin days, but he was blessed with a constitution that allowed him to survive and he had discovered Shabu in the Philippines, which he claimed he was able to handle, and allowed him to shake himself free of the heroin. He never explained where he got the money to finance his lifestyle, and I never cared to ask. Did he ever rob someone? Probably, however I can't say I felt anxious about his presence in my house.

I don't think my baby brother would have ever introduced his mate into my parent's house. It would have been impossible for my father to ever accept a declared junkie into his household. I am glad that my brother considered me open minded enough to give Sunshine a fair hearing. I of course, wondered about my brother, there is the old saying that if you lie with dogs you get flees, but there were no stories from him about shoddy dealers or opium dens. I suspect that he was never just an observer, but didn't wish to break that fragile line that anchored his childhood to the present.

Most young males find risk irresistible, it what drives them to off to wars, to break the speed limits, to challenge the head bull in the heard, and my brother had always been a risk taker. Sunshine claimed his introduction to drugs was initially experimental, but there was a point early in the piece where he made a deliberate choice. I don't know if you could claim that as a moral choice, the naivety of youth or simply addiction.

I hadn't really thought about Sunshine for years until May's disclosure brought back a memory that I found uncomfortable at the time. Sometimes a conversation sticks in your memory, filed in between years of irrelevant information. There was a newspaper report that triggered the initial conversation and in the report a man had been sentenced to jail for incest. Sunshine was adamant that no man should be punished for incest. He argued that in some parts of the world it was a viable way of breeding enough children to work and feed a family. I could not see how the consequences of extreme poverty or isolation should impact on the morality of a man living in suburban Australia at the end of the twentieth century, but my argument held no water with Sunshine.

It was one thing for Sunshine to express his view that incest was acceptable, but the reason that the conversation remains in my memory is because my baby brother agreed with him. How could that be the case? How could my father's son possibly condone the abuse of one's own child? We had been raised with the same values, the same care and attention and yet somewhere along the track we had arrived at totally different destinations. I was glad that my mother was no longer alive to hear her son's declaration that men have a right to decide that their sexual needs superseded the rights of women and children. Incest is after all more than just a crime. I recall thinking about my own sons and their attitudes, but of course at the time I had no reason to suspect that Owen might be in Sunshine's camp.

May didn't want the public shame of prosecution. Who would ever imagine that as a victim she would feel the need to defend herself from the condemnation of others? At least Sunshine by his logic would not have condemned her, not that I see that as a consolation. Basically I would at least expect that the person that claimed to love me would actually care as much about me as they did about themselves, and there would never be an issue of shame or blame. Owen clearly understood that raping his child was wrong or he would not have silenced her with the threat of expulsion. There was no excuse that it was necessary to breed more workers, or that he lived in a world of ignorance.

I don't think before that conversation with Sunshine I had ever really thought about my own convictions that incest is a betrayal of a child's faith in the protection that she or even he expects from a father. I don't think I truly understood the extent to which girls and women are powerless in a male world. Maybe dear reader you have been aware of these things since you were a baby in your cot, but I had always believed that my duty to love was a one sided thing despite the women's movement, that it was all about sacrifice. What if it wasn't? What if you demanded from your other half, what you demanded from yourself? Does such an existence exist?

There was no point in Owen asking me to forgive him. It is all very well to say that the road to inner peace can only be travelled when you learn to forgive, but surely there has to be some act of contrition from the penitent. And what about May? Innocence cannot be regained, and there had been so much damage done that it was hard to envisage how it would ever be possible to undo the past. I wonder now what my baby brother would think if he knew that his niece had been her father's victim. I hope that his consensus with the views of Sunshine was simply a manifestation of peer pressure, and that somewhere underneath the veneer of whisky and beer there was the little brother that was raised by my mother and father.

Chapter 20

I was glad when Jeannie came back because she would be full of humorous tales of her adventures, and ordinarily there would be nothing between us but a romp through the world according to Jeannie. However I sensed that the news of May could possibly have an unexpected impact on our rendezvous.

We arranged to meet for lunch at a restaurant that was enjoying a great deal of popularity as the place to be seen. Jeannie liked to be seen. She was never willing to come to my place simply for a cup of coffee and a piece of cake. Now that I think about it I can't recall ever receiving an invitation to just drop into her place. Jeannie hosted barbeques where Mick was put to work cooking the meat, and she produced a simple tossed salad, she never appeared hot and sweaty in the kitchen stirring a sauce or washing the dishes. There was a cleaning lady to take care of any cleaning up. I always felt out of place at her social gatherings, because she moved in an entirely different set to my friends.

An invitation to lunch was a privilege really, because I am sure there was a long list of friends waiting to catch up with the traveller. I arrived at the restaurant first because even though I know that Jeannie has to make her entrance I am stuck with the punctuality bug, and I just can't bear to be late. It doesn't matter if the person I am to meet is half an hour late, I would rather wait than watch the clock tick even a minute beyond the appointed time. I heard Jeannie arrive long before she reached our table because, naturally being a popular restaurant, there were people to greet.

She looked fabulous, still glowing with the tan she acquired in the Greek islands, and all of a glitter with Moroccan bracelets. Even the wait staff was glad to have her back, and we ordered the special without bothering to peruse the menu. Apparently the entire trip had been simply wonderful with no recounts of missed flights or booking mix-ups at hotels that apparently cause angst for other travellers. She had bought me a souvenir from Ireland, a small, silver, Celtic cross, which I still have. Every now then I give it a polish when I clean my jewelry, and I think of Jeannie and her laugh.

I always find it disturbing, those moments when you know that you need to be giving your full attention to someone else's big moment, but your own agenda dominates your thoughts. I didn't just want to cut across Jeannie's time in the spotlight and infect it with my own troubles, but Jeannie's vivaciousness exacerbated my own anxieties about May. I knew that Jeannie maintained a loyalty to Owen through her years of working for the business, so I could see that it would be imprudent to simply blurt out May's disclosure.

Towards the end of lunch when the plates had been cleared and the coffee cups were almost empty, and we had covered the highlights of the trip, I enquired about Jess. Apparently she had missed her parents, but on the whole she had been pretty happy with her grandmother. I pointed out how lucky Jeannie and Mick were to be able to go on an extended trip secure in the knowledge that

there would be no danger of a pedophile lurking in the background to threaten Jess. Jeannie found it an odd observation. I explained that there had been a recent case of incest that I had heard of through my friends. The case did not involve consensual sex between adults, but rather the abuse of a child. I couldn't of course admit that I was speaking from personal experience. So I passed it off as a theory, and challenged Jeannie with the question of how she would respond if it were Jess who was the victim.

Initially Jeannie dismissed my question with a comment that she was having such a wonderful day that she could see no point in spoiling a lunch with serious questions. Maybe she understood that was some earnest point to my question and with a toss of her hair she gave me her answer.

Apparently Jeannie had recently learned about the existence of false memories, so she was adamant that it was foolish to believe every accusation of incest as fact. I argued that false memories usually spring from an event or trauma. But Jeannie retorted that children could be liars, you never know if it was a situation of a child with a grudge against a parent or the other parent with a grudge creating the accusations. Actually I know that she is terribly wrong about children lying, because most children do not tell anyone, ever. The belief that children lie is a myth that has been protecting abusers forever.

I could see why May found it so difficult even as an adult to bring up her father's abuse. What if you were accused of harbouring false memories or even worse of being a liar? I knew May wasn't a liar because all the other factors, my absence at the time, May's years of rejection and that fateful Christmas were all the circumstantial evidence I needed to be convinced that May had unveiled the truth.

I went on to explain that the family involved had as a result of the incest, disintegrated as a family unit. Jeannie just could not come to terms with the logic of breaking up a family just because of incest. Even if were true why would you break up a family she argued. But of course Owen had already done that when he cut May off from the life that was surely her right. I can see why Jeannie might baulk at the idea if it had been her Jess, and Mick had been the offender. Not only was a future of overseas holidays, and a lifestyle of comfortable wealth at stake, but also her reputation. That would be too much for Jeannie to bear. It wasn't possible to imagine her having to pull in the belt and restrict the visits to the beautician. I am sure there are many women in Jeannie's position who wouldn't hesitate to put their child first, but for Jeannie leaving a husband who brought home the bacon was not an option.

It must be hard on those families who lose a bread -winner when the line between food on the table and an empty plate are so slim. I wonder how many mothers must choose to ignore the obvious in order to keep their family fed? The alarming statistics on family violence certainly indicate that families are often caught in the vice of poverty and dependence. At least I didn't have to worry about small children or buying school uniforms, or keeping the car on the

road. As for my reputation, truly anyone that found fault with me because of Owen's sins was not worth knowing.

I can see now why Jeannie found my questions to be so serious, because before we asked for the bill she lent forward, and in an uncharacteristic whisper, revealed that she knew what she was talking about because her father had sexually abused her and her younger sister for years. She looked me straight in the eye as she announced that in fact she considered herself to be a survivor. I have always disliked that song *I'm a survivor, I will survive*, it's so melodramatic, however there was nothing contrived about Jeannie's admission, and use of the term. Clearly it was part of Jeannie.

I had a lot of questions that I would have liked to ask, but there was nothing in Jeannie's body language that made me feel that it would be appropriate to probe beyond what she choose to tell me. She did however satisfy my need to know how her family had dealt with their lives. She went on to explain that her younger sister was in fact not a survivor, that life for her had been one disaster after another. Her mum and dad still lived together, while Jeannie had stopped talking to her father from the day she left home.

What a pity that May had never had the strength or the resolve to think of herself as a survivor. Who knows where that ability to simply move forward comes from? Some people survivor all the horrors of wars and others like poor Harry are doomed to a life of the jitters, or substance abuse, or destructive relationships.

A friend of Jeannie's, who had arrived for a late lunch, interrupted us, and the survivor turned her attention to reporting that she had enjoyed the most marvelous time on her travels. Jeannie of course had not directly answered my initial question of how she would respond to the information that Jess had been a victim of incest. Maybe she didn't want to think about it or maybe she saw Jess as a survivor through the lens of her own experience. Either way I don't relish the thought of any child coming to harm at the hands of their father. I think it would be easier to come to terms with the trauma connected to some terrible physical accident, because at least you can reason that an accident is not deliberate, than to know that your welfare was of little value to your father.

I don't mean to present Jeannie as stereotype because I am sure there are lots of Jeannies in the world who don't share her point of view on incest. What would you do to preserve a marriage, stand by your man? One thing is for sure; she left me with plenty to think about. Clearly there was not a general agreement that there is only one determined path in response to incest.

It was raining when we left the restaurant and Jeannie hurried off to have her hair done in preparation for some fancy do that she was to attend in the evening. She looked quite content with the world, satisfied I suppose that she was a survivor. I couldn't agree that the abuse of a father was something to be buried. How strange that she should accuse a child of lying, defend the perpetrator when she had once been that child. Maybe Jeannie would never recognize the damage

done being too busy proving to the world that she was just fine, and maybe she was after all, just fine.

It was a point of difference between us that I recognized as a barrier. Obviously neither May nor I could expect any empathy from Jeannie, and also she was connected to Owen through Mick. I guess our friendship was the first casualty in my newfound universe. It is not that we ever had a falling out, but rather that time drifted by, and eventually she had to choose in which camp she belonged, and the survivor in her had no option but to stick with Mick and his friendship with Owen. I never think of her with any ill will, but I do wonder if she ever remembers that we once had a friendship.

As I drove home in the rain I determined that I wouldn't report my conversation with Jeannie to May. It could serve no purpose and in fact I suspected that it could only make May feel as if she was at fault for not having responded to her trauma in the same way that Jeannie had handled her life. I guess that's the point about abuse, you don't really have any control of how you will respond. Jeannie was just lucky that she was born with the ability to dismiss her pain.

Chapter 21

My conversation with Jeannie had left me frustrated by the lack of answers that I sought. Maybe I had been harbouring the need for a little sympathy, after all I viewed May's disclosure as a life-changing event. Probably it couldn't be compared to a death in the family, but for me in many ways it was akin to a death. Life as I understood it had evaporated, suddenly dissipated by a whirlwind of grief. If Jeannie couldn't offer sympathy I would have at least imagined her as providing empathy, but she had shot that notion to pieces, and I had no direction of where I was headed.

I went to Mass on the following Sunday morning hoping to find a little peace, but I was disappointed to learn that the familiarity of the ritual only served to remind me that in fact the world had changed, and while everyone else might be content with their lives maybe it was all simply a facade. It was of course years before the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, so I was still under the impression that the church would be the first to defend the innocence of children.

When I learned, as many others did, of the ineffectiveness of institutional responses by the Church to perpetrators, is when I truly began to question the notion that priests are sacred persons ordained into an unchallenged life. I am sure there are plenty of priests that do their best, and I have only fond memories of the school picnics of my childhood with our parish priest dispensing boiled lollies, and I must point out that nobody ever reported any abuse. Personally I have lost faith in the Church to ensure that they will incorporate the recommendations of the Commission into their institution, and that could well be because I have lost faith in how all institutions including marriage, are conducted. Maybe it is after all a matter of unshakeable faith based on personal experience, a dismissal of evidence or unshakable optimism.

The house was empty when I arrived home from Mass, which was a relief because I really didn't want to spend any time with Owen, but I struggled with the need to talk the situation over with a friend. If I was simply to pack my bags and leave it would certainly prove to May that she had my absolute support, and on the other hand there was the question of what would it mean to my life, and importantly to my sons. Do I proclaim my reasons for leaving to all the world? Is it my shame as well? Some failure on my path? Some set of rules I had ignored? I was no wicked stepmother who had deliberately left children to follow a trail of fragile crumbs, as they unwittingly plodded towards the cruel witch's oven.

There was the possibility that Sen would be at home, so I summoned my courage and gave her a call. My experience with Jeannie had made me apprehensive, I didn't want to be confronted by a further dismissal. As luck would have it Sen and Ben were both at home for the day, so they invited me over to join them while their boys were off with their mates. Their boys were young enough that I didn't really want them to be part of the conversation, so I set off determined to unburden myself without any pretense of an unnamed third party.

I have always liked Sen and Ben's house; it had that distinct feel of being a home. They bought it in a near derelict state when the boys were babies, and over the years Ben has added rooms and a large deck that overlooked his garden of fruit trees and the vegetable patch, which he tended with meticulous care. Not that it was the only possible model of a home. After all a home can exist in a unit or a tent or a caravan. It must be bloody hard in the back of a car! Just imagine it in the rubble of a war zone!

The vegetables were protected from the chickens behind a wire fence, which served to support the passion fruit vine. There was usually a hen or two scratching around the deck or occupying the old couch. Sen regularly complained that the chickens belonged in a pen, and that it was hard to keep up with the chicken poo on the deck, but Ben always laughed it off and I must admit chickens are dear soft creatures to touch. I don't think Sen really minded, her objections were just part of the routine of their lives.

On my arrival Sen brewed tea in her kitchen, which was always blessed with the lingering scent of Asian spices. I loved her collection of teapots that sit on an open shelf, and in season there is a cane basket of fruits from the garden. There doesn't seem to be any objections to the paraphernalia of musical instruments and building tools left on the kitchen bench or the dining room table, but you can see that the surfaces underneath are scrubbed meticulously clean. And there is always fresh homemade cake. Ginger cake is my favourite.

After an indignant white hen was removed from the couch we settled down with our cuppa. There was a brief moment when I wondered if there was any possibility that Ben might have a secret life as a sexual predator, what an awful thought, but in fairness I had never in my wildest dreams imagined that Owen could ever be guilty of such crimes. I remember Owen loudly protesting when the girly magazines first unveiled pubic hair, not that I ever saw him reading such publications, but apparently he knew of such matters through the blokes at work. In more recent times the Me Too movement seems to have opened a seam of sexual abuse that runs worldwide. No doubt the world was always this way, and folk like me just cruised along in a cloud of ignorance. That was really the first moment that I understood the mistrust of men that clearly coloured May's view of life. Bugger Owen, he did that to her!

We judge people daily based entirely on the reputation that they present to the world. It makes you nervous if you think about it because we are only ever privy to the face that someone presents to an audience, I have to say that Owen left me for the first time considering all of that. Poor May, she had had been weighing it up since adolescence. Really there was nothing that suggested that Ben was even slightly dicky and I had listened to his views on everything from human rights to politics, and observed his interactions with his children and his wife, and nothing in their reactions to him ever caused me to doubt that he was the man he claimed to be.

There can't be a genuine conversation without trust. Or maybe there has to be hope that the world is not overwhelmed by the negative? I still feel a little guilty

that I should have ever doubted Ben's sincerity, but my doubts were fleeting. Sen and Ben had known me long enough to understand that May had caused me concern for a very long time, so there was no need to elaborate on the twists and turns of her life, so I simply opened the conversation with May's disclosure.

Sen responded with a mixture of horror and disgust that forced her out of the couch, arms wildly gesticulating, as she punched at an imaginary foe. She wasn't a woman who used coarse language, but she certainly revealed that she was familiar with an extensive vocabulary. When she had exhausted her anger she dropped back into the couch, and held me tightly while the sobs started to bubble up from an endless well inside me. They were cathartic waves that bound us together for some undeterminable length of time. Neither of us moved when my cup of tea bounced off my lap and shattered into small pieces at our feet.

Ben remained silently guarding us on the couch. If I reflect on it now I can't say that he actually looked shocked rather he was pensive, digesting the information, and considering his response. When he spoke he came straight to the heart of matter and asked very simply "What are you going to do about it". It was the question I had been wrestling with, and in the fact it was the reason that I was sitting on their couch.

May didn't want me to tell her brothers, but both Sen and Ben agreed that nobody could go forward until they were informed. I explained what I imagined the impact would be on Francis and his family who were after all innocent of any wrong doing. Ben agreed that would no doubt be an impact, but none of us could really predict how Francis would respond or even Anthony for that matter. And then Sen pointed out the obvious "It must be hard living under that bastard's roof" she exclaimed followed up by a list of wild violent solutions that were really only a metaphorical response. Allowing for the fact that I couldn't poison or shoot Owen, and May would never agree to legal prosecution, Ben framed my situation from his point of view, and made it clear that I had a choice between supporting May in a truly meaningful way by moving out from under Owen's roof, or perpetuating a situation where there was no retribution for Owen's crimes.

Ben's statement moved Sen to add to the discussion by pointing out that there were grandchildren to consider, and you would have to question if perpetrators just grew old and lost interest in children, or if the danger of them reoffending remained. I hadn't given that thought any consideration when I was thinking of protecting Francis and his family from any shame, but the thought of a damaged grandchild was the final straw.

Maybe it is understandable that a pedophile can view a unrelated victim as an object, but how do you view your own flesh and blood that way. Did Owen ever pause to reflect on his actions and say "I am destroying myself"? Maybe incest is another expression of self-harm. I will never know, and Sen and Ben were right. It was up to me to do the right thing. I left their home at least satisfied that they had given me what they believed was their very best advice, and that they had my back, and there is not much more you can ask from friends.

Owen was glued to the television when I got home, so I went off to my new quarters to consider the future. I did wonder if I was approaching things from a Christian point of view, which had been ingrained into my thinking with years of sermons about the Prodigal Son and a forgiving God, but those sermons were based on the idea of repentance, and there had been none of that from Owen. I doubt that my Christian faith would have ever been confirmed enough to forgive him if he begged for absolution, although I know there are women who do, whether through faith or pity.

I lay on May's old bed and listened to the magpie that was making his drop in call to my kitchen window, and marveled that my familiar world could have undergone such change. I am sure you know that feeling of relief when you have been away from home for a holiday, and you finally make it home to the security of your own bed, the smell of your own kitchen, the comfort of your favorite chair that makes you sigh with relief no matter how entertaining your trip has been. Well my refuge from the world was now a foreign land. The dining room table a symbol of life that had not really existed, a monument to my own naivety. Maybe if I had learned of all this when I was twenty years younger I would have felt that I still had a lifetime to make things right for May, but it didn't turn out that way..

It was clear to be me that I had to take a stand for May's sake. It's the way a mother's brain has a wired response that is almost like the immediate reaction to extinguish a fire, a need to stop any pain that might be inflicted upon your children. It is not as intense when your children are past the first cries of hunger, and the knocks and bruises of babyhood, but it never really goes away. Well not in my case at least. It is like that headache that blurred your vision, or the toe you stubbed, which stubbornly refused to stay silent, not enough pain to take you off to your bed and the comfort of the covers and call it quits, but nevertheless with the power to interrupt any pleasure in a day.

My biggest concern was where to start. Should I tell the boys first the reason why I was leaving the family home, or should I leave and then just hit them with the reason? I could hardly just summon Francis to the family home and make my announcement, the situation was too delicate so I made a plan that I would make an excuse to visit him and his family and then find the right moment. I felt confident that I could discuss the matter with Anthony over the phone, but first I needed to discuss it with May.

Chapter 22

I marvel at those couples that proudly professed that in forty years of marriage they have never spent a night apart except for the birth of their children, but Owen and I were happy enough if he went off on a weekend fishing trip with his mates, or I went my trips home with the children to visit my mother. I however was planning a permanent move, and I tossed and turned in my bed all night, and longed for the dawn. I don't know how Owen went in our marital bed because I didn't ask him, and he certainly wasn't forthcoming about his feelings.

Do you throw in all those years when really believed that your life seemed on track? The familiarity of it all! It wasn't all bad, I always felt I had a lot to be thankful for, after all, I find it hard to believe that those perfect marriages don't have any bad bits. Maybe they do, and it just hadn't been my experience until that moment in time.

Early the next morning before May had time to set off for work, I rang her to see if she was open to a visit that evening. I felt anxious about broaching the subject of informing the boys about their sister, because I understood how delicate the topic was, and I didn't want to afford May any stress. I decided a little time cooking was the best way to appease my anxieties while I passed the day. There was consequently shopping to be done, which removed me from the house in the morning. Ben was correct when he said that so much damage had been done that it would take a very determined soul to overlook Owen's sins, and continue living the life of a partner and wife. I don't know dear reader if you have ever found yourself in the position of experiencing actual revulsion towards your partner and overcome your abhorrence, but I have never been able to shake my disgust.

When May was just a little wee girl her favourite meal was old-fashioned shepherd's pie. She was always confused by the lack of shepherds in the dish, and after it was explained that it was a pie for shepherds to eat as they tended their sheep, she declared that in fact it was sheep pie. The name stuck in our family and sheep pie remained one of May's favourite meals. I used to make it for her on cold winter nights when she came in from ballet, and the sun had set, and the chill in the air cemented us all around the soft glow of the radiator. I used to make the pie in individual ramekins so that if Owen arrived home late from the pub, no one had to wait, and his could be presented fresh on the table when he was ready to eat. There were no microwaves of course, so you couldn't just zap a portion. Anyway I made sheep pie in the hope of delivering a little comfort.

The pie did its job, and May was quite relaxed until I made my announcement that I was going to inform her brothers. She had the same look of horror that Sen wore in response to the ugly disclosure. Not just angst, but actual horror, as if she was witnessing some terrible event unfold; an event that she had been able to control for all those long years with silence. But it was the look of fear that I imagined on the face of the doomed that followed, which unnerved me the most, after all it was hard for me to understand because I viewed it as black and white.

She reasoned that Anthony would be able to cope with the information, but there was no way that Francis would take it well. We were seated on her couch the night after my return from Sen and Ben's counsel, and so little time had elapsed between my visit to their home and my time on the couch with May that there had been no time for any nagging doubts that I was taking the right course of action. When I think about it now, I realize how deeply she was still burned with the shame that actually belonged on Owen's shoulders.

I don't know if a psychiatrist would condone my course of action or not, however I could only imagine her guilt buried forever in her view of herself unless I took some action. So I explained that really her brothers had a right to the information, and it was up to them how they responded. It wasn't her responsibility to make their judgments of the situation. Logically they would surely see that she was just a child, just a powerless little girl when the abuse occurred.

I didn't know if May's reluctance to include her brothers in her disclosure was driven by a lack of trust in their response manifested by years of distancing herself from her family, a sense of shame, a need to protect them from reality or a general distrust of men. So I asked if she had ever revealed the sordid tale to her husband.

The question clearly was quite painful. You have to keep in mind dear reader, that it was delivered only just days after the long years of May viewing me as a crony of her rapist, so it was unlikely that I would suddenly become her confidante. I would not have been surprised if she refused me an answer. She took her time and deliberated over her answer. I thought of Jeannie and Sunshine, and their attitude, and took a deep breath myself hoping that I would not be hearing of a husband who was in agreement with them.

Apparently the husband's response had been a defining moment in their marriage. He had, neither rallied in anger against Owen or intimated support for him. In fact he had reacted with silence. May was never sure if it was a silence of condemnation for her or for her father. But it was a silence that had cut deeply. It eventually led to divorce. She said that she had reflected on his response many times over the years and she was torn between the belief that he was simply unable to express his own pain at the hurt inflicted on his wife and the belief that he somehow held her responsible. Either way it left her on her own.

I recall clearly what she said " I didn't need a speech, just a hug would have been enough, but he couldn't even give me that"

I didn't want to condemn May to further pain by a lack of action, by a silent response. Her admission made me more determined that my actions would speak as loudly as my words. I knew in that moment that Ben was right, I had to move out of the family home, and really there was no time to plan for a visit to Anthony's to deliver the news with a cushioning blow. And the more I looked at May the more I loathed Owen. The very thought of his face caused the antipathy inside me to grow exponentially, like a virus that had found the moist soft cells of

my brain, and was now travelling down through the arteries and the veins, past my lung and my heart, through my liver and my spleen, and out to the very epidermis of my skin, where I could feel it bubbling into blisters that exploded into the air. There is no medicinal cure for that.

Moving out would require a destination, and I was reluctant to put that responsibility on May. Her disclosure had ripped the band aide off a wound, and she needed a degree of privacy. I didn't want Francis to learn of my departure from home and come blurting his way into May's life down the telephone wire when she could be in earshot. I don't know what made me cautious- but I was.

I went home to a night spent planning my escape. I had enough of my own money to hold me over in a motel room until I was able to secure a permanent address. It must be terrible for those poor women that have to grab their children, and bolt for safety in domestic violence cases. Imagine heading out the front door with a suitcase, children and no money. In my situation there was no danger that Owen would come charging after me, weapon in hand and bent on destruction.

The following morning Ben rang very early to see how I was going, and to offer accommodation at his home if I needed a place to stay. Bless Ben! I refused his kind offer, because I really didn't want to involve him and Sen when it was avoidable. I still had my part time job at the department store, and I had already called in sick for two days while I made sheep pie and contemplated the upheaval to all our lives, so I had decided on a motel that wasn't that far from work, and all I needed for the moment was a suitcase of essential clothes and toiletries.

There isn't a distinctive memory of that room now. The colour of the walls and the pattern on the bedspread has long vanished; it's all a bit of blur really. I still drive past it from time to time, and I am reminded of that period. I do remember that the couple that owned the motel were very accommodating, and they invited me into their quarters on a couple of occasions to enjoy a home cooked meal. That's the drawback in those motel rooms, the lack of facilities to cook. However there was a phone line, which was imperative, as I still hadn't moved on to the use of mobile phones. The television broke up the evenings, and in fact reminded me that I was no longer sharing a couch with Owen. It was my abhorrence of him that made that small room bearable. I was there for six weeks before I found my flat.

I believe I made the right choice with the motel room rather than insisting on moving in with May. In many ways, after years of separation, there was a distant between us, and as an adult she was entitled to invite friends over without her mother breathing down her neck. She certainly didn't object to my choice of accommodation. Owen said not a word, he made not the slightest comment. I wasn't in hiding, and in fact I had left him a note with my address in case of emergencies. But no emergency arose so there was never a need for him to make contact, and as each day passed I grew happier and happier with my decision.

I don't know what he told my friends when they called my home, but I am quite sure he didn't announce that I had moved out because he had been uncovered as a pedophile who had defiled his own daughter. I can't imagine too many perpetrators admitting to that. I rang my friends from the motel, and explained that I was in transition on my way to a new life because my marriage had broken down because of irreconcilable differences. They were all surprised particularly because we were discussing a marriage that endured the ups and downs of forty years of life, but they all agreed that you never know what goes on in someone else's marriage, and they were happy to accept my explanation.

Jeannie made no contact, and I can't say I was surprised, but nevertheless I was a little disappointed that she felt no loyalty to our friendship at all. I have heard many people complain that during a divorce they lose the mutual friends that they shared with their partner, and I can see now how it does sting. Sen and Ben had me over for dinner at least once a week, and the difference in their response made the whole period easier especially because I could actually discuss the situation with them with complete honesty, with none of that irreconcilable differences smoke screen.

You know I was often tempted to tell people the truth. It seemed only fair. Owen was never going to face a judge, but he should at least be judged by his peers. However I knew that it would be crossing a line that May wasn't prepared to cross. I wonder how many other perpetrators are out there wondering around in the universe, free from censor or punishment, smug in the surety that they got away with it? I suppose there are plenty of governments, corporations and hardened individuals who care nothing for the plight of the people they maim and rob, and they simply get away with their transgressions. Why was it that I had to wrestle with Owen's sins?

In the end there is nothing to do but put the questions aside and simply do what is possible to right a situation. Morality may have been occupying philosophers since the first concept of philosophy were mooted, but inevitably you can only hope that you have chosen the morally sound course, and everyone else has determined to make the same move. I do hope that at the end of time when the balance sheets are being tallied that the good will outweighs the evil, although I must admit there are no guarantees.

You never forget the smell of things; it is in fact a more important sensory input than colour. The roast at Sunday lunch, your garden after the rain, or salt on a summer breeze. Luckily some pleasant smells stick more than the yucky things that we are able to relegate to the back of our minds. My suitcase sat on the luggage rack in my motel room. It was an old case that Owen and I, had owned for years. We took it on our second honeymoon, and I had retrieved it from the shed where Owen sometimes worked on his Men's Shed business. It was made of a waterproof fabric, which it needed to have to live in the shed, but when you opened the zipper the musty past would come flooding out. I remember the smell, a bad smell that I couldn't identify at first. I guess it was the smell of him.

When I realized the impact the bag was having I zippered it firmly shut and shoved it under the bed.

I couldn't remain in a state of heightened alert forever, and eventually my life in the motel fell into a rhythm that allowed me a good nights rest. I can't say that I had any regrets about the absence of a snoring husband. I know friends who have taken years to get over the separation of a life partner, be it through death, sickness or divorce, and in fact I know people who have never recovered from the separation and probable never will. Thankfully that never happened to me.

Actually if I am truthful about the matter, the separation has allowed me to grow. I think the isolation of a motel room devoid of anything that was familiar, any memories, or opportunities to continue my old life, gave me an opportunity for reflection. I have friends who took very little time to find a replacement partner. Good luck to them if it all about having someone to fuss over, but you would be pretty lucky to strike the jackpot and find the perfect partner in your old age. I am told that it does happen, so I have to believe what I am told, but personally I have learned to love my independence, and that is one positive that eventuated from May's pain.

Chapter 23

Francis was always an attentive son. Although he was constrained by distance from physical contact, he had made it a ritual to call me on Sunday nights before the children were settled into their beds in preparation for the busy week ahead. It gave me an opportunity to connect with my grandchildren and the minutiae of their lives. Sunday evening would clearly not be the appropriate time to call Francis, so after some internal debate, I ascertained that Friday night when work was over for the week was probably a better time to call.

The children weren't the only complication; I didn't want Francis calling my home only to learn from Owen that I had moved out. Who knows what excuses Owen' would have provided. I don't know if Owen even realized that my move was permanent, because there had been no discussion on the matter. He was no Heathcliff determined to follow his soul mate to the grave. I don't think that he understood at the time that there were lines that I could never cross. I presume that he either simply accepted his fate when I moved out, or imagined that I would be back dragging my suitcase behind me. He was always a man that knew how to cut his losses. I don't know that he learnt that at an absent mother's knee, but he certainly accepted it as a necessity for his own survival. For all I know he may have labored under guilt that he accepted, but I was past asking.

I waited until I knew the children would be in bed before I made the call knowing that Francis would have had time to unwind from a week of work. The fact that I was now resident in a motel, would surely emphasis the gravity of the conversation and force a divulgence of the background to my departure from home.

It takes so long to divorce yourself from the notion of home, and I guess at that point it was still the word I used to describe what was in fact no longer my place of residence. I suppose if you live in the one dwelling all your life there is only one place that you call home, but I moved on from that just a few months after I settled into the unit that eventually came as a divorce settlement, and I think of it as home just as fondly as I did in the house that Owen built. I marvel at the endurance of folk that are separated from the partners in mind and spirit, but continue to live under the same roof because of financial restraints, or caring responsibilities. It must take determined constraint, or dogged determination to stick it out to the bitter end.

I can see that the news would have come as a shock to Francis, just as it did to me. In one phone call he learned that his mother had left the family home and that his father was being portrayed as a rapist. Francis had always admired his father, and after all he had never really experienced anything to shake that admiration, and nobody that I can think of would like to admit that they were spawned from the loins of the devil. But I wasn't expecting his reaction, it was entirely left field. "May's a liar!" was his response. He repeated it three times like Judas betraying Christ. My God that response hit hard! It was so unexpected! Never in the warnings from May had I imagined Francis's response. If he had responded with a little hesitancy, with suggestions that a discussion with Owen

was required, without absolutely accepting the essence of the version of events as an outright lie, we may have made some progress. But he didn't. He just put it all back on May. I was too gob smacked to elaborate with my observations of May as a parent. There was no opportunity to give him the time frame of events or the evidence that stacked up in my mind. No. He just condemned his sister outright.

Maybe it was the natural reaction of a son having to choose between his respected father and his sister, in a split second reaction. I have thought about it many times since, and the problem lies in the fact that after that call, when he had time to digest it all, he just left it with the declaration that his sister was a liar. I wonder if every now and then he considers his response and wonders if the truth is a possibility. I wonder if he ever looks at his father and is troubled by a niggling doubt. Why has he never considered that his dear little sister became the troubled adolescent from the very time that I left Owen at home alone, while I nursed my mother.

No wonder rape victims have trouble in court. Poor May! She was right all along. It dawned on me in that moment that having insisted on expanding the disclosure to include her brothers, I was going to have to give May a report on Francis's reactions. He had said nothing about my leaving the family home, and from the distance of time I realize that he probably holds me equally as responsible for destroying that world. We never spoke of it again. Clearly he wanted the whole story dead and buried.

He and Owen are still the best of mates, and for a long time that hurt. It seemed so unjust, but eventually I let it go and accepted that there was some need in Francis that made it impossible for him to accept the truth. Francis was equally my child, my first born, just as precious as May and Anthony, so acceptance of his attitude was the only possible way forward.

I don't know if Francis ever brought that phone call up with Owen, but there was something in his tone at the end of the call that prevented me from ever asking the question. I know who the liar would be if he ever asked Owen the questions that really he should have posed, but I suspect that the phone call made from my motel room was the last of the topic for Francis. His wife is not the sort of girl to rock the boat, so she never gave anything away about what was to remain as a family secret buried by time. It does make you wonder how many families respond in the same way, how many damaged lives are never vindicated by the truth.

I decided to sleep on my telephone call before reporting my conversation with Francis to May. There was no point in pretending that she had his support, because somewhere down the track the real facts would emerge. I had a restless night wondering where I had gone wrong as a mother. I could never understand how families became estranged, because in my mind the simple equations of family love equals family support, was a tried and tested rule. You hear that time honored proverb that blood is thicker than water, but for the first time I was truly confronted with the fact that blood may not always provide that bonding.

Maybe that was naïve of me to have considered the proverb applied in relation to sibling love. Owen was blood, not mine, but certainly Francis's, just as I was, but Francis was prepared to cut May loose without even a moment's consideration or empathy. Clearly he didn't believe her claim, but you would hope he would have had the decency to at least ask after her wellbeing. There was none of that. In fact on learning that I was living in a motel he hadn't even inquired about my state of mind. I had a terrible night tossing it back and forth and in the end I was no closer to a sense of peace. The only thing that came out of the long night is that I am no longer surprised when I hear of a family that have chosen to remain apart after some terrible hurt or event.

I knew that May would be aware that news of Francis's reaction would be forthcoming. I hadn't rung Anthony, which required a fifteen hour time gap and an outline of his work schedule hung on my pantry wall, however I knew May was confident that Anthony would have an empathetic response. I had to work on the day that followed my terrible night processing my call to Francis, and I arrived back in my motel room totally drained of energy, so I decided that a telephone call to May instead of a visit, wouldn't express any lack of support.

There probably isn't a real substitute for a conversation with someone in the flesh where you have the opportunity to observe their body language, the undisguised expression, the glint of merriment, the widening of pupils in surprise or horror, a spreading smile or a gaping mouth- on the other hand if you listen intently there is a lot to learn. On top of the visual cues there is the tone to consider, and there is such a range in that. Even though as I explained earlier, my grandchildren have taught me to text, I can't see how an emoji can replace all that.

Phone calls that make you anxious are usually mandatory calls. I was terribly nervous because I imagined my dear May would be as shaken as me. However sometimes the roles are reversed and in fact it was May who brought me some measure of comfort. I could hear, that she was hurt by the confirmation that her eldest brother thought so little of her that he considered her to be a liar, by the hesitation in her voice, just a very slight wavering. However there was no loud outburst of denial, certainly no indication of a sniff to hold back the tears, instead she gently implored me to dismiss any thoughts of self-blame, because I had initiated the conversation with a declaration that I had failed as a mother.

Clearly May no longer held me responsible for all those lost years. She could not see the slow trickle of tears that fell in the solitude of my stark motel room, but I am sure she could hear the change of pace in my breathing. My decision to leave Owen and my old life behind was vindicated when she went on to explain that the hardest part had always been, believing that I didn't care. She couldn't turn back the clock, and although she had come to see that maybe life had dealt her a bad hand with Owen for a father, he couldn't take up her whole life. All he could do is leave a hole.

She went on to say, that the age gap between Francis and herself was wide enough, that really, she felt that there had been very little real connection

between them since she was a very young child. I hadn't considered that point because in my mind my children were all lumped together under the one umbrella. It made we wonder about those siblings who are separated in childhood, and spend their adult lives attempting to find the little brother or sister that was torn away from them. Maybe they had not actually had time to grow apart before they were separated and remain with the earliest memories, or maybe we never get to hear the tale beyond the initial joyous reunion.

I went to bed that night and cried and cried. I cried for May and I cried for me and I cried for a life that could never be.

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Chapter 24

Recently I was reflecting on an old photo album, which depicts a segment of the lives of my children when they were young. The colour has faded from the images, and the photos have stuck to the yellowing pages, but my handwriting records the date, and the event under each photograph. I am intrigued by the fact that one image can stimulate the flood of so many memories. You don't need a time machine or even multiple shots floating around in the cloud to bring the moment back.

The snapshot was a trigger that had the ability to make me reflect, upon the family relationships and where they would all land us. Music has the same power to attribute memory to a particular time or a place, while resisting all the changes in the world. Songs, or at least the way we interpret them, are often at odds with the author's vision or intent and I wondered how Owen would respond these days to that photo in which the intent of the characters depicted was evident.

Our family history in that one picture was captured in the dim light of a theater foyer. Clearly it would have been on the occasion of one of May's ballet performances, an end of year affair that required an audience of mothers, godmothers, grandmothers and siblings that were too young to protest or young enough to enjoy the live experience with the curiosity of the very young. There were never many fathers or grandfathers that I recall.

I don't remember which production it was now, because there were many of them, and while they were all crucial at the time to the happiness of my little girl, Anthony was the only male member of my family who actually volunteered to attend. He was fourteen, which is evidenced by my handwritten date. Dressed in his very best formal outfit, he is holding a bouquet to his chest, a bouquet to present to his baby sister after the last curtain call. If Francis had been there I know the flowers would have been secreted behind his back out of teenage embarrassment. It would all have been a sissy gesture in his mind. Owen taught him the word sissy and I always hated the use of it.

I can't recall feeling anything about optimism for my life and the life of my children when that photo was taken. It is a shame that we can't live our life backward from old age back to the womb. We are always so smug in our belief in the perceived outcomes, but if you think about it, our convictions are always grounded on wobbly premises. Why else do you adhere to any belief, be it religious, emotional or through some questionable wonky evidence?

You can't blame yourself for emotion or you would never form an opinion, but instead remain in the floppy jellyfish state of indecision. My own lack of understanding, my own ignorance of the signposts, the surety of my belief in an understanding of the final outcome, is in so many ways a vanity

My call to Francis had overlaid a sense of urgency in the need to contact Anthony, but I really couldn't summon the courage to return home and retrieve his contact details. I couldn't imagine that Francis would call his brother, however I wanted the whole issue cleared, not only for May, but also for my own peace of mind.

The situation was resolved the following evening with an incoming call. I had not imagined that May would have summoned the strength to ring her brother, but she had, and she had filled him on the whys and wherefore of my current situation. Wouldn't it be terrible if life were just one long string of emotional calls, sucking the energy out of you like they do when you have to ring friends and relatives, and inform them of a death? In fact Anthony's call was nothing like that.

Anthony was in fact still there for me, and still holding that bouquet to support is little sister. Apparently the disclosure came as a shock, but it had answered in his mind the question of why May had been so determined to cut herself off from her family. He understood now all that self-destructive behavior, and had spent a night in tears weeping for the pity of it all. He cursed his father and his brother with a steadiness in his voice, which served to indicate that his response was not delivered in the heat of the moment, but after deep thought.

I hurried to point out that I could understand Francis' reaction and that in many ways he was not to blame. Thank god for the passage of time, it irons out so many wrinkles! It took a few wasted years before Anthony accepted that in many ways Francis is also a victim. They don't see each other very often, but that is not because of a rift between them, rather it a matter of distance and lifestyle. On a positive note, Francis was glad to get his little sister back. They keep in touch all the time, even when there is a physical distance that precludes a visit, and from time to time Francis will remark on the fact that he is grateful for the fact that May initiated genuine contact through her admission of trauma.

Owen's homophobia had apparently created a dilemma for Anthony who had to choose between coming out to his father, and risking banishment and isolating himself from his dad. It wasn't until months later, when Anthony came home for a visit with his partner David, that I learned that in fact Anthony had struggled with the quandary since his late teens. I suppose it is my conceived notion of how a gay person always looks and behaves that blocked my conceptions of why and how Anthony conducted his life. In fact long before May's momentous phone call, Anthony had decided that despite his father's faults, he would still love him, but keep his distance. The announcement from him in the USA indicating that he was planning a visit was a result of the support he found in his partner. My son has stuck to that resolution post disclosure, because he says there is nothing to be gained by confrontation. As long as he is at peace with his decisions that is really all that matters to me.

It is typical of Anthony that his concerns during our phone connection, wasn't just about May. His disconcertment extended into a series of queries over my wellbeing, because he recognized that my flight to the solitary isolation of a

motel room was propelled by disgust and disillusionment with my life as a wife. I don't know dear reader how old you are, what years of experience construct your meaning, whether you are married and looking back through a long telescope at your own marriage, or if you are single because you are still young enough to feel that there are years ahead of you, or even if you have had no marriage at all. Regardless of a lack of lengthy experience, Anthony understood my loss. "I'm sorry for you mum" he stated emphasizing the "you" in his sentence. He went on to say that not only was he sorry about my marriage, but also he could imagine how painful it must be to learn that your child has been hurt.

I wasn't looking for sympathy instead I hoped that I was drumming up support for May, however Anthony's statement stirred up a wave of self pity, which crashed in a great crescendo upon my intention to be as matter of fact as I could. I held that wave down with the determination that my tears would serve no purpose. If I had my time over I would just let it rip, because a stiff upper lip is not the only way to deal with matters of the heart.

Anthony was concerned that life in a motel room must be dismal. I consoled him with my intention to find a flat. The conversation consolidated my thinking, and determination to find a permanent dwelling. I hadn't really thought about my move from the motel before that. I knew that I couldn't go back to Owen, but the rest was vague. I had enough with my work and savings to pay for a cheap flat. I needed a place for Anthony and David to visit, and I didn't imagine that there would be a time that Francis wouldn't visit with my grandchildren.

I had never given any consideration in the past to the choices that folk must make when they downsize because the house and the garden are no longer manageable. It must be truly daunting when you have to downsize into a nursing home, with nothing but a favourite chair and some framed photographs. I was only sixty, so thoughts of a nursing home was a long way off. Nevertheless Anthony reminded me that I was leaving a lifetime of memories behind in the house that Owen built.

My dear Anthony! Unlike his brother he assured me that I had made the right decision to leave his father. He could see what support it would be for May, and in fact she had told him so even though she hadn't actually expressed that opinion to me. My motel room took on a rosy glow with his reassurance. My takeaway meal sat half eaten congealing on the bedside table, and while it was a reminder that I had no access to a kitchen, it also served as reminder that my circumstances were temporary, and I would be back in a kitchen making sheep pies and baked dinners.

We both understood that explanations would be needed beyond the immediate family, because you can't end a marriage, especially a marriage that all our friends thought of as long and enduring, without people speculating on what terrible event had occurred that rocked the boat so much that you were calling it quits. Anthony wondered what his father would tell Mick because Mick of all people had known me for years, and would have known me as an unassuming

character who had long since accepted her duties as a wife, despite Owen's short comings. Although I had never really engaged in any intimate conversations with Mick regarding my marriage, he most certainly would have received any disturbing reports from Jeannie and I can't say that through my friendship with Jeannie I had uttered too many complaints. In fact I had always seen it as my duty to present Owen in a positive light.

Owen could explain my absence as a desertion brought on by some recently revealed mental health issue for all I cared. I was willing to accept that if it meant that May could maintain the privacy that she found so necessary. The people that really mattered would know the truth, and that was the only thing of significance. I really didn't see any explanation that Owen might care to concoct as unjust because his excuses would be delivered on the whole to his friends, the only time the thought of his justifications bothered me was when I thought of Francis, which actually gave me more sympathy for May.

There was a point for consideration that Anthony posed, which left me baffled concerning the question of why, now at this moment in May's life, she had finally decided to offload her pain. What event had occurred to suddenly jolt her from years and years of distrust and resentment to finally make her disclosure? Anthony said that May had always maintained contact with him even though it was a tenuous connection that consisted of very sporadic Christmas cards and birthday greetings. Her disclosure had hit him equally as hard as me, because while I had to grapple with a husband who had destroyed our child, he had to grapple with a homophobic father who was a pedophilic rapist. There is no nice way of putting that!

Once there was a still image-a child with a bouquet. There was no image of destruction or things we can't control. That image has only morphed into a vivid premonition post disclosure years. Do you think dear reader people these days are now more interested in a story only because it is a live moving image?'

Chapter 25

I am glad that May
dug it from the deep hole
in which its invasive roots
had taken a fearful hold.
Spread it in the light of day
to examine and to dissect
and to redirect the shame
into a place far, far away.

Ben came to visit me the following evening in my motel room, just to make sure that I was doing okay. Sen sent some fragrant delicacies for my little bar fridge. Imagine life without a friend with the ability to support you in your hour of need. I am sure there are folk that have friends, but their friends are not in the position emotionally or financially to be of help. Apart from the gift of food, he brought a copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*. I had actually read the novel in the past, but with long nights to fill in the motel room I reread the story of the Okies that struggled to keep their lives together during the Great Depression. Steinbeck's certainly knew how to pack a punch with the enduring image of Rose of Sharon breast feeding a dying man, and it is an image that has remained with me from the time of my first reading. Ben had chosen well, delivering the message of everlasting hope in the desolation of my circumstances, while I munched on Vietnamese pickles.

You don't look back to the past and visualize yourself as living in a movie, or a stage set that depicts another era. You don't get the feeling that the image is naïve or seeped in a lack of understanding. You see the images as not just fresh, but relevant, beyond the furniture and fittings, or the tools that are now considered quaint. If you are close enough to my age, the imagery will be clear because of your own experiences, but if you belong in another age group it may be as foggy as a world of crinolines.

My grandchildren couldn't imagine a world devoid of technology. They would probably be surprised by a vision of a world with landlines, and in my case a world in my childhood before television existed. I like to think I had the best of life with all that free-range experience. No explanation could help the young to visualize the test pattern on the television set or the excitement when coloured television entered our lounge rooms. My generation could have never ever imagined Netflix and Zoom and the ability to leave your comment in a text streaming in response to a question and answer program on your screen. I have to say it is all a bit beyond me.

Personally I find the texts annoying because there is no authority attributed to the author, but I guess on the other hand they allow access to public opinion. And

if you think about it dear reader you are reading my unauthorized comments. I don't know that Sunshine or Jeannie would ever have added their opinion to any broadcast, Mind you on reflection Sunshine may have relished the opportunity to add his opinion to any discussion. But, none of that matters, because in the end, the problems, the issues and the debates haven't really changed. Time doesn't stop at four score and ten, and in fact it goes on barging through all your preconceptions. It is the human condition I suppose. Do you actually have to put your story together on a digital platform to attract a reader?

Do you remember when you believed in Santa Clause? I remember so vividly the year that I heard his sleigh passing over the roof next door. I heard the bells, and I heard the reindeers hooves catching the tiles, and I am quiet sure that I heard a belly laugh just before I drifted off into a deep sleep only to wake to the presents stuffed into the pillow slip left at the foot of my bed. My memories are not distorted by adult reality, they are there just as firmly rooted in the past as they ever were.

Jiminy cricket wished upon a star and Pinocchio's dreams came true. I don't think you should ever let go of that notion or you would be looking into a sky devoid of stars, and even the moon. Would the milk that flowed from your mother's breast have saved you from an empty life if there were no stars? No dear reader, there has to be some sense of redemption in my story or I would leave you suspended in a permanent state of despair, and I don't want to do that, even though reality often does.

Remember it is up to you if you read my tale up to the end, after all you are entitled to question my credibility because, actually this is a novel. If you were reading non-fiction there would surely be some photos, evidence of what I am telling you, but who is to say there is no kernel of truth in my writing?

Anthony was right. Neither of us knew why May finally decided to disclose her rape. I had never been unreasonable or violent with my children. Even after the event, when May progressed into more and more alienating behavior, I had remained as the same loving parent that I had always been. Or at least I hope so. And yet for years and years she imagined that I was capable of allegiance with Owen. We had had no real contact until she invited me to lunch with the intention of challenging me.

When my children were little they loved a picnic. It was in the days when the roads that led out from our town led out to paddocks and wild bush land and creeks. There were no free barbeques or benches installed by the council, and you had to cart water if you weren't beside a tinkling creek. I always loved the smell of the gums, and even a cowpat if you had to cross a field. Sometimes we would take an old iron grid and search for the rocks to prop it up over a fire built from the twigs that the children scavenged amongst tall grass. I remember that May always suffered from car- sickness as we bumped along unsealed roads, but she never objected to a picnic.

The sterile room of my motel didn't seem like a fitting place to question May about her reasons for her disclosure; equally I understood that there was a certain resistance in her lounge. So I invited her out on the following Sunday for a picnic. In retrospect she may have been busy with other things, but she accepted the invitation. I hope she did it for me, at least I think that was her rationale

The country roads and open fields of May's childhood had dissipated into a suburban landscape of housing estates. You would have to undertake a long drive to arrive at any destination that had any resemblance to the picnic spots that we enjoyed when my kids were little, so I settled on a trip to the park, which at least had some old established trees that created an illusion of immersion in nature. I asked May to bring along a rug because I really don't get the same sense of freedom from the everyday world parked on a table. Unfortunately old age has caught up with me lately, and any picnic I attend is dictated by the need to use a camping chair, and a solid path to get me there.

There was a diligent magpie in the park, guarding its territory in a large gum, but for some unknown reason the park was occupied by only a couple of other families who had set up camp on the tables as their children whooped about in the sunshine, gathering what they could find of interest on the well mowed lawn. May and I retreated to the far end of the park where the passing traffic was hidden from view. We found a large Moreton Bay fig tree whose protective roots stretched out into the lawn, and sheltered little tufts of weeds, allowing them to taunt the person in charge of manicuring the park. There was ample space for two between a couple of lateral roots

I waited until we had finished our meal, and May had relaxed with a couple of glasses of wine before I posed my questions. Odd that one should feel so awkward about asking such a legitimate question, but I suppose I was laboring under a feeling of dread that there may have been some further trauma in May's life that had prompted her to expose herself. She knew I had spoken to Anthony and while she was glad about that, she didn't wish to elaborate on her conversation with him, or ask me for the details of my interaction with him.

Apparently my sixtieth birthday had triggered more than Owen's retirement. There was a new man, from May's account a man who had earned her respect, and her love. She had known him for about six months when she rang to wish me happy birthday, and as a result of her affection and trust in him, she was obliged to reveal the reason for the absence from my party, because he could not understand why May would be estranged from her parents. He had been nothing but supportive, a life -saver in fact.

Right on cue a currawong flew into the branches above us and sent a loud ringing call out across the park. It was such a positive note and it encouraged May to continue with her explanation. His name was Philip, and over time he was able to establish that there had never been anything in my behavior that would indicate that I harbored an evil intent against my dear daughter. He did some research and established that it was not unusual for a perpetrator to silence a victim, to

deny any wrong doing, and blame others for their sins. Philip could understand why a small child might believe the lies her father told to silence her. May accepted his evidence, but most importantly she was encouraged by Philip to establish the facts. She had still been filled with anger when she confronted me with her disclosure, because she found it hard to believe that I couldn't see her pain. Poor May! I can see how she might think that.

There must be plenty of Mays out there who never meet a Philip, who live their lives without any resolution. Not that it has to be a man that comes to the rescue, because there are people who find other pathways to leave the past behind without having to join the convent. In fact not all folk have to avoid sex, that complicated creature that has destroyed political careers, and has brought both men and women down, because it can also unite and bind and deliver new life.

Thank God there hadn't been a pregnancy to deal with! I can't even imagine how the pain would have reverberated down into another generation. It would have exposed Owen, but the cost would have been far too high.

Chapter 26

Sometimes I despair
That my tale supported
By my time, by my era
Isn't the final explanation.
The cruelty of incest
Remains unresolved,
untouched by education
or revelation
or the love of a child.

Nobody gets to choose the life or the times into which they are born. I may have lived in a time when women performed their roles as a wife and mother without questioning the goodwill or motivation of our husbands, however it is supposed to be different now, and yet the statistics indicate that the balance of power for many women has never shifted.

I now have a wedding photo on my wall in which the bride is radiant. I had always wanted a portrait like that to add to my memories. The groom looks relaxed and rather pleased with himself. Phillip has proven himself to be a most considerate man. The wedding was a casual affair in park when the grevilleas were in full bloom, so I didn't need to appear like Jeannie in a floaty dress, but I attended as mother of the bride, and cried a few tears as mothers of the bride are entitled to do.

Anthony and David were able to attend, but Francis declined the invitation, which was really disappointing because I saw it as an attempt by May to mend the bridges. Phillip's family attended however, complete with his grandmother, and a mob of small nieces and nephews. It was evident on meeting them that May had been adopted into a close family. There is nothing more I could hope for than that. What about those victims that end up homeless, and what about those people on the fringes with their identity tied up with a fractured life?

I am sure that May's new husband gave her the strength to move on from the bitterness of her life. See there can be stories of romance that make everything right. It is unfortunately a matter of snaring the right partner, and there is nothing written down in the book of rules that will guarantee that. Things never go wrong at the end of a Mills and Boone romance, but in reality, in so many ways, the whole marriage thing is a lottery.

I am equally sure that my support for May, my decision to leave Owen was a catalyst towards her moving forward. I hope that my belief in her gave her strength. Thank God I never had to deal with suicide. How terrible to live with the burden of the secret that you believe is a result of something that you have done. As women we don't ever discuss menstruation with men. We still see women as being about their bodies, which are still disconnected from men, except where they meet for reproduction, or simply the pleasure in the bed.

What if you can't afford the psychologists or your mother turns a blind eye? I get it.

Life ain't all smooth sailing, but some time you have to take control of the helm, turn the sheets into the wind. I am no Pollyanna, I am unwilling to let go of the shitty bits, despite the preachers warning me that forgiveness is key to happiness. I think time wears you down, and it is no longer a matter of forgiveness, because for me it more a case of being past caring what happens to Owen. My children never report what he is up to, and I never enquire. But I would like to think that others will take heed of their children and stop the rot before it takes hold.

I remember as a child that whenever I was out and about in the world, there was a dog or two. There were always dogs peeing on a post or defecating on a well-worn path, but actually dogs were few and far between. There were no signs to say that dogs weren't welcome, because we never thought about any of that. There were no leashes with a plastic bag attached for the remove of any offensive matter. They were usually mutts. Some scruffy, some sleek of coat. Usually obtained from a litter produced randomly under someone's house. It's not like that now. A friend recently took me on a stroll on a pathway where dogs are allowed on leash, competing with babies in their strollers. Each owner with is best friend in tow or in front, unwittingly in a parade of the world in which we now live. No mutts on a leash, but instead every breed, paid for and exhibited on a morning walk. Mutts were such a hardy race, but I wonder what we leant from that. I must confess I don't have an answer, although I do wonder what progress we have made on protecting our women and children.

So many friends are gone now. I don't even bother attending the funerals any more. I am sure my friends will forgive me. That seems to be what happens. The children aren't gone, they are still with me although I hear so little from Francis. I have had friends in the same boat who have lost a connection with one or more of their children for a whole variety of reason that often seem unjust. Sometimes it's a death, sometimes they marry and move off to another country, sometimes they end up in jail or cut themselves off through addiction. Sometimes my friends are clearly to blame, nevertheless no matter which way it goes, there is no guarantee that your children will be with you forever. All the rest seem to be just passing through. Ben and Sen are gone, not because they are dead, but because they moved off to a quieter life some place else where the sea meets the bush. Ben does write from time to time, and he still recommends a book or two, unfortunately I don't actually see them, so that feeling of close connection is lost.

Bit by bit there is a layer slowly peeled from some primeval past. Sediment upon sediment that forms the strata of your life! Is it inevitable that scientific analysis of the human condition will expose the journey? You can't ignore the soggy footprint in a swamp or the fine calcium deposits of a shell that reveals to the now, all that is past.

My politics were no doubt shaped by the times, but I am not too sure that things have really changed. Although if it isn't one crisis in life it is another. Every one

has to suffer them no matter what you do to avoid them, and they are so overwhelming at the time that it makes it hard to visualize that time can soften it all. I thought my reflection in the mirror a threat at sixty, but I have at last accepted that there is no holding those wrinkle and saggy bits back. My biggest problem now is whether it is time for my carer to lead me to the shower.

There was once a girl, maybe just like you, maybe separated or maybe not by time and values, but hopefully united by what we must and mustn't do. There are no guarantees that civilization actually works. Or even, that all families work. Or our friends do what, or think what, we believe they should. That we will ever reach that point that we can say everything is in order. That all power struggles are ceased, and that in smug sophistication we claim that we have it all figured out; that all the cogs are oiled, and we all agree on how to keep the engine running. No life is never that way! What is an ordinary life? Does it ever truly exist? I guess; it is the human condition.

There had to be a final confrontation with Owen. There was no avoiding that. When I finally escaped the confines of my motel room, and was moving on to my flat, it became clear that I needed to pack up my belongings from Owen's house. I rang him to inform him of my intentions, and he answered the phone in a cold business like manner. He didn't care what I claimed from the house, and informed me of a timeframe when he would be absent. There were no words of anger or even excuse, nothing but a line drawn under a life together. The call left me shaken, not because of any regrets for my current circumstances, but because of a sense of deep sorrow for the loss of the family I had.

Ben offered to accompany me on that final trip in case there was some heavy lifting to do. It was eerie entering the house of a past life. Things were the same, and yet they were different, a sense of emptiness prevailed. I wondered if the magpie was still making his calls. The place was a mess, which was not unexpected since Owen had never involved himself in little domestic details. Before me there was Harry to take care of the cooking and remove the daily paper from the couch, and I don't know if Owen had ever discovered where the broom was kept.

There was a distinctive musty smell to the children's bedrooms, which were sealed behind close doors and windows. I imagined anything that the my kids valued would have been removed years before so after a brief glance I sealed them up again with a momentary lump in my throat that I swallowed, determined that I was on a valid mission, strengthened by the support of Ben.

I wonder if he ever missed the photos taken from the bedroom wall. Perhaps it was unkind of me to leave him with our wedding photo, or maybe he never reflected on it at any time in the present or the past. Apart from the photos and some albums there was my sewing cupboard, and the kitchen cupboards full of equipment that Owen would never use, and a few ornaments that had some meaning in my life. I was glad of Ben's support, but the only furniture I wanted was a chair that had belonged to my mother, and Pinocchio of course.

There was an envelope addressed to me propped up against a whisky bottle in the center of the table, where it would be obvious. He was taking steps to set up a financial settlement through a solicitor. How final that statement appeared, a simple statement scrawled in his handwriting on a dated page. I left the table that Owen crafted with its scars and a lifetime of memories, and I turned my back on my old home for the last time, and walked down the front path with no concern that the weeds had taken possession of the front garden.

What he destroyed is our home, because we could no longer be a family. Well at least not with Owen at the helm. Anthony and David have been diligent in their care for me, equally May and Philip have done their best, and while I can't actually claim that Francis has truly supported my decisions, it is possible that one day he will see that I did what I thought was best. But you never know, that's the advantage of old age, knowing that maybe one day I will view it all differently, and lay less of the blame on myself.

I learnt to get on without Owen in fact it was probably a time of learning. I did grieve. Don't think that I didn't. I lost a lifetime of believing that I would grow old with Owen, and that the children and their children would continue to gather at Christmas time, or for births and weddings. Grief doesn't take into account that someone else is worse off than you. No! It is personal. I wonder if he ever grieved for the loss of a marriage, I am sure that he must have been touched by it in some way, because after all he wasn't made of stone. He's got five years up on me, so he must by now be confronting the truth. Or maybe it is my truth and not his at all. I can't answer that. He may have lived happily ever after. All those years of carrying the guilt that you should have seen it coming, that you weren't diligent enough! Pointless really, because I would never just let it happen. I don't care anymore, because in the end it is his problem.

Time has taught me that there is never a universal response to anything, not the light in the day, or the impact on your finances, or even isolation, so really dear reader I can only ever give my response, and you can analyse that. How do you know if this could happen to you, how can you foresee all the little threads that will be woven into your life? I have learned there are others who make choices I don't understand, forgiven their man, but I can't really say that I would ever reacted in any other way but the way I did. I guess there weren't any winners, even though the referee had blown his whistle, although as I pointed out when I began this tale, maybe Owen would tell the whole saga differently.