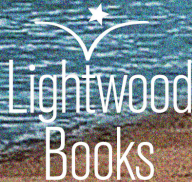




two down in paradise

a lou williams mystery

sandy meredith


Lightwood
Books

Two Down in Paradise

A Lou Williams Mystery

Sandy Meredith



First published in Great Britain by Lightwood Books 2018

Copyright © Sandy Meredith 2018

Sandy Meredith has asserted her moral right to be identified as the author in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the written permission of the author.

Cover art by Naoli Bray, using a photograph by Paula Bowler.

ISBN: 978-0-9573952-3-7

www.lightwoodbooks.com

Email: admin@lightwoodbooks.com

The first Lou Williams mystery is *A Death in Custody* (Lightwood Books 2012).

Many thanks to my kind friends for reading drafts. Deepest gratitude to Benny, without whom this book wouldn't have been finished; to Naoli and Paula for the gorgeous cover; and to Jane for the memories of that trip north so long ago.

1

Squealing tourists are the bane of Sinclair's Saturday mornings. Their squeals penetrate his pounding head with the force of a hammer drill. They are even worse than the seagulls. Sinclair stares into the distance, blocking the tourists out, concentrating on the fine line where ocean becomes horizon, hoping to channel the serenity of the sea. He slows the glass bottom boat as it nears the edge of the coral reef. One more hour and he'll be home. The cacophony mellows to oohs and ahhs broken by occasional whoops as someone spots a coloured fish or a whirl of seaweed. Sinclair's niggling nervousness begins to melt away. Shortcutting to the little north reef has its dangers. There is always a chance one of the tourists has taken the trip before and knows they are being short-changed. The north reef is less spectacular than the main reef the tourists paid to visit, but, crucially for Sinclair, a quicker trip. He'd gambled on this lot, who'd arrived together by coach and would leave straight after for the hills, getting a whirlwind glimpse of the far north in a five-day tour of Australia. In his more genial moments Sinclair felt sorry for them. Hobart and Port Arthur one day, Melbourne

and fairy penguins the next, Sydney Harbour Bridge and Opera House the day after that. Then airborne over the endless terracotta plains to Ayers Rock. No chance of sitting in the shade listening to birdsong or watching a storm transform a dry riverbed into a torrent.

Sinclair puts the motor in neutral when they get near the reef. The tourists wriggle about, pointing out features in the coral to each other, sounding like budgerigars. Suddenly, as if a falcon has swooped on the flock, their chatter becomes screams. Sinclair ignores it. Tourists are excitable, on the hunt for amazing sights, primed to react, cameras ready to shoot. Abruptly, one of the tourists stands up and leaps over the railing onto the glass, and gingerly picks his way along the frame towards the back of the boat. Under hooded brows, Sinclair watches him approach. The man's eyes are frighteningly wide open, lit with a fiery glint that could be fear or courage. Sinclair takes a slow deep breath, lets it out and puts on a smile.

'There's a body! A girl, a woman. In the water. In the coral,' the tourist whispers loudly, as if to avoid worrying the other tourists.

Sinclair curses. Seeing mermaids now, the bloody tourists.

'She's staring up at us.' There's panic in the tourist's voice, terror in his eyes. 'There are woman and children on this boat. You've got to do something!'

Sinclair's head thumps. Just what he needs. Should have stuck to the usual route. All he'd wanted was a quiet morning while his hangover subsided. Now he's got hysterical tourists, women holding their hands over children's eyes, men with their arms around the women. He nudges the throttle to edge the boat forward, to put whatever it is out of sight of the tourists, to see what it is for himself, then puts the motor back in neutral and waits for the turbulence to clear.

Blood pumps into his head as he leans over the back of the

boat to peer into the water. He retches and swallows the bitter bile as he stares into the empty eye sockets of a plump young woman in a billowing floral dress. Her hair waves around her head medusa-like, and orange clownfish nibble at her ears. Purple anemones lace prettily through her fingers. As he looks, gobsmacked, the boat begins to drift, following the bright blue polythene rope tied around the woman's waist to a sandbag smashed open on the coral.

Sinclair hauls himself back up. His head reels. He looks at the transfixed tourists. They are waiting for Sinclair to do something. He can't think of anything to say, so he just shakes his head slowly at the man still standing on the glass. He picks up his binoculars and scans the rich retirees' houses on the shore, in the hope someone has noticed his plight and is doing something about it. He sees people lounging on sunbeds and pottering in their gardens, and his hopes leap when he finds a man looking right back at him through binoculars. He waves his arm but the man drops the binoculars, turns away and goes inside. Sinclair waits, hoping the man has gone to call the police. It's the last thing Sinclair wants to do. He'd run a mile rather than talk to the cops. The minutes tick by but the man with the binoculars doesn't reappear. Sinclair tries to think of anything other than the eyeless woman's gaze, but he can't. He's never going to forget that face.

'You've got to do something!' The man on the glass sounds hysterical, as if he's transmitting the fear of the rest of the tourists. Sinclair sighs and pulls his old hand-held compass out of his kit bag to take bearings. He steadies his shaking hands and looks for the landmarks he's always used to orient himself when he's at sea. He lines up the break in the forest where the railway line to Tooloolo crosses the ridge in the west, then turns north to take a bearing from the little headland that shelters Lawler's Bay. He pinpoints his

Two Down in Paradise

position on the chart, and picks up the radio. He coughs to clear his voice, and radios the police. Then, like the tourists, he waits, gazing silently at the low lying town encircled by lush dark mountains.

Part One

2

Another slow Saturday. A thick red line down the centre of my big toenail. You know the routine. Swirl the brush in the bottle, dab it gently against the edges to knock off that drop that causes havoc and paint another line either side of the first, then either side of those, until my toenail is a luscious red. Hand steady and breath held for one well-placed wide brushstroke on each of the small toes. First foot done. Lean back in the chair, stretch my leg across the desktop, wiggle my toes. They're an oasis of beauty amongst the mess on Ed's desk. Stacks of yellowing newspapers piled up against the dirty window. Handwritten scraps of notes adorned with crude drawings of women's tits. Dusty crumbs under the keys of his old portable typewriter. Grimy phone. Half-finished roll of antacid tablets. Ring pulls chained together. Chocolate bar packets twisted into bows. Greasy hamburger wrappers balled up, ready for Ed to throw at whoever is annoying him, which usually seems to be me.

On the wall Ed's got a collage of sticky-taped phone numbers, betting tickets and snapshots. Ed on a boat, holding aloft a silver fish, the sea bright blue and his teeth dirty

yellow, bared in the crooked grimace he uses for a smile. In another pic, in the same sharp light, Ed has a stubby of Queensland's favourite XXXX beer in one hand and the other is resting on the shoulder of a barrel-shaped bloke with a round, red face and a double chin. In a third pic Ed's clinking cans with a grinning bloke with mirror sunglasses and a drooping moustache out of the seventies. I recognise that horsey smile, that moustache, those gold rings thick as knuckledusters on his fingers. He's the bloke who was at the pub with Ed the other night. 'This is the chick I was telling yer about,' Ed had slurred, pointing at me, and then he burped loud and long. 'Woman, Ed, she's a lovely young woman,' the toothy bloke had purred, twinkling his eyes at me and grabbing Ed's shoulder. 'He's a bit backward, our Ed,' the bloke said. 'Welcome to Hicks Inlet.' Then he steered Ed away.

Here's the threesome again, in fancy dress. It's a professional looking photograph printed in black and white. Ed is dressed as a cop. The bloke from the pub is in a snappy suit with a gangster fedora tipped low over one eye. His arm is around a slender woman wearing a Venetian mask and a low-cut dress. The barrel-shaped bloke with the double chin is beside her, dressed in mayoral regalia. Towering behind them, a tall bloke who looks like he's in blackface is holding up the end of a rope noosed around his neck, with his tongue out as if he's being strangled. Gross. Creepy. I can't imagine the kind of person who thinks that's funny, or even ok. Who would do that?

The fancy dress event photo must be one of Alec's, the *FNQ Mail's* part-time wedding and sports photographer. 'Alec wastes his life taking snapshots of birds. Art, you know,' Earl, the boss, told me when I first started. 'Best news photographer I've ever seen: fearless, great eye, steady hand. Went up in the trees with the greenies protesting the new

road. Got a shot of a crocodile so close you can see where its teeth need cleaning. Wades right into a car crash, shoots the blood and the guts and the vacant gaze of the dead bloke behind the wheel. Shoots stuff that's so true I can't print it. And now he won't do anything but the weddings and sport, for a bit of cash, to support his art. Bloody waste!' Sometimes Earl goes on and on, but it's easier to handle than when he just glares at me.

A gecko shoots up from behind Ed's desk, startling me. It scoots across the wall and hides behind the snapshots. The only motion left in the empty office is the overhead fan and the motes of dust dancing in the gloom of the layout room, known to all as the 'knacker's yard', where I spend my days cutting articles down to size. The motor in the office fridge clanks into operation, loud as a truck. Even in shorts and tank-top I'm stinking hot, and there's Coke and beer in the fridge. And Charlene's Mint Slice biscuits too. Charlene's supposed to be the receptionist or office manager or something, but the only thing I've ever seen her actually do is eat Mint Slices. She slowly licks the dark chocolate outer layer while holding the fridge door open, then closes the door and nibbles off the mint layer while the kettle boils, then dips the rest in whatever brew she has in her 'I've Been to Heaven' Hamilton Island souvenir mug. Badly as I want to eat one of those biscuits Charlene-style, I don't want to incur her wrath. She barely acknowledges my existence, but that's better than the outright hostility I get from Ed. So I've got to make do with some ice-cubes, with sliding them around my neck, so they coolly dribble down what *Vogue* calls my décolletage, across my belly, down my shorts. I flick on the radio, hoping for a diversion, and luck out. The Divinyls new hit, 'I Touch Myself', is playing and it transports me out of the *FNQ Mail* office to a much better place. When it finishes, Slim Dusty or Stan someone or other gets the airwaves, singing that tedious

song about the bloke who's good when he's sober but a pain when he's full, which Ed drones along with when it's on. That breaks the mood like a sledgehammer. Off goes the radio. There's nothing left to do but grab a Coke and start work.

~

Saturday work has two parts: waiting for someone to bring in advertising after the deadline, for which they pay double the usual rate, and reading the *Courier* to find stuff we could pinch for next week's papers or that should get a mention in Monday's *FNQ Mail*. By Friday afternoon most of Monday's paper is typeset and laid out, ready to print after Alec puts in the weddings and sport on Sunday. Last week, my first Saturday shift, I carefully read and summarised every major article in the *Courier* in the same way I've been summarising stories off the wire in Sydney for most of my so-called journalism training. On Monday morning Earl, the esteemed editor of the *FNQ Mail*, flicked through my tidy summaries and flung them frisbee-style in the direction of the bin. He took off his thick bifocals to clean them. He rocked back and forth in his wheelchair, blowing on the lenses and rubbing them with the cloth, staring at me all the while. His mottled brown irises, flecked with hazel, seemed smaller without the glasses. Finally he stopped, put his glasses back on, leaned forward on the desk and spoke slowly, as if talking to a child.

'You really haven't grasped this aspect of the job, young lady. Have you ever read the *FNQ Mail*?'

I nodded.

'See any national news in it?'

I shook my head.

'No, no national news at all.' Earl was in didactic tone, which I've learnt is one of his favourites. 'And it should go without saying that international news doesn't feature either. In the unlikely event that anyone in this godforsaken place

wants to know what's going on in the world they will read the *Courier* for themselves. The really keen ones, people like me, lost souls that we are, read *The Australian* and one of the Sydney or Melbourne broadsheets. We're a local paper here at the *FNQ Mail*. Do you get that?

'Yep, got it Earl, local paper,' I ventured. I'd already found out that Earl doesn't like me to say more than absolutely necessary. Reading back issues hasn't been clarifying. The front page of the *FNQ Mail* is likely to have a picture of a grinning bloke holding a big fish and a report on controversies stirred up by a new carpark or camping ground. Inside it's all about council meetings, car accidents, tourist numbers being up or down, new cane cutting equipment and snap freezers for prawn boats, births, 21st birthdays, weddings and deaths, and sport, of course. It's the dulllest excuse for a newspaper I've ever seen.

'As I told you, someone has to read the *Courier* on Saturday in case it reports something of importance to the local community. If that happens, Alec can squeeze it in when he does the sport and weddings on Sunday. I can't make it any clearer than that,' Earl continued slowly, his hands clasped in front of him on the desk. He inhaled loud and long, leaned back in the chair, then exhaled exhaustedly. 'So, to recapitulate, you read Saturday's *Courier* to get local stuff that might have happened after I went home and everyone else nicked off to the pub on Friday.'

'Got it, Earl.'

'And that space I'm holding for the big last minute advertisement that turns up on Saturday, the one that's going to pay your wages for the week? With luck, Celia from the travel agency will have some late cancellations and tickets she can't get rid of, but if she doesn't walk in the door wanting to place an ad, we can't print with a blank space. So also look for, how shall I put it?' Earl's eyes rose to the ceiling.

'A bit of colour, you know, a spot of poetry, drama, something we can fill that space with. Or another space later in the week, if nothing happens between Tuesday and Thursday, which isn't unusual. So, read, select, note page and position on page, headline and a key quote.'

'Got it, Earl.'

'And type the notes next time. I couldn't have read that mess even if I'd felt so inclined,' he growled, gesturing towards the paper fanned out across the floor.

'Type the notes, keep them short. Got it.'

'Good girl.'

'Good girl' is Earl's way of saying the discussion is at an end. After that he just goes back to whatever he was doing before he summoned me, without saying thanks, or glad we've cleared that up, or any other vacuous nicety you might expect from a boss. After the first couple of times I lost the desire to point out that at twenty-one I'm a fully fledged adult, or to make terse comments about equality in the workplace, in language that would not have enhanced my situation. I was promised three weeks as a real reporter on the *FNQ Mail*, an opportunity to practise interviewing and writing up somewhere that didn't really count. When I eagerly agreed I hadn't realised just how insignificant anyone I interview or anything I write about might be. Not that any actual reporting opportunities have arisen yet. So far my responsibilities haven't progressed past proofreading, typesetting, layout and reading back issues of the *FNQ Mail* so I can 'learn the lay of the land'. I've been honing all those skills for the last three years at the *Sydney Times*, except for reading the *FNQ Mail*, and that definitely isn't going to advance my prospective career as an investigative journalist. Two weeks to go. I'll survive. In his day Earl was a highly respected Walkley Award-winning journalist. He's a great mate of my boss in Sydney. A good report from Earl will get

me over one more hurdle towards becoming a fully fledged journalist back at the *Times*.

~

I spread the *Courier* out on the spare desk and wind some paper into the golf-ball typewriter. Here I go.

Page 1 top, headline: *Sir Joh B-P 'Fighting Mad' After 4 Years of Perjury and Corruption Charges. Jury fails to reach verdict.* Quote: *Joh says 'Just tell Queenslanders this: The woods are lovely, dark and deep but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep'.*

Page 1, right-side column, headline: *New Development.* Subhead: *Joh joins financially troubled tycoon in new bid to secure \$700 million spaceport project.*

Joh hasn't been Premier for four years but he's still hogging the front page. The old bastard was at the helm of Queensland for 17 years. Some journos have been on the Bjelke-Peterson track for so long they probably don't know how to get off.

Page 1, bottom, headline: *Murderer Commits Suicide After Killing 20 y-o Tourist.*

What do you know? He was from Hicks Inlet! A local! Everyone will want to know. I've hit the jackpot. That's the filler we need.

Quote: *The murderer was 'Average Mr Nice Guy' from Hicks Inlet, a hard-working chef at local rugby league club, before going on a killing spree on Sunshine Coast beaches.* Quote: *The murderer bought a high-powered assault rifle from gun dealer in Hicks Inlet a year ago.*

Two quotes is one too many, but Earl's going to want that piece for sure. Space filled. I could stop now and paint the toenails on my other foot, but I'd better skim the rest, just in case. Page 3 has a nice little tidbit about sex video extortion. A bit of colour for Earl. Page 5 and 6 are devoted to the extensive flooding in north Queensland following Cyclone

Joy, but there's already flood news in Monday's *FNQ Mail*. It's a regular item. Damn, look at that, a little piece about the first general strike in Sydney in 65 years, and I'm going to miss it. Skip that too. Not relevant in far north Queensland. That's it then. No point bothering with the finance and sport pages.

The Home section is comprised of house sales advertisements filled out with articles about home improvement. The headline 'Your Home Expresses Your Personality!' makes me laugh. My boyfriend Robbo hasn't even got a home. He sleeps at ours, or at one of his numerous auntie's houses, or somewhere upcountry. But he's got plenty of personality. What about where I live in Surry Hills then? It's furnished with wonky, mismatched furniture, the walls are cracked, nails jut out of the uneven floorboards, the kitchen cupboard doors don't close and the gas stove is ancient. It might express the parsimonious personality of our landlord, but it doesn't express mine or my housemate Noelene's. The posters on the walls and the loud music are all us, but none of the rest. On the other hand, Mrs Swain's boarding house, where I'm staying, does seem to express her personality. Mrs Swain is gaunt, with bony shoulders, stick-thin limbs and a little convex belly that protrudes through her beige apron. She's got thin hair scraped into a tight bun. Her house is sparsely furnished and battened down against the sun with faded brown blinds. The dark hall that stretches the length of the house has closed doors, dung-brown lino and a blechy odour that oozes out of the bathroom. The only decoration in the lounge room is a framed photograph of the Queen. In fact, thinking about it, Mrs Swain's personality isn't only expressed in her home, it's codified in her long list of Rules for Boarders. My favourite is 'Visitors may be Entertained on the Verandah during Daylight hours but may NOT enter the House'. There's only one chair on that

verandah. That tells you Mrs Swain's idea of a joke. On balance the headline has a point.

What else is in today's bloody *Courier*? Four pages of pineapple recipes in the cookery section, amazing concoctions from soups to sweets, and a full-page canned pineapple advertisement. The pineapple company probably paid for the recipe pages too, which seems worth drawing to Earl's attention. If he could get the advertisers of cane-cutting equipment to pay for the articles about said equipment, or for recipes using sugar, it might make him less dependent on the last minute advertisement from the travel agency, and me less likely to have to waste Saturdays hanging around in here. I can't think of a way to express that in a headline and quote that Earl isn't going to scoff at, so I draw a pineapple, complete with cross-hatching for the diamond shapes on its skin, and put dancing 3-D dollar signs all around it. Figure that one out, Earl!

Enough. Job done. I slide the notes under Earl's door and go back to Ed's desk to paint the toenails on my other foot. Just as I get the first brush stroke on my big toenail, Ed's phone rings, sharp and shrill, making me jump up again. For a millisecond I wonder if I should break the rule that no one but Ed uses Ed's phone, then I pick it up.

'Far North Queensland Mail,' I say, in my posh journalist voice.

'Ed?' says some bloke in a bark.

'Ed's not here at present,' I reply politely. 'You've reached Lou Williams. I'm the duty journalist today. How can I help?'

'You that new chick Ed's been going on about?'

'That'd be me.' I can hear my western suburbs edge break through my professional poshness and regret it instantly.

'Ah shit. The sarge told me to tell Ed there's a dead body coming in to the marina on the police boat any time now. Can you find Ed and let him know? I can't spend the whole

bloody day looking for him.'

'I'm on it.' A dead body! A scoop! I'm right in the middle of hot news. It's so exciting that the phone slips out of my hand onto the nail polish bottle, smashing it. A pool of luscious red oozes across the desktop. Ed is going to kill me. No time to stop and clean it up. Got to get interviews. Whoopee! A proper article! A front page! I stuff a couple of sheets of typing paper and a pen in my bag, fly out the office door and down the stairs and run.

3

At the marina a small crowd is watching the police boat tie up at the mooring. They're all bent forwards, their heads leaning anxiously towards the police boat and their backs pulling away from it, as if their brains want to know but their instincts are to run away. They have arms around someone else's shoulders; they hold each other's elbows and hands. An elderly woman wearing a tennis visor and a shapeless dress with hiking boots turns and walks towards me. I stop her, hold her by the elbow and take her hand in mine, look into her teary eyes and ask what happened.

'It's awful, just awful,' she whispers in an American accent. 'The poor girl was just lying there in the coral. She was trapped in it, all wrapped up in it. Her eyes were gone. She had these red eyeholes. It felt like she was staring at us through those red holes where her eyes used to be.' The woman's eyes rim with tears. 'The captain wouldn't do anything. Something's wrong with him. It was so awful. It just went on and on, just sitting in the boat with the woman below us, coming in and out of view through the glass bottom, and the captain just doing nothing. When the police

finally came they didn't even go into the water. They hauled her in with a long hook like she was a bag of concrete. It was so, so awful...' She squeezes my hand. 'I've had enough of this bloody country! They promised us paradise and gave us hell. I can't take any more.' She sniffs and mops a tear, pulls her hand away, and walks towards the tourist bus.

One cop is on the boat, slowly pushing a stretcher covered with a tarpaulin up towards the dock where another cop is stretching out to grab it. A blue rope trailing down from the tarp catches on something in the boat and drags the tarp away as the cop pushes the stretcher up. The dead woman's body is being uncovered. First her sandals and plump, tanned legs, then her floral dress, and then her face. Seeing the ragged, red holes where her eyes used to be makes me retch. Jesus and Mary! My hand clamps over my mouth. My stomach convulses horribly and reverberates up to my throat. Bloody hell! I did not expect this. I think I'm going to spew up. I retch again, violently, bend down low and grab my knees tight. I can hear the cops swearing at each other while I stare at the ground, willing my stomach to settle. I'm supposed to be able to handle this. I'm supposed to be the reporter. Do your job Lou, I tell myself over and over, desperate for some inner strength to overcome this wretched convulsion, this physical revulsion that's brought me down. Straining to stop the retching I straighten up and force myself to look again, keeping my hand tight over my mouth. The cop is still on the boat, holding the stretcher steady with one hand and clenching the end of the tarp in the other. The other cop is still on the dock, sawing at the blue rope, which is tied around the woman's waist. He's using a big fishing knife with mean-looking serrations that catch jaggedly on the rope. When he finally cuts through it he throws the rope back into the boat and the other cop throws him the end of the tarp. It's a relief when he catches it and they pull the tarp tight over

the woman's body. Suddenly conscious of the watching crowd, the cops bark commands for everyone to move away.

I move back with everyone else. At least the retching has abated. I think I'm going to be alright. And as if a fog is lifting I begin to wonder why that rope was around the woman's waist. Did the cops put the rope around her to pull her up? The American woman said the cops didn't go in the water. How did they knot the rope around her waist? Or was she tied to something in the coral? Taking a deep breath I head towards the cops, fishing in my bag for my press pass. Start with where, when, who. I can do this. I know I can. One of the cops walks towards me while the other clears the back of the police van to make space for the stretcher which they've left lying on the ground. The approaching cop is looking me up and down with a leer, making me wish I was wearing something more appropriate than shorts and a tank-top.

'Dead sheila found in sea,' the cop barks at me. 'That's it, girlie. The whole story. Go home and finish painting your nails.' He points at my feet, at the red toenails on one foot and a single red stripe on the big toenail of the other. 'We'll give Ed the details.'

Ed is officially the police roundsman at the *FNQ Mail*. As far as I can make out that means the cops channel all crime stories Ed's way and he reports the bare bones of what they tell him.

'I'm Lou Williams,' I announce in my posh journalist voice, waving my press pass. 'I'm the *FNQ Mail* reporter on duty today. Where was the body found?'

'In the water. Where do ya reckon?' The cop has his eyes locked on my tits.

I line up when, who, how, why questions in my head and hold my notebook high to block his line of sight.

'When was the body found?'

The cop turns away and starts walking towards the cop

van. My question hangs in the air. I can hear the tourists being hustled towards their bus. Now what do I do? Catch up with the tourists and try to get an interview, a better description of what they saw? Damn! I should have written down what the American woman said. I should persist with the cop. Hell, I don't know how to do this, I don't know what to do. I can't let the cop give me the brush off. I run to catch up, and move around in front of him, the way journalists do on television.

'When was the body found, officer?'

'Six months ago,' he says sarcastically. 'When do ya bloody reckon it was found?'

'Who found it?' I'm going to ignore the crap. I've got to get something out of him.

'A bunch of tourists on a glass bottom boat got to see something a bit more interesting than coral and pretty fishies.'

The bastard's not taking me seriously. I want to stomp away, but that's completely the wrong reaction. I'm about to ask him about the blue rope when he cuts me off.

'Look, girlie. The interview is over. When we know more we'll tell Ed,' he says, and he marches off to help the other cop shove the stretcher into the back of the police van. They slam the doors, get in the front and drive away, leaving me standing there like a shag on a rock.

The tourists are getting on their bus. I make a run for it, to try and catch someone to give me some quotes and some information about where the body was found. When I get there, breathless, the door shuts and the bus pulls away. Oh shit, I've really screwed this up. Now what do I do? There's only one car in the car park, across on the other side. A blonde woman is hugging the steering wheel, and staring at me. A man with a cricket hat pulled down low over his face runs to the passenger door, gets in and gesticulates to the

woman. He looks upset, or angry. They might know something. As I run towards them the woman reverses the car away from me, turns and roars out of the car park. Now the car park is empty, the dock is empty, there is no one left, no one but me. I have completely bugged this up. My heart is racing, my legs are shaking, my knees are crumpling and now I really am going to throw up. I slump to the ground and put my head between my knees and try to breathe slowly, feeling the thump of my heart, waiting for it to slow down.

~

I've blown it. I've got next to nothing. Ed will get the story from the cops without even getting his hands dirty. I have to look at a dead body and put up with shit treatment from the cops and I get nothing. And, girlie! The cop called me girlie. Even he could tell that I had no idea what I was doing. Aagh, this is going to stick in my head forever. Instead of a front-page article I've got no interviews, no facts, nothing but the image of the woman's gaping eyeholes superglued to my mind. This is going to lodge deep, horror and shame intertwined; it's going to haunt me, taunt me; it's going to wake me up at night and be the first thing I think of in the mornings. I wedge my head tight between my knees and wrap my arms tight around them. I am not going to cry. I am not.

~

I've got to pull myself together. There must be someone around here who saw something. What about the skipper on the glass bottom boat? Where did he go? I look around again, but no one is in sight. The only sounds are the clank of cable on masts and the screech of seagulls. Near the row of empty glass bottom boats bobbing alongside a jetty there's a ticket office. The skipper might be inside. I get up, shake myself down and set off, but the ticket office is closed up. The timetable pasted on the window says it's low season. No

more glass bottom boat excursions out to the reef until Thursday except by appointment. Shit and double shit!

I've got to get back to the office. Someone might come knocking with the last minute advertisement. I can't miss that too. That would really piss Earl off. My credibility, if I've got any left, would be shattered.

~

Back at the office there's an envelope under the door, with a note from Celia and a list of tickets available for cheap flights over the rainforest and the reef. I put the fan on in the knacker's yard and get a can of Coke. Mechanically I typeset Celia's ticket information and paste the text into the advertisement space. It doesn't help get my mind off my failure to get an interview or stop me from thinking about the dead woman. I have to put together something I can tell Earl. First, write down everything I know. That's the method Robbo uses to get his clients to recall detail.

Here goes. Glass bottom boat found dead body in the coral. Tourists in boat, at least one American. Two police officers with police boat and van. American tourist reported that the police used a hook to bring the woman's body to the surface. Young adult, female, floral dress. Eyes missing. Eaten away by fish? Blue rope tied around waist, trailed off to frayed end. Police cut rope off at the waist and threw it into boat. Just seeing those words written down makes me realise that I should have asked the cops about that first. That's probably where the story is. Answers to the where, when and who questions will be easy to get. The cops wouldn't have known how and why the woman was lying dead in the coral anyway. The idiots couldn't even manage to get the stretcher from the boat to the dock without calamity.

Now the right questions start flooding in. If the woman fell from a boat wouldn't someone have dived in after her? Was she pushed? How did she get stuck in the coral? Who was

she with when it happened? If she was alone, where is her boat? Someone would have reported an empty boat floating at sea. Such obvious things to ask, now that it is too late to ask them. I'll tell Earl about the Mr Average Nice Guy murderer that I read about in the *Courier*, and how he was down on the Sunshine Coast and that being dead now, he's not a likely candidate. Even a rookie like me can tell that the woman's body wasn't in the water for very long. But I need something more to tell Earl. He's going to want answers, not questions. What's he going to want to know? He's going to ask me who the skipper was on the glass bottom boat, of course. He's going to ask me what the skipper had to say. And I'm going to have to say that I didn't see the skipper or his boat. I'm going to have to admit that I have no idea who he was. Earl's going to point out in his superior way that the skipper was the only local witness on the scene apart from the cops, and that I couldn't even manage to find out who it was. If only I'd found out that! What was I thinking?

Oh, I wish my first thought was to find the skipper. I wish I didn't waste time talking to the cops. I wish I didn't want to be a journalist. I wish I'd never come up here. I wish I was back in Surry Hills, hanging out with Noel, cooking our Saturday night special of gnocchi with thick, oily, tomato sauce, with salad and crusty bread. We'd be drinking cask wine, listening to music, cracking jokes with whoever has turned up for dinner. Robbo might even be there, wrapping his arms around me, teasing me. Today would have gone completely differently if he'd been there. He would have told the cops to treat me properly. He would have tracked down the glass bottom boat skipper straight away. But I'm on my own here. I've got to make a plan.

Alec has a pack of emergency smokes in the typesetter drawer and if ever was the time to steal one it's now. I get a can of beer from the fridge too, pull the ring top and light the

cigarette. By the time I've finished my second cigarette and most of the beer I've got a salvage plan. I'll let it go for tonight, or I'll miss dinner at Mrs Swain's. I'm not going to check out the waterside pubs on a Saturday night, that's just asking for trouble. Tomorrow I'll go back to the dock and stay there until I find someone who does know something. I'll get the skipper's name, come hell or high water. I've got a plan. I put the butts in the can, squash it under my foot and chuck it in the bin under Ed's desk.

~

Old George, the other regular boarder, is already eating when I get into the dining room at Mrs Swain's. I sit on my hard wooden chair at the grey formica-topped table, in front of my congealing meal. George gives me a nod. He hears little and speaks less. I don't even try to make conversation any more, but we share a smile of mutual suffering while I mash the soft little cubes of boiled vegetables into the lumpy potato mash and he hacks at the overcooked chops. The image of the dead girl and her red eyeholes and the rope around her waist bobs around in my mind. I'm going to have to live with that for a while, I know, so I don't fight it. And when the self-recriminations for having fucked up rise to the surface I remind myself that I've got a salvage plan. I'm going to make good on this tomorrow. I push my pineapple ring floating in its pool of melting icecream over to George who smiles in gratitude, and wait politely for him to finish it before heading back to my miserable little room. The kitschy pompoms on the pink shade of the bed light dance when I switch it on. The lamp throws a weak circle of light on the patchwork quilt draped over the narrow bed. The quilt is the only half-way decent thing in the room, and that's because it's a mystery, a record of someone's youth, perhaps even Mrs Swain's. Amongst the fabric scraps there are gymkhana ribbons and brownie badges, embroidered doilies and cloth seed-bag

labels. Every day I look for something new in it. Tonight's discovery is a soft pink trainer bra with rollo straps. Trainer bra is such a bizarre idea that I get a few moments' entertainment out of it but it's hard to keep the gaping eyeholes in the woman's face out of my mind.

If I was even a bit smart I'd have a bottle of Bundy rum stashed here for times like this. I can't face going to the pub by myself. The manhood of Hicks Inlet getting drunk on Saturday night is not something I want to investigate. I've got to get out of this room though, and the verandah's solitary wicker chair is the only place to go. George has colonised the lounge room where he watches the tv on full volume. The rapid-fire talk of cheap advertisements for four-wheel drive cars and agricultural chemicals spills onto the verandah, and the bright lights from the screen flicker through the blinds. After the advertisements the flickering lights dull and the sound cuts between bombing and yelling, silence and muttering. An old war movie probably. Over it I can hear the eerie wailing call of the bush stone-curlew. The first few nights I heard it the sound freaked me right out. Alec, the *FNQ Mail* photographer with the little goatee, showed me pictures of it. Its spindly legs and plain brown body seemed the antithesis of its eerie call. Alec assured me that it's an amazing, timid bird that I could and should learn to love. Its call is sheer magic, he said, listen with an open mind. I try, I do, but tonight it sounds for all the world like the scream of a woman being killed.

I've got to force myself to think positive. Tomorrow I'll find the skipper. First thing Monday I'll tell Earl. He'll have to let me investigate. There must be something in the journalists' code of ethics that says the reporter on the spot gets the story. I picture myself doing interviews, notebook in hand, getting leads, following them up. I write a front page article. My name is on the byline. The *Courier* reprints it. When I return

to Sydney the trainee journalists are jealous because I got a murder story, and they start respecting me instead of treating me like I'm a copy-taker lost on the wrong floor, and the boss finally gives me some real journalist work. Out of the ignominy of being shunned by the cops and failing to interview any tourists or the boat skipper I create a victory. And the bush stone-curlew starts wailing again, splintering my fantasy. The cops saw me for a pretender, they brushed me off like a speck of sand. I haven't got what it takes. I'm fooling myself that I can become a journalist. I should be satisfied with having made it out of the western suburbs, with getting from serving in the newspaper office canteen into the typing pool and up to copy-taking. Every step of it took an enormous leap of faith, of self-belief. I've done well. It should be enough.

Oh, but I need to talk to someone. Tomorrow I'll phone Noel. She always cheers me up. I might even be able to get hold of Robbo. He'll have some ideas. He'll tell me he's crazy about me and really sorry he's too busy to see me and for a change I'll say it's me who's too busy to see him, on account of being more than two thousand kilometres away, which he's pretty likely not to remember. Although he did lend me his copy of *Anna Karenina*, to fill my time and broaden my education while I was away, as if that's what I'm in need of. If only he was here instead.

4

The crash of thunder startles me awake, too early for Sunday. Rain batters on the roof with the ferocity of gods hurling handfuls of yonnies. I pull the quilt over my head and try to go back to sleep but the racket makes that impossible. That and the gouged-out eyes of the dead woman from the sea, which I can't get out of my mind.

It's too early to phone Noel or Robbo. Too early to go looking for the glass bottom boat skipper. There's only *Anna Karenina* but the story is all about Levin now and he's dull as dishwater and ponderous as Sydney traffic. I plod through the pages until the clanking of plates gives me an excuse to get up. Mrs Swain could have walked out of Tolstoy's story. Poor old thing that she is, with her mouth frozen in a cartoonist's down-turned half-circle, and a permanent air of being hard done by. I resolve to be nice to her from now on. She probably suffered some terrible calamity herself; I can relate to that. She just needs someone to cheer her up, and old George isn't much fun. I catch her in the dining room laying out breakfast and just as I'm about to launch into a cheery 'good morning' she turns and looks me up and down sourly.

'Footwear must be worn in the house, Miss Williams. It's in the Rules for Boarders,' she announces, her head tilted back so she can peer down her narrow nose at me.

I shrug like an adolescent, cheeriness dissolved, and go and shuffle my feet into thongs, half hoping to entice Mrs Swain into an argument as to whether or not they fulfil the footwear requirement. When I get back to the dining room she's gone. The pineapple juice is sugary sweet and tepid but drinkable. I take a couple of slices of cold toast and pineapple jam back to my room to nibble while I read about Anna's horrible husband. Anna should just up and leave. And so should I. Today I'm going to make up for the failures of yesterday. And first I'm going to phone Noel for a bit of moral support.

~

The rain has moved into the hills, obscuring them in a pall. Steam's oozing up from the bitumen. My jeans and shirt are an excessive response to yesterday's tank top and shorts debacle. By the time I get to the empty town centre I feel as if I've plunged into a pool of my own sweat. At the post office I feed coins into the phone and dial Noel. The phone rings and rings. I hang up, wait five minutes, in case Noel is asleep, or in the shower, or gone out for milk or the paper, and phone again. Still no answer. I phone Robbo's work and there's no one there either. It's a drag having a boyfriend with no fixed abode. He could be anywhere. The only thing that's certain is that he'll be working, busy reading reports, writing notes, debriefing or reassuring whoever he's defending, lighting up someone else's world. He's always working, a lawyer charging on his white horse to save someone from the wrongful clutches of the law. Meanwhile I've got nothing to do, nowhere to go, no one to talk to. From my perch on the post office steps, I watch dark clouds massing over the gunmetal grey sea. The palms in Hicks Square are ragged

from the winds and the rainswept streets are empty. Where do the tourists go on Sundays?

I haul myself up from the steps and phone Noel one more time. Still no answer. I can't listen to those repetitive brr-brrs any more. They mock my loneliness. Time to give up, scoop my coins out of the refund tray, and figure out my next move. The heavy clouds are rolling in from the sea, darkening the sky like a scene from a Disney movie, bringing more torrential rain. I hug the wall under the post office verandah while the rain pelts down, shivering despite the humidity. The drains in the street run like rivers. A two-tone Holden Kingswood drives along the far side of Hicks Square, turns slowly towards the post office, and rolls to a stop right in front of me. The driver winds down the window.

'Want a lift?' he yells, his voice rough and dirty.

I shake my head, show him my middle finger.

'Come on, ya want a good time or what?'

I don't respond to the bastard. He revs the engine, a raw animal growl, then drives around the square twice, slowing down each time he passes me. I'm trying for defiance but my eyes are misting up with tears and my stomach's a quivering mess. Finally he goes, leaving the square and its streets empty again.

I wish I could phone my dad. I'd love to hear his Irish lilt and be reassured by his reliable faith in my ability to do whatever I set out to do, but my mum always answers the phone. She's still angry with me for refusing to meet the second-cousin who had flown out specially from Italy, let alone consider marrying him. If I talk to her right now I might even give in, agree to marry the Italian cousin, live in the same street as the family, work in the same factory, spend the weekends cooking and playing with babies. It would be so much easier than this wannabe journalist torture and the on-again off-again relationship with Robbo, who's always

busy fighting some battle or other that's more important than being with me. But chances are I'd end up like Anna K, imprisoned in domestic drama, miserable every which way. Aagh! I've got to stop being such a sook. Come on Lou, get a sense of proportion, Robbo would say if he was here, and he'd punch me lightly on the arm and then he'd wrap me up in a hug. I wonder if that's why he gave me *Anna Karenina*. A proxy to help me keep things in proportion.

Patches of blue are breaking through the clouds. The rain has stopped. The bitumen's a steam bath again. I screwed up yesterday, but today I'll do better. I'll find the skipper, or something that will shed light on what happened to the dead woman. I'll turn it into enough to convince Earl to let me investigate officially. Time to wipe my eyes, pull myself up, square my shoulders, and head for the waterfront.

~

Down at the marina clanking masts shoot hollow sounds across the bay, emphasising the emptiness of the water, the sky, the day. An empty can rattles about in the empty tourist bus park. The only person around is a young bloke in board shorts and rubber boots, hosing down the glass bottom boats. He's even cute. Broad shoulders and narrow waist. Dark tanned skin. Black hair, straight and thick. Mirror sunglasses. He jumps from one boat to the next with the grace of a dancer, flicking the hose up to move it along the pavement as he goes. He might know the skipper who found the dead woman.

When he jumps ashore from the last boat I take a deep breath and walk up to him. He seems younger close up, late teens perhaps. He kinks the hose to stop the water flow and looks at me.

'Looking for a boat ride? They're not running. It's low season,' he says, flicking water at a seagull. It flies up with an offended squawk and returns to ground at a safer distance.

'I know that,' I say assertively, trying to sound authoritative. 'I'm looking for the skipper of the boat that found the dead woman yesterday.'

'A glass bottom boat found a dead woman? Where?' There's half a laugh in the way he says it.

'In the sea.' Bloody hell, of course in the sea, it's a boat! 'They found her body in the sea. In the coral.' I'm the journalist here. Why is he doing the interview? Why do I lose control of these things so fast?

'A body in the coral? A mermaid?' He's still got that bit of a smile on his face, as if he's amused.

'A mermaid! Seriously? A woman, a dead woman. Found in the coral. That's what they told me,' I say, probably a bit too aggressively. 'I was here. Yesterday lunchtime. Police brought the body ashore. I saw her. I want to talk to the skipper.' If he doesn't know about it, why doesn't he just say so, instead of trying to put me off? Does he know something he's not telling me? 'She was about your age maybe, bit older perhaps.' I can't tell how old he is, but it kind of matters to know if I'm older than him, especially because he seems to think I'm talking hogwash.

'Let me get this straight,' he says with that half laugh in his voice. 'You're looking for the skipper of a glass bottom boat that found a dead woman in the coral? That's what you're saying?' he asks, studying me closely, the way cops do in Darlinghurst when they think you're stoned. He's looking me up and down. I can see myself in his sunglasses and feel myself pulling my stomach muscles in, my shoulders back. I shove my hands in the pockets of my jeans to keep them still and follow his gaze down. Bright red toe nails on one foot, on the other a single red stripe on the big toe nail. That's how the cop looked at me, but without that half smile. I really should have finished my nails.

'You travelling?' he asks, gently, as if he's decided I'm in

need of help. 'On your way up to Lawless?'

'Lawless?'

'Lawler's Cove. Hippie paradise. You on your way up there?'

'No, I'm not travelling.' Especially not to a hippie paradise. I'm trying to sound calm, cool and collected. 'I'm doing a stint at the *FNQ Mail*.'

'The *Mail*? What do you do? Secretary or something?'

'I'm an investigative journalist, trainee. Lou Williams.' I hold out my hand, feeling excruciatingly unconvincing. He pushes his sunglasses up onto his head, and, despite the incredulous look in his eyes, he shakes my hand firmly.

'Chris Mazzolini, yacht master,' he says, laughing, his eyes dancing.

'Pleased to meet you, Chris.' I don't know what a yacht master is but I doubt that a yacht master needs a Sunday job washing down glass bottom boats. He's much too young for such a fancy sounding job anyway.

'So, Hicks Inlet's got a girl journalist.' He shoots another spray of water at seagulls, with a wide grin on his face. 'A girl journalist looking for the skipper of a boat that found a dead woman.'

Chris is laughing at me, but it doesn't make me angry the way it would have if it had been Ed or the cops. It must have something to do with him seeming younger than me, or it might be his smile, which makes little wrinkles fan out from his eyes and the sharp edges of his face soften. Or perhaps it's because he's a bit like my little brother.

'Thought you might have come on one of those yachts,' he says, teasing.

Why not? My serious journalism line isn't working. Might as well play along. So far it's my only chance at finding out who the glass bottom boat skipper was.

'Yeah, right! That's my yacht, the pretty blue one,' I say,

pointing with one arm while I shade my eyes with the other like a ship's captain looking for whales. I probably don't sound convincing. My knowledge of sailing consists of enviously watching them going up and down Sydney Harbour and taking copy from reporters covering the crazy yacht races to Tasmania.

'Very cool.' Chris grins again. 'Belonged to Ted Watson, that yacht, last I knew,' he says. 'You win it off him in a card game?'

He's better at repartee than me. Most people are. The best I can come up with is a shrug.

'Got me. Not really my yacht at all.'

'You sail?'

'No, never.'

'Want to try it?'

'You're really a yacht skipper?' I'm trying for that incredulous tone he was using with me.

'That's the plan. Getting hours up to qualify,' he says proudly.

That sounds more plausible. He's a trainee, like me.

'So I'll be helping you out if I come for a ride?'

'I guess you could look at it that way,' Chris says, grinning again, shooting water at another seagull.

'OK, you're on.' I might as well call his bluff. He's got to confess to making it up pretty soon. At least I really am a trainee journo.

'Just got to pack this stuff up. Give me ten minutes,' Chris says, looping the hose and heading to the back of the ticket office.

'Sure. I'll have a look around.' And with a bit of luck I'll find someone who knows something about the glass bottom boat skipper, and that'll save me from finding out what the boat-washer's story really is.

Near the ticket office there are a couple of shops selling

sailing kit and hardware, both closed. Along the inlet pontoons with fancy-looking yachts tied up to them stretch into the water. The yachts get smaller and less impressive the further I walk down the inlet, with the worst looking ones at the end. Beyond that there's just the wide, muddy inlet, marshland and flies. I don't see a soul. This is so exasperating! I just don't know where to start looking for the glass bottom boat skipper. I am useless at this. All things considered, Chris is the best bet I've got. He must know people who work on the boats. Perhaps if I get to know him a bit he might be able to tell me something that will help. And hanging around with him has got to be better than spending Sunday alone. I'll lose my marbles if I've only got myself for company.

When I get back to the glass bottom boats all the cleaning stuff has been cleared away. Chris, looking fresh in a checked shirt, is leaning against the wall of the ticket office. He greets me with that wrinkle-eyed smile which I find unexpectedly reassuring.

'Where is everyone? It's completely dead around here.'

'There's a rodeo just out of town. Most people go. Major social event on the Hicks Inlet calendar.'

I realise straight away that I already knew that. I typeset a bloody article about the rodeo! What is wrong with me? How did I forget about it? Should I go to the rodeo now, start asking questions? How would I get there? And what would I do? Just go around asking everyone if they knew the skipper of a glass bottom boat that found a dead woman in the sea? Earl would find out if I did that, and he'd be furious. I'm definitely not interested in seeing the rodeo. It's a bit too rural for me. So, here I am, it's Chris and the fabled sailing, or wandering around aimlessly by myself all day. I've had solitude up the wazoo, and this wanker might just have a yacht. It's a no-brainer, I tell myself, and then I notice that

he's got a loop of blue rope in one hand.

'What do you do with that blue rope? There was rope like that around the ...' I stop, wary. I want to find the murderer, but not by going into his lair. Chris doesn't look like the type, but how can you tell? I don't know what to do. I don't want to end up in the coral, with my eyes eaten out.

'This?' He holds up the rope. 'Use it for heaps of things. It's your all-purpose cheap poly rope.'

'But what is that piece for? What are you going to do with it?'

'Tie up some crab pots. So we've got plenty of room on the boat,' he says, with that smile.

Tying up crab pots with a big rope like that doesn't make any more sense to me than a young bloke like Chris having his own yacht. He's not only sticking to his story, he's embellishing it. Let's see this yacht, then. Might as well find out if it exists. I don't have to get on it if it does.

5

I have no idea what to say to Chris as we walk alongside the marina. I definitely don't want to talk about myself or the dead woman. Those topics haven't gone well so far. I don't want to talk about rodeos either. They're a mystery to me and he hasn't rushed off to the one that's on today, unlike the rest of Hicks Inlet, apparently. Chris isn't saying anything either. It's beginning to feel like we really are playing a game of bluff — the yacht he claims to have hasn't materialised yet. Just when I'm about to call him on it he turns onto the last pontoon. It wobbles disconcertingly as I follow him down it. The boats along here look like they're under repair, or should be. Maybe he has got a yacht that's a broken down piece of junk, like the cars my little brother collects. Maybe he's just stringing me along. I make sure to stay a few paces back so that I can run if he does something bad. I don't know if I've stuck with him this far because of the lure of going sailing or because somehow, for no good reason, I feel like I can trust him. He stops at the end of the pontoon and bows with a flourish towards a small dark blue yacht with a white cabin. It looks in much better nick than the others on the pontoon.

The name Hazel is painted in a fancy cursive script on the front.

'Here she is,' he says with a triumphant grin, 'my pride and joy.'

'Hazel?'

Really? Someone like him calls a yacht Hazel? Ok, I'm not taking another step. This is not convincing. He's dropped the blue rope on the pontoon.

'I can't change the name. Changing a boat's name brings bad luck. I'm stuck with Hazel.'

'Get real! It's not yours.' I'm still not buying it. I'm still keeping a distance.

'She's mine alright,' Chris says, looking pretty pleased with himself. He swings onto the yacht and disappears down into the little cabin. A motor starts. I'm toying with kicking the rope into the water when Chris reappears. He leans over the back of the boat as if he's checking something, then he springs up to the front of the yacht and picks up a big lattice pot.

'Catch!' he says, throwing the big pot at me.

I manage to get my fingers into the lattice and put the pot down on the pontoon just before he throws another one. By the time he's thrown the fourth pot I'm catching like an expert. They must be the crab pots Chris was talking about. I'd been imagining the little crockery pots that you get potted crab in at a delicatessen.

Chris leaps back onto the pontoon, puts the pots in an orderly stack, loops the rope through them and ties it to a hook on the pontoon. Phew! Well, that's one worry gone. That blue rope is not coming with us. Assuming we are going somewhere. The next thing I know Chris is back on the yacht and doing something with the sail. I'm beginning think he really is going sailing. I've never even been on a pedalo. Sailing has always seemed something only rich people with

fancy houses on Sydney Harbour do. I can't pass up an opportunity like this. Ok, here I go, in the deep end.

'What should I do?' I call out over the motor.

'Can you go up on the bow? Loosen one end of the line, like this.' Chris is undoing a rope at the back that's holding the boat to the pontoon. 'When I say, let it go and pull the line in from the other end.'

I guess that line means rope and bow is another word for front, and I don't know how this is going to work, but I haul myself onto the yacht and clamber up front, holding tight to the wire on the edge of the boat. Loosening one end of the line is harder than I expected, but I manage it.

'OK, pull it in,' Chris roars, 'then take the other end off the cleat and bring the line back here.'

I haul on the line and the boat swings away from the pontoon. All of a sudden we're heading into the middle of the inlet. I take the other end off what must be the cleat and wobble back down the boat, trying not to trip over the long line, and half fall, half drop into the cockpit.

'Can you take the tiller for a bit? This thing,' he says, gesturing at the big piece of wood he's using to steer the boat. 'Just keep this bearing.'

Chris shows me how the tiller works and explains the mystery of staying on the bearing, then he goes around untying the big soft buoys hanging off the boat, looping up the lines, and stowing it all inside a bench in the cockpit. Shipshape. A new meaning for another word.

'OK, let's get out of here.'

Chris takes the tiller and jigs the throttle. We chug towards the estuary, past mangroves. Their roots poke out of the muddy water like creepy aliens.

'See that beach stone-curlew over there! You hardly ever see one,' Chris says quietly, pointing at a grey-brown bird with long yellow legs in the mud under the mangroves.

'Big bird,' I say, lamely. I thought they were called bush stone-curlews, but I'm not going to say so. To avoid more bird talk that's going to reveal me as an ignoramus, I try changing the topic. 'They're gross, mangroves, don't you reckon?'

'Depends how you look at it,' Chris replies, giving me a smile, crinkling up his eyes, as if to reassure me he's not passing judgment on my taste. 'Loads of animals depend on mangrove. Spiders, snakes, flying foxes, crabs. Fish too. Barramundi raise their young in them. The mud's crawling with bacteria. Mangrove is a pretty cool ecosystem.'

I'm in a foreign place up here. Mangrove is cool, apparently, and it's singular not plural. The eerie call of the bush-stone curlew, or whatever it's called, sounds like sheer magic. Most people go to the rodeo. Women are found dead deep in the coral. It's all a bit creepy.

'I've got to put up the main sail,' Chris announces, gesturing at the tiller. 'Reckon you can hold the boat steady?'

'I'll give it a go.' It's clear he wants me to take the tiller. I know how to use it for maintaining direction, but to hold the boat steady — how, exactly? 'What do I do?'

'Keep it into the wind.'

You're not really answering the question, Chris. And he's not cottoning on to my best look of complete incomprehension either.

'How do I know which way is into the wind?' I'm at sea here, haha. Who'd have guessed sailing meant having fun with words?

'Face this way,' he says, turning towards the sea. 'When you turn your head a little bit either way you should be able to feel the wind on your cheek, then on your ear, as you turn away from it.'

'Really? On my cheek? My ear?' I'm turning but the wind seems to be hitting my whole face.

'We want to go thataway,' he says, pointing in the direction

we're already going. 'You shouldn't need the throttle. We just want to sit still, facing into the wind.'

'Got it,' I say, playing along, pretending I understand.

Chris jiggles levers and ropes at the front of the cockpit, then he leaps up on top of the boat and pulls on a big red rope at the mast, one hand over the other, and the sail rises. He ties it off and jumps back into the cockpit and pulls at ropes and levers again. The flapping sail suddenly fills, goes taut and the boat surges. My spirits lift and my heart flutters. This is going to be something.

'Reckon you can unfurl the genoa?' Chris asks, reaching for the tiller.

'What?' Another guessing game. I know Genoa is a city and a fruit cake, but what does genoa mean on a boat?

'Pull in that white sheet with red flecks. It'll open that sail at the front.'

'Sheet?' No sooner is genoa clarified than another obscurity comes along.

'Rope, sorry! On a boat that rope's called a sheet,' Chris says, laughing.

'This one?' I could swear he called rope a line five minutes ago. Now it's a sheet?

'Wind it round the winch,' Chris says, pointing, 'the round thing there. Clockwise. A couple of times.'

'Like this?' A winch is a winch. No explanation needed. Can't he tell the difference between sailor talk and normal language?

'Yep. Now pull, hand over hand,' he says. 'Use a bit of muscle.'

A sail begins to unfurl at the front of the boat, the bow, as sailors call it. The more the sail unfurls the harder it is to pull the sheet. My hands are burning.

'Use the winch handle.' Chris is pointing at a ratchet-like thing near my feet. 'Pass me the sheet and I'll tail it.'

I go with what I can understand. Square peg on the winch handle, square hole in the winch. That's easy, but I can barely turn the handle.

'Grind it. Get on top of it.'

Tailing, grinding, getting on top. There's a void where I should have comprehension. The genoa's billowing like washing on a line. I've seen enough yacht racing on tv to know that's not how it's supposed to look.

'I can't move it!' I'm half-standing on the bench now, leaning right over the winch. The boat's tipped on an angle and I'm on the downhill slide. I'm worried Chris'll see fear in my eyes, but he's leaning the other way, up the hill, one hand behind him on the tiller, the other fiddling with a rope, shaking it loose from something it's caught on up front.

'Sheet should run now,' he says, and it does, for a bit, then it's difficult again. Grind is the right word.

'It's still ...' I mutter.

'Try turning the winch handle the other way,' Chris says casually.

Is he teasing? How can it turn either way? What's happened to righty-tighty lefty-loosey? But I turn the other way and it works. The genoa catches a little scoop of wind and becomes as taut as the main sail. I tie off the sheet and sink onto the bench in the cockpit. I'm just starting to relax when the boat starts changing direction.

'Hey, duck!' Chris yells.

I turn and see the main sail swinging towards me. I leap out its way, grabbing Chris by the arm.

'Sorry Chris!' I try to smile at him as I edge back onto the bench, shaken.

'No, my fault! Rookie error.' His face is red with a blush. 'Should have warned you we were going to gybe. Should have tightened the boom. Are you ok?'

He's holding out his hand in invitation, giving me an

apologetic smile. I figure boom is probably the word for that thing at the bottom of the sail that nearly whacked me. Changing direction so the sails go to the other side of the boat must be gybing. I've already learned stuff. It's already more fun than I've had since I got to this place.

'Ah, I'm fine, I guess. You do know how to sail, right?' I hope I sound like I'm teasing.

'I do, I do. I'm sorry, really. Tell you what, you do it. Take the tiller.'

I can ask him to take me back to shore or I can trust him. I've trusted him this far. I love that he treats me like I'm capable. I get up and take the tiller, and he sits down right away, leaving me to figure it out. There's nothing around to run into. The boat probably won't tip over in this placid water. We're going the right direction. Woo-hoo! I'm driving a boat! When I push the tiller a little this way or a little that, the sails fill or go limp, we speed up or slow down. It's all so very good I can feel myself grinning. Chris is relaxed, spread out on the cockpit bench and rolling a cigarette. He gestures towards the shore, where huge houses have yachts and launches docked where their gardens meet the sea.

'Money-grubbers live in those palaces. They come up here from Melbourne and Sydney, buy yachts they don't know how to sail, spend their days watching their shares and sitting on their decks getting pissed, then they die. Retirement, they call it.'

The houses are variations on those advertised in the *Courier*, right down to the gardens green with palms and dotted with vibrant splotches of tropical flowers. In their own way they're as similar to each other as the rows of council houses where I grew up.

'Most wives sell the yachts when the old man goes. Sometimes they hate the yachts so much they give em away. That's how I got this one.'

'Someone gave you this?' Pricey thing to give away. That much I know.

'I used to take the owners out round the reef when their friends came to visit. He used to pretend he sailed all the time and just hired me as skipper when they had company. The old girl hated sailing. Scared of the water. Couldn't swim. Always worried she'd go overboard. She phoned me up to come and take the boat away before her hubby was even in the ground.'

'Hazel?'

'Yeah, Hazel!' Chris laughs. 'Hazel hated the yacht. Wouldn't be surprised if she hated the husband too. Didn't seem too upset when he went. Gave me the yacht, sold the house and went back south.'

Mangrove swamp marks the end of Hicks Inlet. We're heading towards the mouth of a river. Chris goes into action, furling the genoa, starting the motor, dropping the main sail, folding it neatly along the boom as he goes. He ties the soft buoys back on one side of the boat and prepares ropes. It looks like we're going to stop somewhere. A nervous little voice in my head wonders if I should be worried, but I'm having too much fun to heed it. It's the first time the dead woman has come to mind since the sails went up. When Chris comes back to the cockpit and takes the tiller, his arm brushes against mine and my stomach does a bit of a flutter.

'Take a break, skipper,' he says. 'Going up the Cedar now. It's a bit tricky.'

I crash onto the cockpit bench, suddenly feeling exhausted, rub my aching hands and shake the tension out of my shoulders. So this is the famous Cedar River. Trees rise like canyon walls. The undercover is dense with ferns and sparkling with flowers. Birdcalls fill the air with song. This is the paradise they talk about. It's more beautiful here than anywhere I've ever been. I know from back issues of the *FNQ*

Mail that locals and greenies from down south are trying to stop tourist developments around the river, but none of those articles made me care enough to take a side. Now I get it. I'd like to write an article that makes people understand why beauty like this shouldn't be corrupted. Something in-depth, cutting edge. Make people sit up and pay attention.

'Magic up here, isn't it?' Chris says, as if he's been reading my mind. 'Sorry to bring you down, but we've got to tie up over there.' He's pointing at a rough, narrow jetty half-hidden under the forest canopy.

It brings me down with a thump. The nervous little voice in my head cranks into operation. We're going to tie up here? In the middle of nowhere? For what? While I'm trying to frame a question that doesn't make me sound like I don't trust him, Chris throws me a curve ball.

'Reckon you can lasso a pole on the dock when I pull up alongside?'

Lasso a pole? Does he think I belong in the rodeo? I shrug and smile, which Chris takes for assent. He shows me how to hold the rope and throw it, and sends me up to the bow. When we come alongside the jetty I throw the rope towards a pole and watch it sink into the water.

'Give it another go,' Chris yells, already turning the boat in a circle. I drag the heavy, wet rope back onto the boat and loop it up. I've got to be able to do this. On my second try I hit the jetty but miss the pole.

'Third time lucky?' Chris is grinning, heading back into the river in another wide swing. This time I get the rope over the pole, and can't stop myself from doing a little victory dance.

'Get that line in,' Chris yells urgently. 'Keep the boat near the jetty.'

Chris has already lassoed the pole at the other end, and is tying the rope off to a cleat with a figure of eight. That I can do, after a few tries. By the time my rope is secure, the engine

is off and dishes are clanking. I hear what sounds like a kettle whistling. When I get back to the cockpit, Chris is coming up from the saloon with cups of tea. There's a hooting yell from the forest, and a dreadlocked hippie walks onto the dock. Is he coming to chase us off?

'Mazzo! Mate!' the hippie yells, waving his arms.

'Pers! That was quick,' Chris yells back. 'Thought you might take a while to show up.'

'Been up in the tree hut,' the hippie says, pointing towards the sky. 'Saw you bringing in the main. Don't miss much up there with the scope, eh. Moonshadow didn't show? Had to get new crew?'

The hippie drops vertically onto the jetty, crosses his long hairy legs, and his sarong gapes open, right in front of me. I concentrate on looking up at his glazed eyes. I'm thinking moonshadow, new crew? What is he on about?

'G'day!' he says, leaning forward to shake my hand. 'Perseus is me name.'

'Perseus? Like the meteor shower?' His grip is hard as iron. I'm giving my best smile, waiting for him to let go.

'For bravery in the face of sea monsters,' he replies, finally freeing me. 'Mazzo is so unaccustomed to having anyone to introduce he's forgotten how to do it.'

'This is Lou,' Chris blushes, redness running up his cheeks like a wave.

Chris knows my name! It makes me feel like I matter, like a kid with their hand up in class who gets to answer the question. I'm up the river with two blokes I don't know, but I drove a yacht, across the sea. How good is that?

6

It's some kind of perfect up here in the shade, drinking tea on a gently rocking boat, surrounded by gargantuan trees and ferns. Flashes of red and green flicker through the forest as birds make their way up and down the river, squawking to one another as they go. I've decided I'm not going to think about yesterday. Going to keep it at a distance to help with my sense of proportion. Perseus is nattering like someone who spends too much time alone, meandering like a river over flat ground, telling stories about people he and Chris know. The couple who mine for tin. The old folks who live on smoked snake and rice. The woman whose freshwater creek is mired with chemicals because of the roadworks. Tales of a forest full of people trying to get on with their lives in the face of harassment by the state and the developers. A conspiracy of evil against good, of the big man against the small. Perseus speaks in soliloquies, in the slow rolling way of people around here, hanging 'eh' or 'but' off the end of every other sentence, sticking 'bloody' and 'fucking' in the middle of words. Chris is mostly quiet, with a half-smile on his face, replying from time to time with assentive grunts, as if to give

Perseus time to breathe. I'm concentrating on a piece of bark turning on the water, making its way towards the side of the boat then eddying out into the stream. Concentrating on not thinking about yesterday.

'Hear about old Stickie's latest bloody stunt?' Perseus is saying. 'Knows the fucking freshies won't eat him, but.'

'What's a freshie?' I venture.

Perseus pauses and looks at me for an uncomfortably long time.

'So, where do you hail from, Lou?'

'Sydney.'

'Ah, you southerners don't know your crocs, eh. Freshies, your freshwater crocodile, mostly they're going to leave you alone. It's the other way with saltwater crocs, but. Your saltie, you leave them fucken well alone. Pretty simple, eh. Stickie sees them all as crocodile-skin packets of cash. He runs tours on the river, dressed up like Crocodile Dundee. Spins yarns bigger than a strangler fig. His favourite trick is hanging a live chook over the edge of his boat on a stick. Waits for a croc to rise up and grab it in one swallow.' Perseus acts out flapping chicken, rising croc. 'Gives the tourists a bit of excitement, does Stickie, in exchange for good, hard cash. Meanwhile, the Council is trying to get the crocs out of the river so the tourists they want for their development aren't going to get frightened. They've got a point. People get bitten, they get killed. Stickie, on the other hand, wants to keep the money-making crocs. So what does he do? He swims across the river, to prove the crocs are harmless, which, of course, being freshies, they are. I hope a dirty big saltie gets the bastard one day, eh. I wanna to be there to see it.'

'You're a harsh man, Pers,' Chris chips in.

'Need to be up here, eh,' Perseus says. 'Fawcett was poking around this morning. Wish a croc would sink its jaws into that bastard too.'

'Fawcett? The cop? What's he doing up here in the bush?'

Chris's interest sparks mine. I've really got it in for Hicks Inlet cops now. If they're going to treat me like a girl they're fair game.

'No bloody idea what he was up to, but it'd be something evil, eh. I could see him from up in the tree hut. Even from a distance Fawcett looks like filth. He was with the mayor and that bloke who's a part-owner in the new development. You know, sideburns and mo, big gold necklace and knuckle dusters. He brings people up the river in that dirty big motor boat sometimes, churning up the bottom, scaring the fish.'

'Stanley Hunt?'

'Yeah, Stanley Hunt, that's the name. Don't know what it is about him but he sets my teeth on edge, eh. Debris among the detritus, they were.' Perseus emits a low rumbling chuckle. 'Three dirty bastards sitting in a car surrounded by bulldozed forest, having a heart-to-heart. Don't miss much from the tree hut now that I've got that scope, eh. Yesterday I saw a cop boat go out to one of those glass bottom tour boats. Looked like it was hauling in something big. Very strange.'

'A woman!' I burst in. 'It was a dead woman. I saw her when they brought her in to Hicks Inlet.' I glare at Chris and he raises his hands, as if to say don't shoot.

'Well, fuck me,' Perseus says, his eyes wide. 'Knew I should've got a better scope. How did a dead woman get out there?'

'I don't know. Her eyes were gone.' Suddenly it's easier to deal with when I can talk to someone about it.

'Fish'll eat those soft parts real quick. That must have been a hard thing to see. There you are, taking a nice walk along the esplanade, and bang, a dead woman with no eyes. Freak ya right out, that would.'

'I was there as a reporter,' I say proudly. 'I'm a trainee journalist.' Finally I get to redeem my credentials.

'Lou's looking for the skipper,' Chris says, as if he had believed me all along. 'Could you see who it was?'

'Nah, the magnification ain't that good,' Perseus says, scratching his head. 'It wasn't the main reef though, just the little north one. Must have been a cut-rate tour. Who does them?'

'No one, officially,' Chris says. 'But Jock Sinclair sometimes takes a chance on the north reef. Hopes the tourists won't know they're getting short-changed.'

'Jock Sinclair?' I cannot believe my luck. I've found out who the skipper was. I've been saved from Earl's derision. My gamble paid off. Investigating while learning to sail. So cool! 'Where I can find him?'

'Down the pub usually,' Chris laughs. 'But not today. Pubs are shut.'

'He lives near me old mum,' Perseus says. 'I can show you when we get to Hicks.'

'Speaking of which, we'd better make tracks. Wind's coming up,' Chris announces, businesslike, and he descends into the saloon. The engine starts and Chris comes back up with a little backpack. He throws it up to Perseus.

'Got to get changed,' Perseus says, scanning the sky. 'Me old mum don't like it when I turn up like this for Sunday tea.'

Perseus rises to vertical in one smooth movement and disappears up the jetty with the backpack. Chris is fussing with the ropes. I take the cups down to the saloon so I can check it out. It's just like a little caravan inside. There's even a toilet. I'm trying to figure out how it flushes when Perseus thumps down the steps. Without a making a fuss he shows me how it works and goes away. When I get back up from the saloon we're starting the turn to go back down the river, with a flock of rosellas flashing red and green against the forest alongside us.

At the river mouth the sea's choppy. Water streams over

the bow as we cross the waves. Perseus moves around the boat, raising the main sail, unfurling the genoa, while Chris steers, watching the sails fill, and then, with a casual flick of his hand he shuts off the engine, and we're flying through the water on the wind. Chris and Perseus manage the boat without speaking to each other. I envy their skill. I'm going to learn this sailing business. Might just have something to show for myself from this sojourn in the wilds of Hicks Inlet after all.

'Lou, can you help Pers with the tacking?' Chris smiles at me, that warm smile, those dark eyes wrinkling up.

'Happy to help,' I say, as if I know what's going on. The only tacking I know uses a needle and thread. What are we going to sew? The sails?

'Tacking is moving the genoa from one side to the other, to change our direction,' Perseus explains quietly.

'I thought that was gybing!' I whisper, sure that's what Chris called it.

'When the wind's behind, it's gybing. Going into the wind, it's tacking. We're flirting with the dead zone. See up there, top of the mast, that little V?'

'Yep.' I have to tilt my head right back to see it.

'The dead zone's inside the V. That shows where the wind is. We can't sail directly into the wind. We want that arrow to be just outside the V, like it is now. When we tack it'll be on the other side of the V.'

'Got it.' It's much easier than Chris's wind on the cheek and ear method.

'When I say, be ready to haul that genoa sheet in,' Chris chimes in.

I look at Chris and point at the rope on the winch.

'That's the one,' he nods. 'I'll turn the boat and Pers will let his sheet out while you haul yours in. The aim is to get the genoa all the way out. Put a few turns of the sheet on the

winch, clockwise, and pull when I say.'

'Ready about?' Chris commands.

'Ready!' we chime. I start pulling on the sheet.

'Not yet, Lou. I say "ready about". You check that you're all ok to do your thing and if there's no problems, you say "ready".'

I nod, looking forward to the day I don't have to have everything explained to me.

'Then I'll say "let's go", and I'll turn through the wind and you haul in the sheet. Let the wind do most of the work.'

'Aren't you supposed to call "helms alee", cap'n?' Perseus teases.

'Saving it for the exams,' Chris laughs. 'I reckon "let's go" will do it for now. OK then, ready about.'

'Ready,' Perseus and I chant in unison.

'Let's go.' The boat turns into the wind and the genoa starts flapping raggedly. The wind pushes it around to my side of the boat, and I haul the sheet in, pulling the genoa taut, proud of getting it right the first time. Perseus is on the high side of the boat, straddling the ridge on his side of the cockpit, dreadlocks flying, tidying up his sheet, and I'm so low in the boat I could reach out and touch the water. We're going much faster than we did on the way up. Every now and then a spray of water hits me. My lips taste of salt.

'The north reef's just out there, Lou,' Perseus yells, pointing. 'You know, the spot where they found the dead woman.'

I'd forgotten her again, forgotten yesterday. Sailing consumes consciousness, in a good way. Thinking of the woman, here in the choppy water, it seems an unimaginably lonely way to die. Someone must know how she ended up out there. Someone else must be thinking about her.

'Ready about?' Chris calls, demanding my full attention. Perseus and I get into position. We execute the tack like a

tightly tuned team. When I look up we're heading directly towards the big north shore houses.

'There's Stanley Hunt's place, straight ahead,' Chris points. 'Long deck upstairs, glass balustrade. Motor boat on the jetty.'

I wonder if the people in those houses watched the police boat raising the dead woman. I wonder if any of them saw the accident. I could go and knock on their doors, find out. I've got ideas for Earl. I'm going to have a lot to do.

'Ready about?'

Perseus and I do our thing, and we're heading back out to sea. We've zigzagged like this the whole way. First we head towards land, and then back out to sea. The horizon is clouded in mist now, and the sea has darkened to slate grey. One last tack and we're heading straight towards the inlet.

'You're a master!' Perseus yells to Chris. 'Going to sail us right into home! Show the old codgers sitting on their boats how it's done, eh.'

This time we're with the waves instead of against them. They give us a push into the shelter of the inlet.

'Time to furl the genoa?' Perseus asks Chris.

'Yeah, wait and I'll try to point her into the wind.'

The sails flap and Perseus hauls the genoa in. I instinctively feed out the line, feeling proud they didn't have to tell me what to do. When Perseus goes up on top of the boat to drop the main sail I follow him.

'Can I help?'

'Sure, it'd be great if you pull down that end as it falls. Fold it as it comes, eh. Nice and neat. Keep the cap'n happy.'

I grab hold of the boom and walk gingerly towards the cockpit. The sail's much heavier than it looks when it's full of air. It's hard on your hands when you're trying to pull it into neat folds. Once we've got it down Perseus passes me some little straps and I tie down my end of the sail the same way he's doing it. Then we tie those little buoys, which he says are

called fenders, to the guard rails. He's got a simple way of teaching me stuff, giving me confidence. Makes me happy as a duck in water.

As Chris makes the turn towards the dock, Perseus and I set up mooring lines, then on his signal I swing over the guard rails down to the dock and we secure the boat. When Chris stops the motor there's only the sound of the wind and wires clanking on masts. I sit on the pontoon, dangling my legs over the edge, and watch Perseus and Chris tidying up the ropes. I've got the glass bottom boat skipper's name. I'm going to knock on his door. I went sailing. I even made some friends. The day ended up a hell of a lot better than it started.

'Got to make a move, Mazzo,' Perseus says to Chris. 'Me old mum don't like eating late, eh.' Chris is absorbed, double checking the fenders, adjusting them a little this way, a little that.

'Let's go, Lou,' Perseus turns to me, stretching his hand out to pull me up. 'We'll see if Sinclair's home and then go to my mum's and have a feed. She'll have enough for an army. Chris'll be fussing here for hours yet.'

7

Monday morning I'm outside Earl's office the minute I hear the goods lift rumble. I'm determined that it's going to be me who writes the article about the dead woman brought in from the sea. Sinclair wasn't home last night, not before we had Perseus's mother's great roast dinner nor afterwards when Perseus walked me home. I haven't got anything to show for myself, but I've tried, and I've got ideas for following up the story. Earl's got to let me do it. He comes through the first door wearing those wraparound dark sunglasses that old people go in for these days. He takes them off, rolls up to me and stops.

'Good morning Lou,' he says slowly. 'The answer is no.'

'I haven't even asked a question!' I try to hold his door open for him, find it awkward to make enough room for the wheelchair, and end up inside his office before him. A fait accompli.

'First, can you pull that book out of the back pocket of this contraption for me?'

It's *The Tax Inspector* by Peter Carey, hardback, brand new. I put it on the desk in front of Earl and go and stand on the

other side with my hands folded in front of me. Earl takes off the sunglasses and puts on his bifocals. Then he folds his hands on the desk. I wonder if he's mocking me.

'Alright, seeing you are still here, shoot,' Earl says, motioning to me to shut the door.

I hear myself spewing out words — dead woman, glass bottom boat, tourists, cops, blue rope — without conjunctions, without verbs, without tenses. I blurt. I blabber. I make no sense. I should have prepared. Earl puts his hand in the air like a traffic cop.

'One sentence!' Earl commands. 'Give it to me in one sentence! Facts!'

'A dead woman was found in the sea by tourists on a glass bottom tourist boat.'

'Thank you.'

'There was a rope round her waist. Her eyes were eaten out.'

'One sentence, I said,' Earl cuts me off. 'It's Ed's story, Lou, you know that. Ed is the Police Desk.'

'But I got the scoop.' I can hear myself sounding like a whiny kid. 'I'm the eyewitness reporter. Ed wasn't even there.'

Earl takes off his glasses, gives me his steely look, eyelids dropping, lips thin and mean, making it clear there is to be no more discussion on that point. He cleans the glasses with the handkerchief he keeps in his top drawer for that purpose, then puts them back on.

'I can promise you that Ed will have a polished version of the story when he walks in the door,' Earl says eventually. 'Ed's experienced. He's covered boats capsizing and fishermen drowning, scuba divers and snorkellers going down and never coming back up, swimmers dying from bites by stingrays and crocs and sharks. He's even covered people drowning in hotel swimming pools. Ed knows the terrain,

and he knows the police. Let it go, Lou. And please sit down. We have other matters to discuss.'

I slump into the chair opposite Earl, sitting on my hands, trying to contain my agitation. Earl has my notes from the *Courier* in his hand.

'Now, your work from Saturday, from which I derived some entertainment on Sunday.' Long pause. It's a neat trick. Earl uses it a lot. It makes it seem like you're about to say something important. 'You are getting better at this work. Half a line on the local murderer. A couple of lines more wouldn't have hurt, but you didn't miss it. Well done. We filled that space with it.'

I resist the urge to say that Hicks Inlet clearly shelters more than one murderer.

'But what's this?' Earl's tone has moved from portentous to theatrical, his good arm is crooked, hand in the air, fingers inclining inwards, eyes brightened. He reads from my notes. 'Page 1, "Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen 'fighting mad' after four years of perjury and corruption charges. Jury fails to reach verdict. Joh says 'Just tell Queenslanders this: The woods are lovely, dark and deep but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep.'" What compelled you to include that lovely little item?'

'That's poetry isn't it? I remember "the woods are lovely, dark and deep" from school. You asked for poetry.'

'Did I? Really? It's the least interesting thing in that story. The charges of corruption aren't surprising. Half the government got something similar, but perjury, from a god-fearing man ... And the jury can't reach a verdict? Word has it that Joh owns the jury foreman. Still, it wasn't in the *Courier* and it's not something for the *FNQ Mail*. Some other lucky journos will be digging in that cesspit. Now, what other gems did you have for me?' Earl continues, clearly enjoying himself. 'Page 5: "Prostitute jailed for sex video extortion,

thanks to huge undercover police operation code-named Big Boy.” You chose to note that for what reason?”

‘Colour. You said to look for colour.’ I’m trying not to sound angry. Earl can be a right prick, but I need to keep on his good side if I’m going to get the article about the dead woman from the sea.

‘Colourful it is.’ Earl’s tone is softer. ‘Big Boy undercover operation. I can imagine the cops cacking themselves when they thought that one up. So, that leaves us with the question of the pineapple with the dollar signs. Please explain.’ He holds up my drawing.

‘Four pages of pineapple recipes and a full-page advertisement for pineapples,’ I burst out. ‘That could be five whole pages paid for by the pineapple company.’

‘And?’

‘We could do that, the *FNQ Mail* could do that, I mean. Get the advertisers to pay for what looks like actual content.’

‘Clever girl,’ Earl says, bestowing his benevolent dictator smile on me. He pushes the notes across the desk, and gestures towards the bin. I get up and put them in the bin, and dare to sit down again. Earl gives me an annoyed look and opens *The Tax Inspector*.

‘What now?’ he asks, not even looking at me.

‘Thanks Earl. That’s very helpful feedback.’ Dictators love praise. They also get off on supplication. I lean forward, hold my hands together the way they taught me in church, lower my head and my voice. ‘Please let me investigate the murdered woman from the sea, Earl. I’m supposed to be getting real journalist experience up here. I’ve been summarising news stories forever.’ I take a punt, lower my voice even more, raise my eyes. ‘Earl, there was a frayed rope around the woman’s waist. Why was it there?’

‘Murdered, you say? What evidence is there for murder? A frayed rope around the woman’s waist?’ Earl sighs, closes the

book and leans forward in his seat, drumming the fingers of his good hand on the table. 'Who else saw this rope?'

'The tourists on the boat. One of the tourists told me the police had to cut something away to free the woman's body. The rope, presumably.'

'So you talked to witnesses?' Earl seems slightly impressed. 'Who?'

'An American woman. But then the tourists all left in their bus before I could get any more information.'

'Well, that's useless. Those tourists are probably in Perth by now. Or back in America. What about the boat skipper? Who was he? What did he have to say?'

'He was gone when I got there,' I say, defensively. It's a white lie. 'But I spent yesterday tracking him down.' I might as well make it sound like I worked my butt off, like I've already invested oodles of time, even though I've got nothing to show for it.

'Yes, and?' Earl says eagerly.

'I'm not one hundred per cent certain, but the skipper was almost certainly Jock Sinclair.'

'So many qualifications. If I understand you correctly, you are telling me that you have no idea who the skipper was. As eyewitness reporter you failed to get this elementary detail. Is that correct?' Earl is glaring at me and I'm trying not to squirm.

'He wasn't there when I arrived at the scene. Nor was his boat. I do know that there are no official tours to the north reef where the body was found, and that Jock Sinclair is the only glass bottom boat skipper who does tours there. Yesterday I also found out his address, but he wasn't home. I tried a couple of times. His neighbours told me that he hasn't been seen since Saturday afternoon.' One neighbour, Perseus's mum, but a little embellishment can't hurt. 'I thought you'd let me go back and try his house again today. I

also know where the body was found, so I thought I could door-knock the houses along that stretch of coast to see if anyone saw anything.'

Earl puts his hands behind his head, leans back and stares at the ceiling for so long I begin to wonder if I've gone too far, been too persistent. Finally he drops his arms and leans forward on the desk, looking me in the eye the way a headteacher does to a misbehaving student.

'Look, Lou, it's a police matter right now, and therefore the story belongs to Ed.' Earl is speaking very quietly, making me lean forward to hear him. 'The young woman, who was not much more than a girl, was the mayor's niece. They're an important local family. It's delicate. We should have had a report in today's paper, but there were complications, apparently. Ed was briefed by the police when he was at the rodeo yesterday. He's got it covered. He's kept me informed.'

Anything I might say now will only make my chances of getting this story worse. I sit as still as I can manage and keep staring into Earl's mottled brown eyes. It takes all my nerve.

'However,' Earl says, looking up at the door, as if he's checking that no one is listening, and lowering his voice even more, 'so far you've given me more detail than I got from Ed, and I can be confident that he has told me everything the police told him. So ...' He takes off his glasses and cleans them again. 'So, in your spare time, you can track down that Sinclair fellow, see what you can learn. But you must not do that as an official representative of the *FNQ Mail*. You are just a concerned citizen, who happened to be at the scene of the ..., at the scene at the time. And don't go bandying things around. This is between you and me. Is that clear?'

'Sure, Earl,' I say. Everything just got a whole lot less clear, except for the fact that I'm not going to write the article. Is Earl saying that someone is hiding something? I want to ask a million questions but know not to ask any.

'And, because I did promise you some real experience,' Earl says more loudly, 'your first official reporting assignment is the opening of the new hospital wing on Wednesday. Do your homework.'

Earl anoints me with his smile of encouragement. He's acting like he's given me a great consolation prize, but a hospital wing opening? Really? What can there be to say? I beam ingratiatingly back at him, hoping my gritted teeth don't show.

'Thanks, Earl. Hospital wing opening. Got it.'

'But first there's a heap of work in the knacker's yard. That's still your first responsibility.'

'Of course, Earl.'

'Good girl.'

I'm barely out of the chair before Earl has opened *The Tax Inspector* and started reading.

~

Proofreading, typesetting and layout are parts of this job I hadn't anticipated. I thought I was going to be a reporter. It makes me wonder exactly what my boss in Sydney had promised Earl. 'Earnest girl from western suburbs. Can do everything. Offer her a bit of reporting.' It's like being invited to a family wedding. You get a piece of cake, a little bit of dancing, and a lot of washing up. Back at the *Sydney Times* typesetting, proofing and layout are done by tradesmen in different departments, and the journos do journalism, but here it's 'all hands on deck' as Earl put it, or rather, it turns out, my hands on everything. Earl explained sheepishly that Roger, who usually does all the typesetting and layout, was taking a three-week holiday that fortunately coincided exactly with the time I was to be at the *FNQ Mail*. Charlene is supposed to do some typesetting when her front desk duties allow it but I've never seen her in the knacker's yard. I haven't figured out what the front desk duties are either. On

my first day Earl assured me there'd still be plenty of time for me to do proper reporting while I enjoy this great opportunity to learn the ropes. He'd started from the bottom himself, he explained: copy boy, typesetter, proofreader, sub-editor, journalist, editor, and now he has his own paper. He said the last with great irony, making me wonder why he'd left the *Times*, where he'd been a prominent arts columnist and reviewer. Given the photograph on the wall showing him standing in front of the Sydney Opera House, I figure it's something to do with whatever put him in the wheelchair. It's not the sort of question I want to ask.

Earl demonstrated the whole process to me during my first week. The typesetting isn't much different to typing except that I have to change little wheels on the machine to get different fonts, and muck about with kerning to make the words fit on the line. The text spools out on special photographic paper. The proofreading is familiar too, checking spelling, proper nouns, adding missing words, stuff like that, but I also have to make sure there aren't too few or too many gaps in the lines. Mistakes mean I have to reset the type, which has made me pretty careful. Layout means waxing the little strips of special paper on the back then laying them in between the blue lines on the layout boards. The boards have blue boxes designating space for advertisements and other boxes for headings, so the whole paper has a design and shape before any actual articles are added. Advertisement space is never cut, but if the articles are too long or short for the space available they get the chop. I guess that's why they call this room the knacker's yard. That's the real fun: cutting out or adding words, first in blue pencil on the layout strips, and resetting lines on the typesetter, then laying the new strips in and proofing again. Both grandiloquence and paucity flourish under my guardianship. By now I can mostly skip the error-correction

stage. The articles are short, I count lines and adjust spacing as I typeset, avoid spelling errors, add and take away words. That 'stitch in time saves nine' thing finally makes sense. After everything is laid in, every double-page spread gets an eagle eye, as Earl put it, which consists of squinting at it from a distance to make sure it all looks ok.

By five o'clock I've got much of Wednesday's paper typeset, corrected and laid in. Everyone else has gone home. I lock up, leave the key under the mat, and walk down to the marina, past the empty glass bottom boats and the big launches and yachts. Chris's yacht is all closed up. The inlet's disappearing into the evening gloom. I take the short cut Perseus showed me, through the lane between the chandlers' shops, past the backyards filled with overgrown weeds, boats half-built or half-repaired, cars on blocks and washing on lines, listening to the hoots and jeers of children playing and mothers yelling. When I get to Sinclair's house no one answers my knock. My only witness isn't home. There's no point searching the pubs; I don't even know what Sinclair looks like. Another miserable evening looms. Mrs Swain's wretched dinner, old George, my bare room and Anna K's bleak life.

8

How do you do homework on a new hospital wing opening? There's no point asking Ed. It turns out this is one of the hidden talents of the usually opaque Charlene. Without taking a break from filing her nails she directs me to a Mrs Pike at the Council Planning Office, who, Charlene claims, will provide me with all the background information I need, and all that I don't.

The entrance to the colonial-era Council Offices is grand. Hicks Inlet's notion of its future prospects hasn't panned out. Three wide stone steps and four stone columns hold up a deep, tiled verandah. Carved double doors open into a foyer with polished parquetry. A pair of ceiling fans swing languidly beneath the high ceiling. Doors lead off left and right. My knock on the door marked 'Planning' gets no response. My second knock is louder but equally unproductive. I invite myself in. A long drawn out squeak in the hinges of the door closing slowly behind me announces my arrival in the empty room.

Panelled windows cast rectangles of light on the long counter that protects two empty desks and a bank of grey,

metal filing cabinets from people with planning inquiries. I cough, but no one appears. I pull my notebook and pen out of my bag and drop them loudly on the counter. A slender, middle-aged man with a mop of dark hair slides out from behind the filing cabinets. He buttons the jacket of his crumpled linen suit as he sidles up to the counter.

‘May I be of assistance?’

‘Good morning, sir. I’m Lou Williams, from the *FNQ Mail*.’

‘Good morning, Miss Williams,’ the man says, looking at me expectantly.

‘I’d like any information you have about the new hospital wing, please. I will be reporting on the official opening.’ I’m speaking in my posh journalist voice again. It always comes out when I’m nervous. It sounds so phoney to me, but nevertheless it gives me confidence.

‘I can confirm that the wing is new, Miss Williams. In fact, it is not even finished. Despite that small problem it will be opening on Wednesday. Officially, that is. Not opening for customers. Will there be anything else? A planning inquiry, perhaps? That is our speciality.’

‘Who is the new wing for?’ I say, opening my notebook and picking up my pen. I haven’t prepared any questions to ask, so I’m stuck with the old who, what, where, when, why routine.

‘It is for sick people, Miss Williams,’ he says, looking at me as if I’m a fraud.

A snort of laughter balloons from behind the filing cabinets, followed by a curvaceous woman whose hips rock voluptuously as she approaches. She’s a riot of colour, with metallic red hair done up in a beehive, vivid aqua eyeshadow, pink lipstick and nail polish, all of which, she seems to have decided, will work perfectly with her purple paisley dress. A whiff of lavender hits me when she leans on the counter.

‘Excuse Mr Dorade, my dear.’ She gives the man a gentle

shove with her hip, pats him on the bum and leans towards me. 'He's not very good with the public. He's foreign, you know. Lacks confidence in his spoken English. He comes into his own with filing though.' She gives me a wink and dabs at her forehead and neck with a lacy handkerchief.

'Mrs Pike?'

'I am Mrs Pike,' she says, doing a little curtsy.

Behind her, Dorade is pulling thick manilla files from a filing cabinet and putting them on a desk.

'I'm Lou ...'

'Miss Williams. Your reputation precedes you. May I say that your eyes are even more exquisite than I imagined. How may we be of service?'

I have a reputation? For what? Strange eyes? Hers are green. That's pretty rare. Should I comment on that? Before I can speak Mrs Pike ploughs on.

'I may be able to help with any questions, for example, while Mr Dorade gets the relevant information from the files.'

'Thank you, Mrs Pike. I'm reporting on the opening of the new hospital wing for the *FNQ Mail*, and I'd appreciate any information that would help me provide a, um, rounded and full report for the newspaper.' At least my voice sounds a bit more like me this time.

'Very nicely said, Miss Williams. I guess old Earl briefed you about being careful with what you say and how you say it up here in paradise.'

'Well, Earl told me to do my homework, and here I am.'

'A straight talker. Like me. Very nice.' She pats her beehive as she speaks, sending out wafts of lavender. 'You must understand that the new hospital wing is very small. It is only a wing in the sense that it abuts the main hospital.'

'Right,' I say, writing that down.

'The most noteworthy aspect of the new wing is the instigating role of one Mr Stanley Hunt. This is off the record,

Miss Williams, in confidence, not for quotation or inclusion or even implication in your little article.'

'Stanley Hunt?' I ask, still responding to the only bits of Mrs Pike's flowery talk that make any sense. I've heard that name before.

'Mr Hunt came up from Melbourne about ten years ago,' Mrs Pike says. 'You have probably encountered him already in our small town. Snappy dresser, gold chain around his neck, heavy gold rings, sideburns and moustache. All somewhat undercut by a decidedly horsey smile, I might add. Mr Hunt seems to think that he's god's gift to women, but you shouldn't say that. He puts his hand in his pocket for all manner of things, which you should say, of which, I might add, the most interesting is this new little hospital wing. You could describe him as a philanthropist if you wish to flatter him. A society gent. He has friends amongst the National Country Party cronies on the Council, in the sense that he helps with their, how should I put it, their developments, in return for which, well, who knows? Needless to say, you shouldn't say that in your little piece.'

I'm scribbling furiously, trying to keep up, when Mrs Pike whips the pen out of my hand.

'The best thing, Miss Williams, is not to write down the things I tell you not to say. It's the method used here in the Council offices to help staff avoid confusion later on.'

She leans closer, tears out my page of notes and shreds it to confetti. It's so wide of my expectations that I don't know how to react. A tight smile comes to Mrs Pike's carefully lipsticked pink lips and she raises her eyebrows as if she's expecting another question.

'So, Mrs Pike, may I ask what the new wing is for? Cancer patients? Old people? Children?'

'At present it is going by the humdrum title of the women's wing, Miss Williams, as it will provide antenatal

care, or postnatal, or something to do with the messy parts in between. Perhaps it will be officially named the McCready Wing, after our illustrious mayor. Or perhaps the Hunt Wing, in recognition of his contributions, but he'd probably prefer that kept in the shadows.' She licks her little finger and slicks it over her arched eyebrows.

'Ah, so, um, pregnant women, new mothers, babies? That's nice.' Mrs Pike has reduced me to inanity. I've lost control of an interview again. This should have been easy. I've really got to work on my interviewing skills.

'Actually, sometimes it isn't nice, Miss Williams. Pregnancy does not equal joy. A pregnant woman may, let us say, miscarry, and find herself in need of considerable medical attention. She may bleed uncontrollably. Or she might be struck by a life-threatening infection,' she says slowly, fixing me with those scary green eyes. 'Whilst not uncommon in times gone by, this unfortunate turn of events seems to be on the increase in Hicks Inlet. Ironically, it's probably not appropriate to say that in your little article either.'

I'm out of my depth. I don't know what Mrs Pike is talking about. I've got no idea how to manage her. While I'm trying to think of some way to get back to my interview, Mr Dorade glides over to the counter and hands Mrs Pike a single page. He seemed to be taking notes for ages. What happened to everything else he was writing? Mrs Pike thanks him, writes 'Made possible by donations from Mr Stanley Hunt' on the piece of paper, and slides it across the counter. The notes comprise of: 'Application to build a new two-room wing at the Hicks Inlet Hospital' and the date of council approval. That's all.

'All set now?' Mrs Pike says. 'Don't forget to report on the work of the Ladies Auxiliary. I'll be there to point out who's who and that sort of thing. See you tomorrow, Miss Williams. Wear your best outfit. That crowd will be dressed up to the

nines and you should try to blend in.'

Mrs Pike turns on her high heels and sashays back behind the filing cabinets before I can ask anything more. She's stolen my pen and given me next to nothing.

Feeling like I've been battered by a lavender-scented cushion I wade out into the blinding light and humid heat on the Council Office steps. It backs me into the shade, up against the wall. Another interview completely screwed up. Something as insignificant as the opening of a bloody two-room hospital wing, and I can't even manage to interview someone in the planning office about it. I never expected it to be this hard. All I've got is Mrs Pike's weird talk running around in my head and the date of the planning approval. Mrs Pike has drawn a wavy line under Stanley Hunt, the proofreader's mark that indicates bold text. Stanley Hunt was the most important thing about the new wing she said, I remember that. Where do I know that name from? Am I going to have to go through the old copies of the *FNQ Mail* again? That'd be proper punishment for failure to interview. I'd rather give it all up and go sailing. And suddenly I remember Chris and Perseus talking about Stanley Hunt. Three of them sitting in the car in the forest, Perseus said. One was a cop, with a name like a tap — Fawcett. The mayor, that would be McCready, was another. And Hunt was the third. Stanley Hunt, with the big motor boat and the waterfront house on the north shore.

~

Charlene is not at the reception desk. It's a relief. At least she can't ask me about the wretched interview. The office is empty. Everyone's out for lunch. The *FNQ Mail* staff take lunch even more seriously than Sydney journos, and that's a challenge. Ed's desk is the usual mess, with a little clearing where he's drawn a circle in blue pencil around the blob of red nail polish. Exhibit A in Ed's campaign to drive me out of

the office, no doubt. Why did I come to Ed's desk anyway? What am I doing? Stick with the proofreading and typesetting, Lou. At least I know how to do that. But the photos taped to the wall catch my eye. And there he is, the man Mrs Pike described, with the sideburns and mo, with the gold rings and chain, in the photo with Ed in the boat. Stanley Hunt. The bloke I met in the pub with Ed. He seemed decent then, compared to Ed, but that's a low bar. I wonder what Hunt did to get Mrs Pike's goat. And there he is again, dressed as a gangster at the fancy dress party with his arm around a slender woman in a Venetian mask. I wonder if she's Hunt's wife. And I wonder if the bloke dressed up as a mayor might actually be McCready. The mayor's pretending to be the mayor. Is that meant to be funny? I think about Perseus describing Hunt, the mayor and Fawcett out on the road in the rainforest. Three dirty bastards he called them. The third man in the photo is the one in blackface with the noose around his neck. Could that be Fawcett? There was a scandal about cops dressing up like that a while back. Creeps you right out, that sort of thing.

Charlene's tittering laugh and Ed's guffaw outside the door make me scoot to the knacker's yard. At least the proofreading and typesetting will give me somewhere to hide away from them. I distribute paperweights to stop everything from flying off the table, switch on the overhead fan and settle into the old wooden typesetter's chair. After I've typeset reports on daredevils and drunken fights at the rodeo, new fertiliser for the cane industry, great-grandmothers playing croquet and Rotary's campaign to keep the streets clean, I get to Ed's piece on the dead woman from the sea.

The headline says 'Mayor's Niece Drowns in Tragic Accident'.

The report consists of two short paragraphs:

'On Saturday Aileen McCready, nineteen years old, tragically

drowned on the north reef. Originally from Dindin, Aileen had been living with and performing domestic duties for her aunt and uncle in Hicks Inlet. A private family funeral will be held. Donations may be sent to the hospital in lieu of flowers.'

'While this tragic death is as yet shrouded in mystery, police are concerned that it may be yet another instance of a snorkeller getting in trouble. In the past 15 years, seven snorkellers and three scuba divers have died on the reef. Investigations are under way.'

Is this a joke? I read it again and again.

So much is wrong. Snorkelling, for starters. In a dress? No one does that. And there's no mention of the tourists in the glass bottom boat, no mention of the rope around the woman's waist, and the need to cut her free from the coral. The headline is misleading at best. The cop at the scene said 'Dead sheila found at sea'. I'm supposed to question factual errors. Through the window in the door of the knacker's yard I can see Ed lounging at his desk, doodling on a writing pad. I brave up, swing open the door and stride up to his desk, with the offending report in my hand.

'Excuse me, Ed.'

He ignores me. I step forward and wait. Ed draws a cock with balls on the notepad and puts a smiling face on the top of the cock, the way kids did back in school.

'Ed, I'm fact-checking this article.'

Ed swings his chair and stares up at me blankly.

'About this article, the young woman, Aileen, was wearing a dress when they brought her in from the sea. It seems unlikely that she was snorkelling.'

'Aileen drowned.' Ed's reply is dismissive. 'She might have been snorkelling. People do drown when snorkelling, as the article says. With Aileen, no one knows for sure. It's a theory. It's under investigation. As it says.'

'Who goes snorkelling in a dress?'

'Women do the weirdest things,' Ed snorts. 'Your first dead

body, was it? Not easy to handle for a young'un, specially a girl.'

'There was a rope around her waist,' I mutter, and I start to walk away then decide to push it. I can't take too many defeats in a day. 'Let's say she was snorkelling, Ed. And someone was there, holding her by a rope, while she went snorkelling in her dress. And she drowned. Why did they just leave her in the coral for tourists in a glass bottom boat to find?'

'Rope?' Ed guffaws. 'What rope? You've let your imagination run away with you. There's a reason why experienced journalists have to report on this sort of thing. I'm not the Police Desk for nothing.'

'Come on, Ed, I wasn't the only one who saw the rope!'

'The police didn't mention a rope of any type, which means there wasn't one. They did mention some city chick acting like she was the official reporter. We had a bit of a laugh about that. If anyone's having trouble with their facts, it's you.'

He swivels back to his desk and begins drawing another, bigger, cock. As I retreat to the safety of the knacker's yard, I hear Ed sniggering behind me. There's no respect among colleagues here. They swat at me like I'm a fly.

9

Charlene was in a good mood this morning. She all but gave me a smile. Well, it was a laugh, really.

‘Oh my god! Is that your best outfit? You’re kidding!’ she said when I walked in the door, and then that smile, or laugh, or whatever it was. She peered down at my feet.

‘No heels? Wow, are you going to stick out like a sore thumb! That crowd will be in their best formal daywear.’ And then she laughed again. ‘Here, I’ve drawn you a map. So you don’t get lost on the way.’

The map is useful. Once I’m past the town centre each cross street on the way to the hospital is named. All women’s names. I tick them off as I walk: Mary Street, Anne Street, Joan Street. This is a new part of town for me. The streets have shady trees and are lined with Queenslanders, the rambling old weatherboard houses on stilts with wide verandahs for escaping the tropical sun and rain. I wish I was staying in one of them instead of Mrs Swain’s morgue. Minnie Street, Clare Street, and now past an ill-kempt park that isn’t shown on the map. A few people are lounging around under the enormous Morton Bay fig in its centre, but

the rest of the park is empty. It's a sharp contrast to the busy park in Hicks Square. Emily Street, Adelaide Street, and here we are.

The hospital's an old brick building surrounded by a garden of lawn, shrubs and flowers. The new building is off to the side, next to the Emergency rooms and the ambulance park. The ground around it is dusty and littered with builders' debris. Men are clustered in the shade of the hospital wall, smoking, their suit jackets hooked on fingers and draped over shoulders, sweat circles darkening their armpits. I make a wide circle around them and pick my way across the rubble into the building where women are gathered, all wearing pastel colours and floral prints with feathered racecourse hats. My white shirt-dress is my best outfit, but I'm way underdressed in this crowd. The 'Save the Whales' badge on my chest draws more disparaging looks than the stain it covers would have done. Chatter and tittering fills the room. Everyone knows everyone else. I find a bit of wall to hug and try to be inconspicuous.

At one end of the unfurnished room, hatless women in aprons are setting up cups and arranging a feast of thin sandwiches, scones and yo-yos. An imperious woman in a mauve outfit waves a fly swat over the table while she gives instructions to a woman in hot pink. A tiny woman in a beige dress pats at her neck with a tissue then stuffs it down her cleavage as she carries out mauve-dress's instructions. A tall woman in a flowery outfit is sticking an equally flowery, handwritten poster on the wall. It asks for donations to the Ladies Auxiliary to raise funds for hospital beds and equipment. At the other end of the room a portly bloke steps awkwardly onto a wooden box and wobbles like a clown until he gets his balance. His cheeks are ruddy from too much sun, or too much mid-morning sherry. His tight collar and tie emphasise his double chin. He looks familiar. I watch him

mop the sweat off his forehead with a check handkerchief, waiting for the crowd to quieten down, while I hope for a flash of inspiration about where I've seen him before. The men outside begin to grind their cigarettes in the dust, pull on their jackets and file unenthusiastically into the room. The woman in the mauve outfit bangs her fly swat loudly on the wall. The chatter ebbs. Someone calls for a hush so that Mayor McCready can be heard. Well, there's a bit of unexpected interest. The mayor is the uncle of the woman who was brought in from the sea. And now I remember where I've seen that face before: he's one of the blokes in the photos on Ed's wall. He's fishing buddies with Ed and Stanley Hunt. He's the one who dresses as himself for fancy dress parties.

The mayor announces himself to be a man of few words. Titters and guffaws break out and he grins widely. There's an absence of visible grief that is either the mark of a professional or plain lack of sentiment. Once McCready gets going there's little evidence of the former: he reads from notes on cards, pausing to pocket a card at the end of each sentence, a staccato delivery of a very dull speech. His cadence changes abruptly when he puts the last card in his pocket and thanks Mr Stanley Hunt for the generous donation that allowed the project to come to fruition. Hunt steps out from behind the mayor and takes a bow. His face is more gnarled and sunburnt than I expected. McCready announces the conclusion of formal proceedings and invites everyone to partake of the bounteous cake stall, and to be generous with donations.

As the crowd surges towards the cake stall a hand clutches my bum, making me jump. My elbow's starting to swing back to where I expect the person's guts to be, and as I turn I see it's Stanley Hunt.

'Best way to get a girl's attention, I've always thought', he

says with a leery smile. I recognise the purr in Hunt's voice from the pub, but there's no twinkle in his faded blue eyes today. His breath reeks of alcohol. He puts his hand on the wall over my shoulder, standing over me. I can't move forwards or left without getting closer to him, and some fatso's got their back to me on the right. The bastard's got me trapped. I flatten myself against the wall. I'm looking into the hairs in his nose, seeing the wobble in his adam's apple, inhaling Old Spice. I feel my fist balling up. I wish Robbo had taught me how to do an uppercut. I'd like to be able to whack Hunt's chin into his teeth.

'I didn't think an insignificant little event like this was your style,' Hunt says, looking down at me, the purr replaced by a yobbo's sneer. 'What I heard was that you're a shit-stirrer. Your big claim to fame is some story about an Abo who topped himself.'

What the hell? That Hunt knows about my one and only article is totally unexpected. I'm less surprised that he's trotting out the usual racist line. It puts me on the front foot. This is a corner I've fought before.

'There are significant, unanswered questions about what led to that young Aboriginal man being found dead in the Collooney lock-up, Mr Hunt.' A posh, clipped tone so unlike my normal speech is coming out of my mouth and giving me courage.

'Everyone knows they can't stand being locked up, the Abos,' Hunt snarls, showing his buck teeth. 'It's how they are.'

'Actually, the considerable evidence of foul play in that Collooney arrest and incarceration led to the establishment of a Royal Commission.'

'You like muckraking, don't ya? Stirring up a bit of scandal?' Hunt says.

He's still got one arm over my shoulder, leaving me no

room to move. His Old Spice perfume is making it hard to breathe. All around us people have turned their backs and are chatting amongst themselves, as if pretending this isn't happening. Why doesn't someone tell Hunt off? What's his story? What's driving all that aggression? Whatever it is, his aggro is making me fight. I'm back in the playground, taking on the kids who are taunting me about the mortadella in my sandwiches, calling me a dirty wog. I've got to put this creep back in his box.

'A journalist is sworn to tell the truth, Mr Hunt, to report things as they actually are. How shall I describe this in my little article about the new hospital wing opening? "Donor harasses innocent female journalist" sounds like an appropriate headline. This little article might turn out to be more interesting than I anticipated,' I say, holding the posh voice to the end.

Hunt releases his arm, takes a step backwards, pulls a comb out of his pocket and runs it lightly over his hair, more mannerism than combing. He gives me a horsey smile.

'The only kind of scandal we like up here in FNQ is knowing whose missus is shagging whose husband,' he chortles, sucking in air through his prominent teeth and letting it out as a choking gurgle. 'Ah, here comes Bernadette, my lovely wife and millstone.'

A blonde woman with her hair in two short plaits, wearing a simple but classy black dress, is winding her way towards us through the turned backs of the crowd. When she arrives, Hunt introduces us, shoves his hands in his pockets, and walks off. I let out the breath I seem to have been holding for an eon, and try to breathe normally.

'I'm so pleased to meet you, Miss Williams,' Bernadette says quietly, a warm smile on her face, her cool hand holding mine. She's got blue eyes too, but they're bright and clear, unlike his. 'Please forgive Stanley. Things have been a bit

frayed with us the last few days.' She heaves a sigh. 'It must be wonderful to be a journalist.'

A couple of sentences, a smile and a gentle touch, and she's turned the situation 180 degrees, defending and apologising for Hunt, complimenting me. It's a skill.

'Please call me Lou. And I'm just a trainee journalist.' My voice has reverted to normal.

'And you should call me Bernie. I only get Bernadette when I'm in trouble!' She lets go of my hand, still smiling. 'So, Lou, trainee or not, I've heard that you've made a mark on the world already. Perhaps you'll be able to do something that will make a difference for poor old Hicks Inlet.'

'This hospital opening is my first reporting assignment up here.' I give her a smile. 'I don't think it will make any difference to anything.'

'Well, you have to start somewhere. You never know where it will lead.' Her voice is still warm and quiet but she's keeping an eye on Hunt as if she's uneasy. I can see Mrs Pike at the far end of the room watching Hunt too. She's alone, hatless but with a big yellow bow on the front of her red beehive, drinking a cup of tea with her little finger poking up in the air. Deep purple nail polish today. She gives me a wink. When Hunt gets to the door, he beckons to Bernie with a curt jerk of his head.

'I'm being summoned,' Bernie says. 'I am so glad to have met you, Lou. Perhaps you could come up to our place and interview Stanley for the *FNQ Mail*. He could tell you all about his good works for women.'

With that strange comment, Bernie walks off to join Hunt, right past Mrs Pike who is making a beeline in my direction in bold primary colours.

'Coming out for a ciggie, dear?' Mrs Pike says when she arrives by my side.

Mrs Pike doesn't give me a choice. She takes my arm with

her pudgy fingers and leads me outside. Avoiding the crowd of smoking men, Mrs Pike directs me across the road to a little orange Mini. She squeezes into the driver's seat, kicks off her ludicrously high-heeled blue shoes, and fossicks in her big yellow handbag. After much swearing under her breath, she withdraws a gold Glomesh cigarette case, snaps it open and puts a cigarette between her teeth. Delving into the bag again she finds a box of matches, lights her cigarette, opens her window and throws the match out, blowing smoke in a funnel after it. After a couple of puffs she wrenches her body around in the seat, squeezing under the steering wheel, and squints at me with those strange green eyes.

'Well, well, Miss Williams. What on earth did you do to Stanley Hunt? He seemed unusually ferocious. Hunt usually tries to be suave.'

'He scared the shit out of me at first, the bastard.'

'I know. I watched. I thought he might breathe fire on you for a moment there.'

'I didn't see you charging in to rescue me. Everyone ignored it.'

'You didn't seem in need of help. You stuck your jaw out and pulled your shoulders back, and I would have sworn you had your fists balled up. You met ferocity with ferocity. It was very impressive, Miss Williams.'

Flattery takes the edge off, as usual. It's reassuring to think I looked tough, even if I didn't feel it.

'Hunt took me by surprise. I met him once before, in the pub. He seemed ok then, decent even.'

'Decent, really? Decent and Stanley Hunt are words that don't belong in the same sentence. Unless it was "Stanley Hunt got a decent kick in the private parts", or something like that.' Mrs Pike blows smoke over her shoulder towards the window. 'What did he want?'

'I don't know. He called me a shit-stirrer, a muckraker.'

'Whatever for?'

'He went after me about an article I wrote a couple of years back. It's the only proper article I've ever had printed. But how did Hunt know about it?'

'I believe Stanley Hunt is friends with your police reporter.'

'Ed! Of course! Earl must have told Ed about it. He might have been trying to boost Ed's opinion of me. And Ed told Hunt. That makes sense. I know they talked about me.'

I remember Ed slurring 'this is the chick I was telling yer about' when he introduced me to Hunt in the pub.

'Stanley Hunt pays attention. I will give him that,' Mrs Pike says, blowing another puff of smoke awkwardly over her shoulder.

'But why would he pay attention to me? I'm not anyone. I've only been here a week or so.'

'He'll have his reasons. Stanley Hunt has many interests in this town and he likes to keep good stock of them.'

Mrs Pike straightens up and delves into her bag. She slips on a pair of diamante sunglasses and lights another cigarette, then blows smoke out the window in the direction of the men gathered outside the hospital. I'm wishing I paid as much attention as Hunt. What do I know about him? I know he's got a waterfront house and a motor launch. And I remember Perseus saying he was a part-owner in the new rainforest development. What other interests does he have?

'So Stanley Hunt gave you a warning to stay clear?' Mrs Pike asks, still looking out the window.

'Is that what it was? What am I supposed to stay clear of? He's involved in the rainforest development, isn't he? Has he got something to hide?'

'I believe he has many things to hide, Miss Williams, but I can't be going around telling stories. I live here. My dear old mother lives here. People like us, we can watch and we can listen, but we know better than to put our heads over the

parapet. You, on the other hand ... Ah, here they come. Stanley Hunt, Mayor McCready, and the grey eminence known as Inspector Fawcett. They're thick as thieves, those three. McCready doesn't look like a man in mourning, does he?' Mrs Pike says, grinding the butt out in the little ashtray and winding up the window.

'He sure didn't look like someone whose niece had just died. Seemed pretty jovial up there on his box.'

'Jovial describes it. Mind you, beneath that hail-fellow-well-met exterior,' she says, winding up the window, 'hides a heartless, cheating, lying scoundrel. McCready's wife is a dear old friend of mine. I've got no idea why she puts up with him. She was out with her sister on the property in Dindin when poor Aileen died.' She turns to me, pushing her sunglasses down her nose, so she can subject me to that green-eyed stare. 'The police are suggesting the girl had been snorkelling, but she couldn't even swim. A girl like that is not going to suddenly take up snorkelling. There's a fishy smell about the whole tale!'

'I was there, Mrs Pike, when the police brought her in. Aileen was wearing a dress and sandals. There was a blue rope around her waist. A tourist on the glass bottom boat that found her said the police had to cut her free.'

As soon as it's out of my mouth I wonder if I shouldn't have told her. Earl told me to be careful what I bandy around. I wonder if Mrs Pike knows Earl. I don't want to get in trouble, but it's the first chance I've had to talk with anyone who knows Aileen, and who thinks her death might be suspicious.

'Oh, my poor dear. You are just a babe. You shouldn't have to see things like that. Are you alright? It must have been very disturbing. How do you cope?' She's still peering at me over the sunglasses.

'I don't know. It really messed me with at first, but then ...

I don't know. I switched off, I guess. Found a way to distance myself.'

'You certainly seem tough. You might just be the right person for the job,' she says, pushing her sunglasses back up her nose, and turning to look out the window again. 'Ah, there's Mrs Hunt. How did you take to her? Such lovely blue eyes. She's the only natural blonde here. And she's not showy. He wears the jewellery in that family.'

Boy, Mrs Pike sure changed the subject fast. She's pointing, with her hand held low, in the general direction of a red Mustang. Bernie is in the passenger seat, looking downwards. Hunt, standing at the driver's door, is calling out farewells, giving people his horsey smile.

'Bernie seemed nice but nervous,' I reply, going with Mrs Pike's change of subject. 'She invited me to their house to interview Stanley.'

'She invited you to their house? To interview Stanley Hunt? Now, that would be interesting.'

Mrs Pike, staring at Hunt's car, is about to say something more when Hunt starts the Mustang, revving the motor loudly. He drives straight at us, veering away at the last minute.

'Bastard! Such a frigging bastard!' Mrs Pike says explosively. She lets out a few quick breaths and pats the bow on her beehive. 'Oh, I am sorry, Miss Williams! Please excuse my French. That man brings out the worst in me.'

Mrs Pike starts the car, does a sharp u-turn, and follows the Mustang down the street. It turns right and we go left, away from the town and towards the northern coast.

'You get to the bottom of Stanley Hunt's story and you'll be doing this town a favour, Miss Williams. Let me show you their house.'

Mrs Pike drives through bare flat land blighted by huge signs for new housing developments, showing swimming

pools with children frolicking in sprinklers and mothers peering through kitchen windows. She does a running commentary on the houses along the road, when they were built and the types of people who live in them: these houses are mostly retired people from down south, she says, rich, but not rich enough to buy waterfront; here it's mostly farmers who got out, you can tell they didn't have much money, can't you, they've got small houses, small cars, but they look after their gardens nicely; and on she prattles as we drive up the hot, empty road. When the houses grow larger she slows to a crawl.

'And here we are. That big house on the right, with the wide stairs, is Stanley Hunt's fortress. It's worth a pretty penny. Waterfront, motor boat, private jetty, so I've heard. They'll be at the club having lunch. Everyone will be there. Big do for the races in Melbourne. That's what the hats were all about. Want to go take a peek? They won't be back for ages yet.'

'I wouldn't mind throwing a brick through one of his windows.' Pay him back for trying to intimidate me. A bit of like for like.

'Understandable, Miss Williams,' Mrs Pike says, 'but never a good idea. Having a bit of a look inside though, that could be interesting.'

'What would we be looking for, Mrs Pike?' She's got to be having me on. Breaking and entering is worse than chucking a brick through a window.

'You'd just be doing a little reconnaissance, that's all,' she says, pushing her sunglasses down her nose and staring at me. 'You are training to be a fearless journalist, are you not?'

'Mrs Pike! I can't just go snooping in people's houses.'

'Damn!' Mrs Pike slams her hand against the steering wheel. 'A journalist with ethics. They're rare as hen's teeth and we have to get one! Well, when you go to interview

Stanley Hunt,' she spits out his name as if it was poison, 'make sure you tell me all about the house. I've been dying to know what goes on in there.'

Mrs Pike does a fast u-turn, squealing the tyres, straightening up her sunglasses as we go. My head's already reeling. First Stanley Hunt tries to pick a fight with me, then prim and proper Mrs Pike wants me to have a perve in his house. What's going on? There's bad blood between her and Hunt, something bubbling beneath the surface. Who'd have thought a little hospital opening would turn up so much local drama? It reminds me of the stories my nonna used to tell about the feuds in her village back in Italy.

'Time to get back to work,' Mrs Pike announces curtly. 'Mr Dorade won't know what to do in Planning if I'm not there. I'll drop you at your office.'

10

Charlene is at the front desk reading *Cosmopolitan* and slurping Fanta through a straw. I get a grunt in reply to my cheery hello. The only action in the main office is the flies hovering in the middle of the room. Earl's at his desk, reading *The Tax Inspector*. He waves me in. I sit and wait while he finishes the page, dog-ears the corner and closes the cover with a thump.

'Advance copy. You can read it when I'm done.' He eyes me up and down. 'You want to save whales now? Right little do-gooder aren't you?'

'Very funny. Spaghetti sauce stain. This badge is the only thing I've got that'll cover it.'

'Ever heard of dry cleaning? Where have you been all morning?'

'At the opening of the so-called new wing of the hospital, as instructed.'

'Of course. How could I forget such a momentous occasion?' Earl beams, enjoying his great skill with irony. 'Got a story for me? No more than five short paragraphs, you know — who, what, when, where. Three paragraphs will do

it. We're not going to delve into the why in this little piece. Anything interesting to report?

'Stanley Hunt's a thug. He slammed me up against a wall.'

'He what?' Earl would have leapt out of his chair if he could. Instead his body stretches up and out, explosive with rage. Unexpected! I'd better tone it down. Don't want him to have a heart attack.

'Not slammed exactly,' I add quickly. 'He sneaked up on me. Grabbed my bum. Backed me up against the wall. Tried to scare me. It was all I could do to stop myself from slugging him.'

'Oh, Lou. I'm so very sorry. Are you alright?' he says anxiously, in a tone more befitting an elderly aunt than a tough journalist. He must hate being in that wheelchair. All he's got to fight with are words.

'Of course I'm alright, Earl. It couldn't have been more than a minute. He backed off when I threated him with a "donor harrasses innocent female journalist" headline.'

'Very good!' Earl chuckles. 'Quick on your feet. Couldn't have done better myself.' He grants me a smile of approval before slumping back into the chair. 'Hunt's usual style is debonair, especially with women. What brought that on?'

'My thoughts precisely.' This is cool, this collegial in-tune-with-one-another chat with Earl. Beats the pants off the belittling I'm used to in the journalism game. 'Hunt went after me about my Collooney story. Muckraking, he called it. I was surprised he even knew who I was, let alone what I've written.'

'He's well informed. Has friends in high places does Mr Hunt, people like our Ed,' Earl says, grinning, as usual, at his own joke.

'What's his story?'

'Good question, Lou. Very good question. Who is Mr Stanley Hunt?' Earl's wheelchair squeaks as he rocks back

and forth. 'I heard he started out as a butcher's apprentice. Served with the boys in blue for a bit. Fell in with some Melbourne gangster types and went over to the dark side, did some bookmaking, sold stolen TVs, that kind of thing. Could be that there's muck to be raked.'

'He's a gangster? Really? A gangster philanthropist?' One of the types Robbo loves to hate: philanthropists who ostentatiously shower money about to obscure its rotten origins.

'Well, gangster is a bit strong. Associate of. Used to be. Perhaps. Don't quote me on it. Up here you can start over. No one cares. Lots of people up here made their money in ways they don't like to brag about. They buy nice houses and boats, throw some cash about philanthropically, and if they've got some left over they might go in for a bit of property speculation, like building tourist resorts up in the rainforest. Hunt's involved in that. It gets sensitive sometimes, what with the greenies protesting and everything. The Council's paying for the road and the bridge, of course, to enable the tourists to get to said resorts without braving the crocs. Grease the right palms and you can get on pretty well in Hicks Inlet.'

Perseus's story about Hunt, McCready and Fawcett sitting in a car on the new rainforest road comes to mind. Mrs Pike connected them too. They're thick as thieves, she said. I wonder if there's a story there, some shenanigans to do with the tourist development. If I could get something like that to report on it would be better than this irrelevant hospital wing story.

'Hunt was pretty chummy with the mayor and Inspector Fawcett today,' I say suggestively to Earl. 'Has Fawcett got anything to do with the new tourist resorts?'

'It's not clear what Fawcett does, but his name doesn't come up in association with the new resort plans, or with

reports on the protests. He hasn't been up here all that long. The Senior Sergeant isn't fond of him, between you and me. Fawcett's speciality is bribery. He collects dirt on people and extracts money from them to keep it hidden. Believed to have been an agent in a murder or two down south, or so some say. He managed to get transferred up here before the Fitzgerald Inquiry really got going — the inquiry into police corruption. You may have heard of it.'

'Heard of it? Earl, I spent a lot of the last two years taking copy over the phone about it. Endless stories about cops getting bribes from brothel bosses and bookies so they'd warn them about cop raids. Zillions of details about who received what, when they got it, where the payoffs happened. Not so much on why it went on so long, or how they all got away with it.'

'It was fascinating, wasn't it? Like watching a soap opera. I suppose you know that the police involved called it The Joke. The corruption ran all the way from constables to government ministers. The millions of dollars they received in bribes was mind-boggling by any measure.'

'We called it the joke too. Some drunk journo would phone in a report and I'd turn it into sentences, make sure the names were spelt right, put the journo's name on the piece and send it on to editorial. Off the record, the journos would tell me stories they heard in the pubs about the cops who got away. Fawcett is one of them?'

'Well, perhaps. Like your journos' stories from the pubs, it's not something we'd put in the paper. Not verifiable. And not something you should go around saying.'

'You know, I heard that Fawcett, Hunt and the mayor were sequestered together in a car up on the new roadworks near the Cedar on Sunday. It's not like they'd be going fishing, not in the middle of the rainforest. What do you think they would have been talking about?' I watch Earl carefully as I speak. I

suspect the expression flashing across his face is genuine surprise. Hah! This is fun. Two new responses from Earl today. First he gets angry about Hunt's little stunt, now he's taken aback because it seems like I actually know something. Or is it three? He's treating me like one of the grown-ups.

'How do you know that?' Earl asks, leaning forward in his chair, as if I'm about to tell him a secret.

'I was looking for the skipper of the glass bottom boat that found Aileen.' As soon as that's out of my mouth I realise how ridiculous it sounds. False move, Lou. Just when you were getting a bit of respect.

'You were looking for a boat skipper in the rainforest?' Earl says incredulously, the slight mockery back, the collegiality gone.

'Some of the people I talked to when I was looking for Jock Sinclair told me about it. It just came up,' I say, hoping that Earl doesn't prod me further. I don't want to tell him the whole story.

'Ah, Sinclair. Apparently he came back in from that Saturday morning tour and took off on a holiday.'

'Well, that explains why he doesn't answer his door then,' I blurt angrily. 'I thought I was supposed to be looking into it. You could have told me.' I'm whining like a teenager grounded on Saturday night. That semblance of two journos chewing the cud has evaporated like mountain mist in the midday sun. The look on Earl's face would slay dragons. He breathes out slowly and crosses his arms across his chest.

'Ms Williams,' Earl says sternly, 'as you are here for training it is incumbent upon me to inform you that the tone you have just taken with me is not an appropriate tone for a young journalist to take with their experienced and very senior editor. I have worked with some who would show you the door if you spoke to them in that way.'

'Sorry sir,' I bleat. He's still glaring at me. I shouldn't have

said sir; he probably thinks I'm being sarcastic. 'I'm really sorry, Earl.'

Earl breathes in and out slowly a few more times, glaring all the while, then uncrosses his arms and leans on the desk. I'm hoping the worst is over.

'Now that we've got that out of the way,' he says, more kindly, 'yes, I said you could talk to Sinclair. Yes, I could have told you that I confirmed one hundred per cent and for certain that Sinclair was the skipper we need to talk to, and also that he's gone on holiday. But the main thing I told you, repeatedly, was that it is Police Desk. It is Ed's story. The McCreadys are a prominent local family and it is delicate. And your assignment is the new hospital wing. Which involves Stanley Hunt. If you are really serious about journalism you should work on your assignment. Do some more homework on that.'

'I got all the facts and figures yesterday from Mrs Pike,' I say quickly, trying to erase that lecture, to impress him with my efficiency, to inch my way back up into his good graces. 'She was there this morning, with her red hair in a beehive and her daffodil yellow dress. She was concerned about how Hunt treated me,' I add, taking a chance on becoming an object of pity rather than contempt.

'Ah, the inestimable Mrs Pike,' Earl says with a smile, his anger gone. 'She is a lovely person and a true friend to my good wife.'

'Ah, so you told her about me.' I hope Mrs Pike doesn't tell Earl I talked to her about Aileen. 'She's kind of taken me under her wing, in a weird, conspiratorial sort of way.'

'Mrs Pike finds life in Hicks Inlet more interesting when seen through a conspiratorial lens, but then she probably knows more about what goes on here than anyone else. Try her on some minor detail and she'll give you chapter and verse. And, yes, my good wife probably asked her to look

after you. I guess you could call that a conspiracy.'

'Only if you are involved as well. Takes three to conspire.' Robbo taught me that. It makes me wonder what Hunt, Fawcett and the mayor were talking about in the rainforest again. I feel sure there's a story there.

'Is that so? You know the strangest things, Lou. I might have asked Mrs Pike to keep an eye out. She was kind to you when you visited the Planning Office, I take it?'

'Very kind. She taught me what to write down and what not to.'

'There's the proof. Conspiracy's her thing. On the topic of writing things down, did you talk to anyone else this morning?' Earl takes his glasses off to clean them. He's lost interest.

'I talked with Hunt's wife, Bernie. She told me she thought it was wonderful that I was a journalist.' And now's my chance to get back to the grown-ups' table. 'Bernie asked me to visit their house and interview Stanley about his good works for women.'

'Bernie said that? Hunt's good works for women?' Earl has put his glasses back on, uncleaned. I've surprised him again. I'm back in the good books.

'Peculiar turn of phrase, isn't it?'

'Very peculiar. A visit to their house to interview Hunt seems like an excellent opportunity for you to practise journalism skills.'

'Even Mrs Pike wanted me to visit their house,' I say, realising that I've just dug myself deeper into the non-story of the Hunts and the hospital wing. 'Sometimes it's like being in a B-grade movie up here, Earl. Mrs Pike drove me up to northern beaches to show me where the Hunts' house is. She wanted me to sneak inside and do a little reconnaissance, as she put it.'

'She did?' Earl says with a laugh. 'You didn't, I take it?'

'Of course not, Earl. Is there something going on between Mrs Pike and Hunt? They seem to have it in for each other.'

'Do you think so? Mrs Pike takes an interest in other people, that is true,' Earl says, still smiling. He likes this kind of talk. 'Unfortunately she is not immune to the internecine troubles endemic in small towns. However, she is unusual amongst the inhabitants of Hicks Inlet in that she hasn't fallen sway to Mr Hunt's charms. She thinks he's up to no good. I imagine she told you that.'

'Mrs Pike doesn't really say anything. She just intimates.'

'Good word. Captures what Mrs Pike does exactly, in all its senses. This bloke is good with words too,' Earl says, poking at the cover of *The Tax Inspector*, 'but then, he used to be in advertising, so he should be. This new book's a bit dark. *Oscar and Lucinda* was a romp in comparison. Still I must get back to it. I've got a review to write.'

I stand, waiting for dismissal. I'm not going to get anything about more about Mrs Pike and Hunt from Earl today. I can play the waiting game.

'You've done well today, Lou. Good girl.' There it is. 'I'll ask Charlene to set up the interview with Hunt. You should take some time out of the office today to think about your five short paragraphs. Or three. You don't want to go rushing into a great bit of reporting when a little time for reflection is available. You can write it up in the morning.'

'Thanks, Earl,' I say, although straight away it feels as if he's passed me a poisoned chalice. What am I going to do with an afternoon off in Hicks Inlet?

'And Ed will cover Saturday. It will be your last weekend. You should have some time for a look at the beauty of the far north east. I don't want your boss accusing me of slave driving,' he says, opening his book. I am dismissed.

~

Charlene's sleeping, snoring, with her head in her arms on

the desk. I close the door quietly behind me, resisting the temptation to slam it and wake her up. I wonder if Earl gave me the afternoon off as a form of punishment. At least work makes the time pass. I've got nothing else to do in Hicks Inlet, unless Chris is around and wants to go sailing, but when I get down to the marina Chris's yacht is all closed up. The yacht master must have a day job.

Lunch, then. My research into the take-away options in town suggests that the Trocadero Café is the least worst. The lunchtime crowd is gone by the time I arrive, leaving tables littered with dirty plates and glasses. The woman who takes my order for a salad sandwich and a chocolate milkshake gives me a sour look as if she's never seen me before. I've been here often enough to know her sandwich-making method, which she carries out with all the enthusiasm of a production line worker near the end of a Friday shift. Two square slices of thin white bread dumped on greaseproof paper. Margarine slathered across both slices in a single motion. Sniff, back of her hand wipes her nose. A sprinkle of yellowing lettuce shreds, a slice or two of cucumber, tomato and tinned beetroot, a shower of salt. Top slice flipped on. For variation in the routine she brushes a fly off the bench with the bread knife before dissecting the sandwich and wrapping it up.

There's no room to sit on the post office steps. There's been a tourist influx. It'll be quiet for days on end then busloads of them will turn up all at once, as if they travel in convoy. Hicks Square is crowded with tourists hogging all the benches, sprawling on the lawn, fanning themselves with brochures. A tour group brushes by me, heading to Hicks Square, crossing the street in pairs like primary school kids on excursion, the keen and needy sprightly at the front trying to get the tour guide's attention, the dulled and dreamy straggling at the rear. They're happy to be on holidays. Bloody Earl and his

bloody afternoon off. I can write those five, or three, paragraphs in no time. There's nothing to think about. What am I supposed to do? Where can I go? I can't go back to the office. Or to Mrs Swain's. One of the Rules for Boarders stipulates that we're not allowed to be there during work hours. I don't want to go back to the waterfront. I've been hanging around there so much people probably think I'm a working girl. I wrack my brains, and remember the park I passed this morning on the way to the hospital. It might have a spot where I can sit and enjoy my delicious lunch, and figure out what I'm going to do with the rest of the day.

Part Two

11

When I get to the park the seats are all taken by blokes drinking from cans of beer or flagons of wine half hidden in brown paper bags. An old fella lifts his flagon in greeting and moves along his seat to give me room. I give him half of my sandwich, which has turned lurid pink and soggy. He eats it as if he is doing me a favour, then washes it down with wine. I refuse his kind offer of a gulp from his bottle, and we sit in silence, watching the elderly women gathered under the one shady tree, watching the barefoot kids playing. No tourists here. Nor lurching office workers. Just Aboriginals. A few blocks from Hicks Square and I'm in a different world.

I probably would have kept clear of this park too, before I did that crazy solo trip to investigate so-called black riots in Collooney, hours and hours away from Sydney in the outback. I was so young then. I had no idea what I was walking into. I stumbled unwittingly into a part of Australia that was more like apartheid than it was like the cool bars and beer gardens of inner Sydney that I was used to. In little Collooney, the Aboriginals mostly lived on the edge of town, in tiny, dilapidated houses in old mission settlements. They

couldn't get work. They weren't allowed in the bars. Cops harassed them day and night. The courts served out fines, jail time, even banishment from town. Not that I'd have seen or understood half of that if I hadn't run into Robbo, local boy made good, smart enough to get into law school, determined enough to see it through. Meeting Robbo was the turning point. He took me to the mission to meet his aunts, who gave me the information that made my story so powerful. He took me to the river where his ancestors were massacred, and gave me a crash course in the Aboriginal history of Australia, which is a whole lot different from what I learnt in school. It changed my life, that trip. It gave me my first article, my only byline. And that article got me taken on as a trainee journalist, which I'd never have got by the normal route. Although the university-educated posh boys who got traineeships via the normal route get to write articles and I haven't got past taking copy over the wire. But I have got Robbo, when he's not working. I've still got sweet, smart, spunky Robbo.

There's a grunt from the old fella. He's moving on. He ratchets himself up from our seat and wanders away. The sun's blanket-warm. It's making me dozy. I stretch out on the seat and watch the white tops of the clouds slowly cauliflower into mist in the shimmering blue sky. When the women start calling out to the kids that it's time to go I turn on my side, arm crooked below my head, and watch as the women collect up the kids and their bags of stuff and saunter away. It must be time for me to make a move too. But way across the park, where the thick border of scrubby bushes meets the tall fences of houses, I catch a flash of something pale. It's probably a cat after a bird, but after that first flash all I can see is a pale smudge. I watch and wait. I've got all day. I can out-sit a cat. I scan the bushes, in case it moved without me noticing, but there's nothing except that pale smudge. I

wait and watch. And then it turns out that I can't out-sit the cat. I have to know what's there.

Squatting to peer below the bushes, calling 'puss, puss', I see instead a person, wrapped in a dirty blanket, hidden deep under the bushes. Flies buzz around the pile. A shiver shoots down my back. My first thought is that it's a dead body, but I tell myself that's because of seeing the woman brought in from the sea. It's really messed with my head. I've got to get a grip. It'll just be someone sleeping rough. I should walk away, leave them in peace, but my feet won't take me. Instead I sit on the grass and wait and watch for I know not what. When there's another movement, it comes with a whimper and a moan. Something's wrong. I wiggle through a hole beneath the bushes, scratching my arms and legs. Warily I inch forward on my knees and gently pull the dirty blanket away from the person's head. A young woman looks at me with wild eyes.

The woman reaches up from under the cloth and weakly takes my hand in hers. It's sticky, shaking. 'Kelly,' the woman whispers, 'Nid Kelly, lawless'. Her eyes close and her hand drops limply to the ground. I try to rouse her but can't. She's barely breathing. She tried to tell me something but I didn't understand it properly. All I can think of is Ned Kelly, the famous bushranger from the old days. I kneel there, frozen, terrified. I don't know what to do. Nearby a car door slams and a starter motor turns over. Thank god! Someone to help. I scramble back through the bushes, run to the street and bang on the car's bonnet as it starts to move. It's the woman with the fly swat from the hospital opening, the captain of the Ladies Auxiliary. She stops the car. She's going to help. She slowly winds down the window.

'Someone needs help!' I'm so breathless I can hardly talk. 'In the park. She's sick.'

'Those people in that park don't need my help,' the woman

replies, staring at my dirty hands and the bloody scratches on my arm. 'They have to learn to help themselves.'

'No, listen! It's a woman, she's really sick. She needs to go to hospital.'

'Sorry, I'm busy,' she says, winding up her window, revving the motor and barely waiting for me to step away before she drives off.

Bloody hell. What now? The hospital is close. I'm so wound up now the run there seems short. When I burst into the Emergency rooms a nurse grabs me by the shoulders.

'Hey! Slow down! This is a hospital. What's going on?'

My mouth opens but I can't speak. The nurse pours me a glass of water and hands it to me.

'Where's that blood come from?' she asks, looking at my arms that are grubby with dirt and dried blood.

The water hurts my throat as I swallow. I think I'm going to throw up. I take a deep breath for what seems like the first time since I found the woman.

'Someone's really sick, in the park. It's her blood.'

'Hicks Square?'

'No, the one near here.'

'The blackfellas park? Aboriginal woman?'

'White woman. Really sick. Wild eyes. Sweaty. Limp. It's her blood.'

'Young? The nurse is holding me tight by the shoulders again, her eyes locked on mine as if to make me concentrate.

'Your age? Younger? Older?'

'My age. Older. I don't know. She needs an ambulance!'

'The ambulance is out already. Car accident.'

'She might die. You have to do something. Now!'

'Sit. Drink the water. Wait.'

The nurse pushes me onto a chair and disappears. Aagh, this is hell. I left a woman dying in the park. I took too long before I did anything and now the woman is going to die.

'Let's go,' the nurse is calling me. She's heading out the back of the building, with an old fashioned doctor's bag in her hand. When I catch up she's already starting a car. She pushes open the passenger door and starts moving before I've even shut the door. We speed along the street. At the park I leap out of the car and run. As I scramble through the bushes I can hear the nurse swearing behind me. The woman under the blanket doesn't move when I touch her. Her eyes are vacant. The sweat on her forehead has dried into specks of dust. I was only gone a few minutes. I ran. I'm too late. The nurse comes up beside me and I make way, kneeling beside her, shaking, feeling useless. The nurse searches for a pulse on the woman's neck, and closes the woman's eyes the way they do in movies.

When the nurse peels the blanket back off the woman a rotten smell rises. The woman's hands are between her legs, gripping her groin. That's where the blood came from. Her ankles are swollen and blotchy with raw red welts. Oh hell! I waited and watched the bushes for so long before I did anything. She was dying while I was wondering whether or not to take a closer look. A great ropey sob bursts out of me.

'Shh, now,' the nurse says calmly. She's patting the woman's face. 'She might have been raped. This looks like bruising. She might have been beaten up too.'

Raped and beaten and left to die? Jesus! And I was going to leave her alone too. I bite down tears.

'Who is she?' the nurse asks, businesslike.

'I don't know.' Does she think I'd let someone I know lie there like that?

'Was there a bag, a purse? Any ID?' she says, feeling in the dead woman's pockets.

The best I can come up with is a shrug. The nurse swears quietly, puts the blanket back over the woman, then she puts her arms around me, patting me on the back, as if she's

comforting a child who's lost a favourite toy. When I calm down, she lets me go.

'What is your name?'

'Lou.'

'Look, Lou, I have to go back to the hospital. I can't do anything here, and there's no one else on duty. OK?'

I manage a nod. I am very freaked out. Nothing is OK.

'Come on! You're a grown up. Pull yourself together.'

I nod. The heat's shimmering above the park in waves I could reach out and touch. The woman is dead. I'm not really grown up. I'm just pretending.

'When I get back to the hospital ... Lou, are you listening?'

The nurse lifts my chin and looks me in the eye. 'When I get back I'll phone George. He's from the morgue. He'll take it from here. OK?'

'OK.'

'You sit tight until George comes. OK? He might be a while, but when he gets here he'll take over. OK? After George gets here you go home, wash up, have a cup of tea. OK, Lou?'

'Don't leave me here! Wait with me,' I whimper, grabbing the nurse with both hands.

'If I stay here I can't phone George, can I?'

I nod. I shake my head no. I can't stay here with a dead person.

'You'll be just fine,' the nurse announces, detaching herself from my grip. 'You're very brave, Lou. Keep hold of that, OK?'

'OK.' I am anything but brave.

'Wait for George. OK? Touch her. Talk to her.'

'Talk to her about what? I don't even know who she is. And she's ...'

'Tell her about your day, Lou. Tell her anything. You'll feel better. OK?'

The nurse turns and crawls out along our little path, pushing the doctor's bag in front of her, swearing as she goes. Slowly, reluctantly, I put my hand on the dead woman's shoulder. I don't want to look at her face. I don't want to see those eyes closed forever. What am I going to say? I can't talk about work, because that'd mean talking about the dead woman brought in from the sea. It would feel like telling her that it could have been worse. I don't want to talk about anything that makes life sound like it's worth living either. Just talk, the nurse said. So I tell the woman about how lonely I am in Hicks Inlet and about Mrs Swain's horrible boarding house, and how I miss my friend Noel and our little house back in Sydney, even though it's a damp dump with peeling walls. I tell her about my boyfriend Robbo but not that's he's great, only what a pain it is that he's never around because he's a lawyer and always busy saving someone from some disaster.

As I talk the woman becomes more real to me. I pull the blanket back a little. I brush ants from her face. Her skin looks papery. She's fair. Her skin's translucent on her forehead where her fringe protected it from the sun. She's got a neat shoulder-length bob. Her eyebrows are plucked carefully, framing the eyeshadow and mascara smudged around her eyes. There's a small brown mole above her lip. Silver earrings with green stones. A tiny gold cross on a chain around her neck, like all the Catholic girls at my school used to wear. I flick ants off her shirt, and tell her how pretty it is, with the tiny blue and orange flowers on the white background, then I cover her again to the neck, to tuck her in. I tell her about the stupid Save the Whale pin with its rust holes in my best dress, and what happened the night I got the sauce stain beneath it, and about having nothing else to wear. It's so filthy now, I tell her, that I'll have to wash it and that means I'll have to iron it, and I hate ironing. I talk about the

hospital opening and the matrons in racecourse hats, and the Ladies Auxiliary woman in the car who wouldn't help. I tell her about Stanley Hunt and how aggro he was at the hospital opening, but I don't tell her what he was angry about because I don't want to talk about anything that might make it seem as though there are worse ways to die. So I tell her about Bernie, and how kind she was, and how she invited me to go to their house and interview Stanley Hunt about his good works for women, whatever that means. And about Mrs Pike wanting me to break into the Hunts' house to check it out. Mrs Pike with her beehive and the daffodil yellow dress that clings so tight around her waist that her hips appear all of a sudden below it, jutting out and swaying in a peculiarly erotic way when she walks. Which makes me laugh for the first time since I crawled under the bushes.

The woman looks peaceful now, in repose, as they say, so I tell her about sailing, about going into the wind, and hauling on the genoa ropes with Perseus as if we were a pair of sailors who'd been working together for years. About Chris and how sweet he is and that he's hunky but way too young for me and anyway I've got Robbo. And now that I feel as if she knows me I ask her what she meant when she said 'Nid Kelly, lawless'. Did someone called Ned Kelly rape you and beat you up? Was he really called Ned Kelly, I ask her, or was that his nickname because he's some sort of lawless type? Who'd name their kid after a bushranger, I ask, even one that gets played by Mick Jagger in the movie? I squeeze the woman's shoulder gently, asking her what she meant, and what I should do about it, but of course she doesn't say a word.

A bull ant is crawling up the woman's neck towards her earring, twitching its russet jaws, its bulbous eyes gigantic on its horny black head, one leg delicately tapping the curve of the green stone. I find a twig and flick the bull ant away, and slip the earrings from her cool pale lobes and slide them into

my pocket, and tell her I'll look after them, as if we're going to meet again. Then I hear someone calling my name, and a rustle in the bushes behind me, and there's a tap on my shoulder. A man in a dark blue uniform introduces himself as George in a soft American accent. Gently he tells me that I've done well and that now I have to go home and wash up and have a cup of tea. I don't want to leave the woman, but George insists and points me in the direction of the little path we've made through the bushes, and gives me a prod to make me go. At the edge of the park I wait until I see George and another man pull the dead woman from the bushes on a stretcher, and the tears come. I turn away and a small crowd of onlookers on the street parts to let me through, not one of them saying a word. I walk back to Mrs Swain's in a trance, lock myself in the bathroom, pull off my filthy dress and stand under the hot shower for a long, long time.

12

This narrow bed in this dingy room at Mrs Swain's is no comfort. Every nerve in my body is twitching, if someone hooked me up to the electric grid I could power the whole town. Is this what happens when the tears run out, when the brain gives up? How do I stop it? Something to concentrate on, I need something to concentrate on. I try *Anna Karenina* but I just read the same line over and over. It doesn't even make any sense. I need to focus on something small, and slow, and simple. The sunlight shafting through the gap between the thin brown blind and the window frame is laying a beam across the quilt. It glistens on the gold lettering of the green Eureka Creek Rodeo Junior Cowgirl sash sown across the centre of the patchwork. That will do. What does a junior cowgirl do to get that sash? Ride a wild cow? Like a bucking bronco? Fight it like a matador, dressed in a spangled bolero? This is Australia. This is something for girls in Australia. Does she do something more domestic, like milking her cow faster and better than the next cowgirl? How do you milk a cow better? Is that a thing? I don't even know how you milk a cow. But it can't be that. Surely that's not a

spectator sport. If I'd gone to the rodeo I'd know what a junior cowgirl does. I didn't go to the rodeo because, because why? I can't remember. I wrack my addled brain. Why didn't I go to the rodeo? Oh! I didn't go because I was looking for the skipper of the boat that found the woman deep in the coral. First there was the woman who died in the sea. Then the woman who died in the park; the woman who died while I ran off to the hospital. Did the nurse say she was raped and beaten to death? Is that what happened to her? What sort of creep would do that? Did it happen in the park? Did she crawl under the bushes? And wait there under the grubby blanket until I crawled under too, and found her, and talked to her, too late, and went away, while she died, alone, under the bushes with her hands between her legs all bloody. And then when she was dead, gone, with only what they call her remains left, the nurse told me I had to talk to her. I had to talk to the dead woman lying under the bushes all scratched and bloody and bitten. I've never seen a dead person before, except in a church, all done up in a coffin, when you have to walk by and pay your respects. They're not really a person by then, just what's left of the person who was there before. The remains of a person, that is what they say. No, that's not even true. I saw the woman from the sea, just a few days ago, and now I've seen the woman in the park, but that was different. She was alive when I found her. She touched me, spoke to me, some nonsense about Ned Kelly being lawless. And then I went away and when I got back she was dead. Was that my fault? What should I have done? Those twitching tingling tremors in my body are making me feel sick. I can't take much more. Concentrate on the quilt. The shaft of light is lying along a pearly pink pillowcase for a crib, for a tiny pillow for a baby girl. I should have met the nice Italian man my family arranged for me to marry. He might have been alright. It might have been just fine. It would have been better

than this.

Mrs Swain's dinner bell rings in a tinny distant tinkle. The shaft of sunlight hits a white patch with tiny blue and orange flowers. The woman in the park was wearing a shirt like that. Her silver earrings with the green stones are on the bedside table. Why are they there? I took them off her ears, I remember that, while a bull ant crawled up her neck. But why did I take them off her? Such a weird, crazy thing to have done. Stop thinking about her. Stop looking at the quilt. Focus on the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. It doesn't remind me of anything. Concentrate on the light bulb. Until it disappears into the gloom, like everything else. Don't think, Lou, just don't think.

~

When hunger, or exhaustion, drives me to the dining room the only thing left on the table is a letter addressed to Miss Williams. A single page from Mrs Swain, in old-fashioned cursive handwriting. It reminds me of my grandmother's kitchen table notes about which parts of dinner were in the fridge and which elsewhere, with Nonna's pretty writing squeezed into ever tighter lines as she neared the bottom of a page. Mrs Swain is not so generous. She restricts herself to writing on every second line. She's parsimonious even in print.

Dear Miss Williams,

As you have been informed, the Rules of this House limit showers to three minutes.

Dinner is at 6 pm and you are expected to take it at that time. Unless 24 hours notice given. You were not present for Sunday dinner this is your second offence.

You stay in my House at my Discretion. As stated in the Rules. I have born with you and found you unsuitable as a Boarder.

I have no alternative but to insist that you find alternative accommodation as soon as possible.

*Yours sincerely,
Mrs Swain*

It makes me giggle. It's as if I've exhausted anguish and sorrow and have only inappropriate sentiments left. Laughter's jiggling out of me like steam out of a pressure cooker. I should have no other thought than hunting down Mrs Swain and going down on bended knee, pleading to be allowed to stay. Mrs Swain, I've had the worst of afternoons. A woman died in the park. In my arms. More or less. Take pity, Mrs Swain, I have nowhere else to go. But instead all I've got is crazy light-headed elation, glee at the prospect of escaping this gloomy place. I'm not even angry that the bitch is kicking me out. If she appeared right now I'd probably just pick a fight about whether or not 'bear with' becomes 'have born with' in the past tense, or whether dinner is taken or eaten, or about the construction of a sentence. But she doesn't appear, and her absence provides the opportunity never to have to talk to her again.

I cram my stuff into my backpack. One last look around the unloved room. Is this sane? I might not find anywhere else to stay. I might need that patchwork quilt. I roll it into a tight bedroll and and buckle my belt around it. Fuck you, Mrs Swain. I'm going and I'm taking your heirloom with me. There isn't a sound in the house as I pull the front door shut behind me.

~

The youth hostel has a 'Full House' sign. Its little reception room has a 'Closed' sign. In the hostel kitchen a couple of sunburnt young women in sarongs ask me what I'm trying to escape from and when I can't find a way to answer they tell me that they're escaping from Hobart. They confirm that there are no empty beds left in the hostel. On the front verandah a bloke with greasy long hair and flowery shorts apologetically tells me he doesn't know where else I might

go. Another bloke, sitting on the step, picking at scabs on his feet, calls me 'man' as if it's 1969, and says it's cool if I share his bed. He shrugs when I decline.

Along the main street the hotels have 'No Vacancy' signs. It's a long way to the motels on the northern beaches. For a while I sit on a bench in Hicks Square and contemplate unrolling the quilt and sleeping here, but the woman in the park was raped and beaten. And if I sleep here ... But where to go? Perseus's mum might take me in but she'd want to talk, she'd need an explanation, and the thought of that is too much. Chris's yacht? It had a little bed in the cabin. I could break in. He'd probably forgive me.

The waterfront is eerie in the dark. Glass bottom boats thud on the tide. Ropes clank against the masts of yachts, making cold marina music. At the end of the pontoon where Chris's yacht is moored there is light. My heart leaps. Suddenly I realise that the prospect of being alone has been terrifying me too, on top of everything else. And laid-back Chris is just the right kind of person to be with. When I get near his boat there is music. INXS's new album 'Kick'. That's what Noel plays to cheer me up, she sings along, dancing like Micheal Hutchence, bum out and gyrating. She drags me out of my chair and makes me dance too. It always works. Even here my shoulders are starting to shake, I can hear myself sing.

Sometimes you kick

Sometimes you get kicked

I slide the pack off my back and dump the bedroll, stick my bum out and wiggle it, turning round and round, arms in the air, letting the music work its magic.

Sometimes you kick.

I wiggle my bum at an imaginary Mrs Swain, at Ed and Charlene, at whoever did that to the woman in the park. I giggle and wiggle and sing out loud. Fuck them all. And

when I turn Chris is standing at the top of the saloon stairs, with a wide grin on his face. A hot blush runs up my cheeks. I drop my arms, straighten up, shrug my shoulders.

'*FNQ Mail's* first girl journalist dances on the docks!'

'Chris!'

'Everything ok?'

'Not really.'

'Come to stay?' He points at my backpack.

'No, oh no.' I don't know what I'm doing. 'I've just got my stuff with me.'

'Good idea,' Chris says with a generous, nonjudgmental smile. 'Surefire way to keep track of it.'

'I've been chucked out of the boarding house,' I reply quickly, in case he still thinks I'm a screw loose. 'The youth hostel is full. The hotels are full. I didn't know where else to go. I thought you might have some ideas, you know, being from here and everything.'

'Everything?' he asks, giving me a quizzical look. 'Had dinner?'

'No.' The less I say the better.

'Come, eat.'

Chris jumps lightly off the boat, swinging off the stanchion and picking up the pack in a single movement, throwing it into the cockpit as he goes back aboard. I throw the bedroll in and follow, much more awkwardly. Chris motions towards the saloon with a flourish and a small bow.

The little table in the saloon is covered with food that almost makes me cry again. It's just like at home. I squeeze onto the seat behind the table, taking the empty plate and little glass Chris passes me and shuffling along so that he can sit beside me. He picks up a half-empty flagon of red, pours some for me and tops up his own.

'Mum doesn't want me to go hungry,' he says, gesturing at the spread. 'The old man's wine's a bit rough, but the more

you drink the better it tastes.'

It's a feast worthy of my own mother. Thinly sliced mortadella on a slice of paper, plastic containers of sliced tomatoes and basil drizzled with oil, bright green olives, little balls of mozzarella, rapa sautéed with onions. White bread with a hard crust and big holes in it. Mrs Swain's this ain't.

'Italiano?' I ask Chris, appraising anew his black hair, his prominent nose. He's too tall. 'Northern?'

'Umbrian, mostly. Nonna's family is Sicilian. You?'

'Mum's family's from Reggio Calabria. Dad's Irish. Although he reckons the Irish and southern Italians are just the same, except the Italians have olive skin and better food.'

'So this suits you then?'

He's slicing the bread with a long knife.

'Didn't think I was going to get anything decent to eat until I got back home,' I say, trying not to cry.

'Really?' Chris laughs. 'Have you been living on fish and chips?'

'Perseus's mum did a mean roast chicken. But my landlady! She torments the food before she dumps it on the plate.' I'm sucking at the fruity olives like someone who's been starved. 'These are amazing. And rapa! I haven't had a proper fresh vegetable since I got here. Were you going to eat all this? I mean, I don't want to take your dinner.'

'Eat! Eat! You know Italian mothers. Don't want their boys wasting away.'

I stuff mortadella in my mouth and dip my bread in the oily tomatoes. I was starving. Chris keeps topping up my glass with the rough red. When we've eaten every skerrick, Chris takes out his tobacco pouch, licks and joins cigarette papers, lays out a thin line of tobacco and covers it with weed. He rolls the joint, licks the paper, and smoothes it into a neat cylinder. He puts it aside while he makes a little cardboard filter that he fits into one end, then he twists off the

other end. Finally, he puts the whole joint in his mouth to moisten it, the way my brother does. The familiar food gave me more comfort than I could have dreamt of, and now, watching Chris roll the joint is familiar and comforting too. He lights it, closing one eye as he takes a long drag, and passes it to me. A cautious puff is the best I can do. My head is in a fragile place. I don't want to stir it up. While we smoke he packs up the dinner containers and loads them into a basket on the chart table. Done, he flourishes one last container on the flat of his hand, as if it is a platter.

'And what do you think we have here?' he asks.

Canoli, please let it be canoli. I want that so much I won't even say it.

'Tell me.'

'Nonna's canoli.'

'Canoli is my favourite.' It's as if I've fallen into a fantasy.

'With coffee?'

'Espresso?' That's got to be too much to hope for. Espresso on a boat, not likely.

'What else?'

In the little kitchen, Chris takes a moka pot from behind a sliding door and fills it with water and coffee, screws it together, lights the burner and puts the pot on it. I'm a little drunk, a little stoned, as if I'm in a padded cocoon. Water's gently rocking the boat, cables are clanging in the distance. My afternoon with the dead woman in the park seems like a story told to me long ago, like something that happened to someone else. I recognise this disjunction. Back in Collooney I saw and heard things that couldn't be borne (perhaps Mrs Swain was right), but I didn't feel them, didn't even really acknowledge them until I got home and began to write them down. Before that they were like flickers on a screen, scraps that didn't fit together, that held no meaning, fragments of disparate realities, like the patches on the quilt. That

experience taught me that if I hold firmly to the moment and keep past and future at bay, the horrors of today will get organised by some deep-down part of my brain, sorted into something I can understand and cope with, something that will become a problem I can try to solve, to remedy, to bring to justice. I know it doesn't mean that I don't care, or don't feel, it just means I have to wait. The main thing is not to panic. I watch Chris sitting on the saloon step, scraping dirt from beneath his fingernails with a pocketknife, until the pot gurgles and the smell of coffee wafts through the saloon, and he springs up to switch off the gas.

Wine came in an ordinary little glass, but Chris serves the coffee in a gold-rimmed espresso cup with a cube of sugar and a tiny gold spoon on the saucer. It's topped with creamy foam. He silently holds out a bottle of grappa and I raise my cup so he can add some. I suck the filling from the canoli, dip the pastry in the coffee and catch it in my mouth before it disintegrates.

'You eat canoli the same way as my sister. It's gross,' Chris says with a laugh. 'For that alone she'll probably let you stay.'

'I can stay with your sister?' He knows somewhere I can go? He feeds me, gives me wine and weed, and now he's going to give me somewhere to stay? How did a day that went so very badly end up so well?

'Maybe. How long do you need?'

'Going back to Sydney the weekend after next.' A whole week and a half with the prospect of decent food and decent company. 'She'll really let me stay?'

'I'll have to ask. Trev's out west working in the mines. Josie's always saying she needs someone to talk to. Complaining that Marco talks too much and I don't talk enough.'

'Where does she live?' I don't care who Trev and Marco are. I need somewhere to stay. And Chris will be there.

'Josie? She lives here, in Hicks.'

'Can we go and ask her?'

'Too late to turn up now. Reckon you could manage in the cabin up front for tonight? I can sleep out here.'

'Really? That would be so, so good, but let me sleep out here.' I don't want to put a person out of their bed. I'm not that desperate.

'I get up in the night, watch the stars, piss in the water,' he says. 'Better if I'm out here. Got an early start anyway.'

'Thanks Chris. You're a bloody life saver. I don't know what I would have done without you.' I want to hug him but I don't. Instead I wash the moka pot and cups and put them away in the little safe holes above the sink. Chris rolls another joint, pulls on a black beanie and we go up to the cockpit. He sits opposite me, head back, watching the stars, smoking most of the joint himself which suits me fine. The more he smokes the quieter he gets. Eventually I summon up the nerve to break the silence.

'I found a woman dying in the park today... She died while I went to get help.'

Chris points at the sky, his finger following a shooting star. I wait for him to say something. I feel a little better for having told him, for having said it out loud, but with it an echo of that terrible shaking that overtook me back at Mrs Swain's passes through my body.

'First time I met you you were talking about a dead woman,' he says, still staring at the sky.

'You thought I was making it up.' He doesn't want to talk about what I just said. That's fine with me. I'm still not sure that I want to either. A mosquito is biting my ankle. I hit at it, and miss.

'Well, it did seem a bit unreal,' he says quietly, eyes on the sky.

'Everything up here seems a bit unreal, but the woman

who died in the sea is real, was real. She was called Aileen McCready. She was the niece of the honourable mayor.'

'I hadn't heard anything about it that morning, Lou.' Chris sits up and looks at me, bent forward, elbows on his knees. 'Now I know about it. And I know that Jock Sinclair was the skipper on the boat that found her. You wanted to know.'

'My boss told me. Apparently he's gone away somewhere.'

'I heard that after Sinclair found Aileen's body he flew down south. That was even weirder than you appearing out of nowhere saying you were a journalist investigating a dead woman I'd never heard of. Sinclair never leaves town. He's always broke. He drinks every cent he makes. Then out of the blue, he's got airplane tickets and a few weeks holiday.'

'Why would he take off?' Another mozzie. This time I get it. There's a splotch of blood and black bug on my ankle.

'The interesting question is where did the money come from? It's all a bit suss.'

'Suspicious is par for the course. Apparently there were complications with the police report, so it didn't get into the paper until Wednesday. Apparently Aileen was snorkelling when she drowned. But she was wearing a dress. I saw her when they brought her in. A flowery dress. Who goes snorkelling in a dress? And there was a rope tied around her waist when they brought her in. A blue rope like that one you used on the crab pots, but all frayed at the end. One of the tourists on the glass bottom boat told me the cops had to cut her free from the coral or something. But apparently the cop report doesn't mention a rope. So much seems suspicious. If Jock Sinclair was here he'd be able to tell me what he found, he'd be able to back me up. Even the boss doesn't believe me, and bloody Ed, the police reporter, aagh, he pretty much straight out says I'm making it up. Because I'm a girl, of course.'

'Yeah, well, Sinclair's gone. And now you've got another

dead woman. That must feel like hell,' Chris says leaning back, eyes on the sky again.

'It was horrific, Chris, terrifying.' My body shudders again, but this time it doesn't hurt so much. I want some of that detachment Chris has got, that cool, calm, wait while it connects thing. I'm going to stick with the easy bits, the so-called facts. 'The woman was lying under the bushes, pretty much unconscious, when I found her. She said something about someone called Ned Kelly. Do you know anyone called that?'

'The bushranger. Don't know anyone called Kelly in town.'

'It didn't make any sense to me. I didn't know what to do. In the end I ran to the hospital and the Emergency nurse came, but the woman was dead when we got back.' A sharp shiver shoots through me like an arrow. I've got to unload the whole story. Chris is still looking at the sky.

'There was blood, Chris. Between her legs, on her hands. The nurse reckoned she'd been beaten up and raped. I had to sit with her until the bloke from the morgue turned up. The nurse told me to talk to her, so I did. Sat there talking to a dead woman, trying not to say things that might upset her. It was fucking awful, every moment. All I could think of was that I let her die.' My voice is starting to break up.

Chris looks at me again, leans forward, his elbows on his knees, his hands on my knees.

'Are you ok?' he asks, so very gently. He listens, he cares. Those three little words work like a salve, make me feel better.

'No, not ok, not really. I think I'm trying not to think about it. Just like, you know, if you hurt yourself, cut yourself or something, you're not supposed to poke at the wound.'

Chris looks at me a while longer, silently, then stands up, holding out his hand to pull me up.

'Reckon you'll be able to sleep?' he says gently. 'It might

make more sense tomorrow.'

Chris sets up a bed in the bow with Mrs Swain's quilt, then he leaves me alone and goes back up to the cockpit. I curl up in the bed and let the gentle whoosh-whoosh of water against the hull sing me to sleep.

13

A low, repetitive thud, above me, below me, all around. Is it my heart? The startled, wild eyes of the woman in the park appear in the darkness before me, so real I'm sure I could reach out and touch them. Where am I?

I sit up, too fast, and whack my head. The woman with the wild eyes died, under the bushes, in the park.

It's a motor thudding. I hit my head on a ceiling. I'm in a bed in a little box. I'm on Chris's boat. Where could we be going in the dark?

I feel for my clothes and pull them on, and stumble out to the cockpit, banging into benches as I go. When I get up the steps there are a few lights on in the marina and on the roads in the distance, but everything else is in darkness. As my eyes adjust I make out Chris standing on the side of the boat, peeing over the edge.

'What's going on?' I wish I didn't sound so accusative.

'Oh, sorry!' Chris says quietly, in his beautiful, deep voice, doing up his zip. 'Didn't mean to wake you up. Promised Josie I'd get some crabs for tonight.'

'Crabs?'

'Crabs. To eat, you know,' Chris explains, holding his hands up in front of him and flapping them like a crustacean, as he walks towards me around the edge of the boat.

'We're going to a fish shop?' I feel less anxious but no less confused.

'No, city girl. We're going to see if some crabs have taken our bait.'

'Very funny. Are you telling me we're going sailing in the dark?' It looks dangerous out there. I can make out fishing boats at sea, brightly lit, with seagulls flying around them.

'Nah. We'll just run up the estuary on the motor. Won't take long. Can you do the bow spring?' Chris jumps down into the cockpit and starts loosening the rope.

'The bow spring?' Cogs slowly clunk in my brain and I remember that the front of a boat is called the bow, and that rope has many names. He wants me to untie the rope up front. 'No worries. Got it.' I'm ok. I'm safe. I've got a job and I know how to do it. I clamber up onto the side of the boat and, holding the railings and the top of the cabin, feel my way to the bow. 'Ready,' I call.

'OK, let's go,' Chris yells back, and the boat swings away from the dock into the estuary.

By the time I've got the ropes tidied away the sky is vivid magenta and there's a gold arc on the horizon. As we make our way along the estuary I watch the rising sun changing the colours of the land. A new day. I'm going to stay with Chris's sister. I'm going to be an investigative journalist. The woman in the park is my assignment. That's how I'm going to cope with it. With coolness and care, with my head not my heart. She died on my watch, but I will find out who killed her. And make them pay.

'Hey, dreamy, don't s'pose you could make us a cup of tea?' Chris asks.

I swing down into the saloon like an old hand, but my

prowess stops there. I can't figure out how to get water out of the tap. Chris anticipates me, yelling instructions about how to use the little hand pump and how to turn on the gas. He's already put out teabags and two cups stained brown with tannin.

'Takes ages,' Chris yells. 'We'll hear it whistle. Come up. Beautiful morning.'

I stand on the steps and lean on the top of the boat, out of the wind. Out at sea fishing boats are circling.

'Must be a school of something,' Chris explains, following my gaze. 'Wish I was out there, although the pros think fish assemble in schools for their benefit. Probably would have told me to put my sails up and piss off.' He's talkative this morning.

'You get crabs out of pots, right?'

'Yep. Not much sport in it. Bait in at night. Crabs out in the morning. All going well.'

Chris stops the boat at a buoy, gives me the tiller, shows me how to use the throttle to keep the boat still, then goes up to the bow with a long hook. He pulls up a crab pot and lands it on the boat, reaches in and pulls out crabs that he throws either in a bucket or back in the water. He points to a second buoy and I give the engine enough throttle to edge us over to it. He hauls in another pot, and a couple more crabs get thrown back. The rest go in a bucket. The whistle on the kettle goes off like a siren. Chris takes over the tiller and I shoot back into the cabin. Pouring boiling water into cups in the moving boat isn't easy. Carrying the full cups up the saloon steps without spilling them is even harder. By the time we've got our tea, we're close enough to the town to see cars moving on the road.

Another day. I've got to go to work. What am I going to tell Earl about the woman in park? Am I going to tell Earl? Should I? He'll just say it's Police Desk and give it to Ed.

There might be a police report already. Will the nurse report it to the cops? Or the guy from the morgue? How does it work? Am I supposed to report it? If I do that, or I tell Earl and he reports it, then it will definitely be a Police Desk job, and Ed will get it for sure. And he won't give a shit about the woman and what happened to her. And if I push Ed on it, try to make him do a proper investigation, if I say I was there and I saw, he'll argue the facts and say I can't handle it because I'm a girl. But I can handle it, and I will. I'm going to find out who she was and why she died. By myself if I have to.

When we get near the docks I take over the tiller, holding it in one hand and my cup of tea in the other like a proper sailor. Chris goes around the boat tying on fenders and preparing ropes. On our final approach I give him the tiller and head up to the bow. I know the drill. It's cool standing up the front, watching the water slice away around the boat and the mooring approach. Wish I didn't have to go to work in the hot little *FNQ Mail* office, in any newspaper office. I could be a sailor instead. But I've got a job to do, and I'm going to do it.

~

Chris drops me at the office, promising to pick me up after work and take me to his sister's place. The office door is locked but the little bathroom down the hall is open. There's a grotty towel hanging behind the door and a cracked bar of soap. My feet are filthy. Big blotchy patches from mosquito bites adorn my ankles and the boney tops of my toes, red as the polish on some of my nails. I hunt in my bag for moisturiser, dab it on the bites to soothe them, smooth it onto my face, and tidy my hair with my fingers. I'll pass for normal. I square my shoulders and go into the office.

Ed's hunched at his desk, wearing a polo shirt and shorts instead of his usual too-tight suit. He emits the growling sound he uses for a greeting, to which I reply with a cheery

'good morning'. I'm going for cool, calm and collected. Ed doesn't say a word about the woman who died in the park, so I'm guessing he doesn't know yet. He's not going to hear it from me. He'll show off when the cops phone him. Newspapers like to publish stories about dead bodies found in suspicious circumstances, especially women raped and beaten. Ed will make a big deal out of it. Unless it's the niece of someone you know. Unless the woman in the park's 'Ned Kelly' is someone important. I wonder if it'll be front page news or one of Ed's terse paragraphs on page 2, squeezed in amongst incidents of grievous bodily harm at the pub or the footy. Would he get off his big, fat arse and actually do some investigation? Not likely. He'll just print whatever the cops tell him. I might never find out why she died. That's why I have to investigate it myself. For a change, instead of feeling vulnerable to Ed, with his cock-and-balls drawings and dumb-girl jibes, I feel like I've got the edge. If I watch carefully I'll figure out how Ed's contacts work and learn something about journalism. I might even learn something about the raw underbelly of this miserable town. And from this thought springs daffodil-yellow, beehived Mrs Pike, for whom conspiracies are bread and butter. I find the phonebook and look up the Council Planning Office. When I get through to Mrs Pike I ask if she'd be so kind as to go over my piece on the hospital opening, to make sure I haven't got anything wrong. Mrs Pike is so delighted she suggests we meet at the Grand Hotel for lunch. When I put down the phone I respond to Ed's sneer with another cheery smile.

'You want to check facts on a two-paragraph bit about a hospital wing opening?' he snorts. 'Bloody keen.'

'Just want to be sure I get it right.' I simper a little for effect. 'I'm just starting out, Ed. I don't have your experience. If you have any tips for me that'd be great.'

There's no soft centre in Ed, and he doesn't like it when

women try to appeal to it. As far as Ed's concerned women are either devious or dumb. I've overheard Ed and Charlene bitching about me at the fridge. A girl journalist, he'll scoff, why the hell are we training a stupid girl journalist? She just gets in the way. Earl and his bloody moving-with-the-times, Charlene will chime in. The whole point of being in Hicks Inlet is that the times don't move, they'll agree.

'You'll sort it out,' he says to me in a peculiarly sincere sounding tone. Perhaps he doesn't want me complaining about him to Earl. 'I've got an assignment to follow up,' he goes on, standing up. His phone didn't ring. He'd brag about it if he was going to see the police. He pads across the office with his fat feet hanging over the edges of his thongs, and when he gets to the door he slides his fishing rod bag out from behind the broom closet. Holding it against his side, as if to hide it from me, he says, 'This assignment will probably take all day.' And when he's halfway out the door, he adds, 'By the way, Earl's gone to Sydney to deliver his bloody book review. He's not back until Monday. He said to tell you there are some new pieces to be typeset for Monday's paper on the typesetter. And Friday's paper needs some corrections, and to give it a final proof, and not to change anything except spelling errors and extreme factuals,' he continues, by now having said more to me than he's said the whole time I've been here. 'Put your piece on the hospital opening in the gap on page 5, give the whole thing a final look over and take it to the printer. You know the drill. Oh, and Charlene's got an appointment at the beauty parlour so you mightn't see much of her either. The key's here,' he taps a brass key on a hook next to the door. 'Lock up and leave it under the mat when you go out.'

The bastard's left me all the work. I bet he was supposed to check my article. The boss is out of town so Ed and Charlene are going awol. They're trying to fuck me over. Leave me the

paper to do all by myself in the hope that I screw something up. And then they'll claim they had more important things to do than babysit me. Use it to prove that I'm not up to the job. I'll show them. I can handle a two-bit paper like the *FNQ Mail*. And I've got the office to myself.

First things first, in case Ed or Charlene relent and come back in. I look up Kelly in the phone book and find two entries. The first one I ring tells me that her husband was called Alf and he's dead, she's got two daughters who both live down south, and she's the only Kelly left in Hicks Inlet apart from her sister-in-law who's a dedicated spinster. When the second Kelly answers the phone she sounds exactly like the first. She's never married, she says, couldn't see any advantage in it. She's got to be the sister-in-law. I find the phone number of the Emergency room in the hospital and ring to ask about the woman from the park. Whoever answers says she doesn't know about anyone dying in the park yesterday, and gives me the number for the morgue. No one answers when I try it. I phone the cops and ask if they have any information about a woman who died in the park near the hospital yesterday afternoon. The bloke who answers the phone asks who I am. A friend, I say. He goes away for a long time. When he picks up the phone again he tells me gruffly that no one died in Hicks Inlet yesterday, not in a park or anywhere else. He hangs up before I can get another word in. No one knows about the woman who died in the park. How can that be? What's going on? Am I losing my marbles?

Now I wish Earl was here. Hell, I'd even talk to Ed or Charlene about this crazy turn of events if they were here. I dial home, hoping Noel will be taking the day off. No answer. I try her at work. She's in meetings all day. At Robbo's work someone tells me he's in court all week. If I go to the cop shop to demand to know what's going on Earl will find out and

give me hell about doing Police Desk work. I've got no one to talk to until Mrs Pike at lunchtime. I don't know what to think, what to do.

So, work. I'll do work. I get a can of pineapple juice and a couple of Charlene's Mint Slices from the fridge and sit at the spare typewriter. Hospital opening. I write four short paragraphs, read it, screw it up, zip a clean sheet of paper into the typewriter and write it again. Something for Mrs Pike. I'm not going to tell her about the woman in the park, not going to tell her that she seems to have been disappeared. She'll tell Earl for sure, and I'll be in trouble. I'm just going to act like nothing happened, like everyone else seems to be doing. I'll wait and watch. Cool, calm and collected. Investigative journalist on the job. Facts not feelings. Something will come up. Meanwhile proofreading, while I wait for inspiration, or lunchtime, whichever comes first.

14

The Grand Hotel looks like it was built around the same time as the Council Offices, but its grandeur is faded. The floors are cloaked with that splodgy, multi-coloured carpet hotels use in the hope that dirt will blend right in. The walls are hung with large framed pictures of waterfalls and steam trains. The overhead fans are whirling noisily. Mrs Pike is filling an armchair in the foyer. She's wearing a baby blue dress with sunray pleats, and fanning herself with a brochure for glass bottom boat tours. Thick aqua eyeshadow diminishes the piercing effect of her green eyes. She's wearing a ring with such a huge diamond it has to be fake. She greets me effusively as she launches herself out of the chair, and steers me by the elbow to a corner table in the busy Ladies Lounge. She picks up the 'Reserved' sign standing on the table and lies it face down. This must be her favourite spot. We can watch everyone in the dining room from here.

'What news for me from the grand world of investigative journalism?' she says loudly, making people's heads turn, and then she holds the boat tour brochure up in front of our faces, in case anyone is lipreading, I guess. Goes in for drama,

does Mrs Pike.

'My good friend, Mrs McCready,' Mrs Pike whispers, 'asked me to convey her thanks, h-hmm, regarding the tragic loss of her niece, to convey her thanks for the information that the girl was wearing a dress. She wonders if you could enlighten us about the significance of the blue rope.'

'Me? Enlighten her?' I whisper back, in this strange world of secrets. 'Didn't she already know about the rope? Surely the police told them about it, and the dress. I mean, if I was conducting an investigation they'd be the first things to ask questions about, and the responsible adults she was living with would be the first people I'd ask. To be honest I wondered if Mayor McCready came up with the snorkelling theory.'

'That snorkelling story is hogwash, pure and simple. Mrs McC agrees with me on that. She's not talking to Mr McC, so it is possible that it was his idea. He's not particularly intelligent, in my humble opinion.'

She lowers the brochure and looks across the room, pointing with her nose. There, in the direct line of Mrs Pike's green-eyed gaze, is Mayor McCready. He's wearing a dark suit and a blue tie, and sitting with a woman sporting a curly Annie-style perm and wearing a frilly white blouse. She has her back to me.

'She's the secretary of the Parents and Citizens Association at the school. One must assume they are discussing educational matters. It is not of interest to our projects.' Mrs Pike raises the brochure again. 'Mrs McC and I wonder if you have any more useful tidbits,' she whispers.

'Sinclair went south,' I whisper in reply. 'Apparently he's never got a cent to spend and then, out of the blue, he's got airplane tickets and off he goes.'

'Oh, you are good!' Mrs Pike whispers. She covers my hand with hers and implores with her aqua-shadowed eyes.

‘Someone gave him a bag full of money?’

‘That’s all I know, Mrs Pike,’ I say a little more loudly. ‘So far. Earl gave me strict instructions to stop investigating this matter.’ I emphasise ‘so far’. I might as well let her know that while I’m definitely open to being part of her conspiracy, I’ll be in trouble if she goes blurting to Earl.

‘Oh, what a pity,’ she squeezes my hand. ‘You do such excellent work! Still, my dear friend will be grateful for this useful piece in the puzzle. But not another word!’ Mrs Pike does a stage cough, folds the brochure, and reverts to her normal, loud voice. ‘I took the liberty of ordering fish and chips for both of us. I’m a working girl and I have to get back to the office on time. The service here is appalling. As is the food, of course, apart from the fish and chips. It’s not good for the waistline, but then nothing is. I see our shandy is coming now.’

‘Shandy?’ I ask. I’ve never understood why some people think lemonade improves beer. I’d have been pleased to have a beer, if she’d given me the choice.

‘Only ladies who lunch have time for the bottle of Spumante, and the fish and chips needs something to wash it down,’ Mrs Pike says, gesturing with her nose towards the rest of the room. Most of the diners are women wearing old-fashioned dresses that look like they’d be uncomfortably hot. Some faces look vaguely familiar from the hospital opening.

‘So, how are you enjoying your time at the *FNQ Mail*? Earl was a brilliant journalist, as I’m sure you know,’ Mrs Pike says loudly, taking a ladylike sip of her shandy, little finger cocked in the air. ‘He worked on all the interesting newspapers back when newspapers were interesting. He won awards for some of his work.’

‘I don’t know much about his history, except that he used to be a senior editor on my paper in Sydney. And he’s a friend of my boss, who only said that Earl could teach me a thing or

two. How did he get stuck in Hicks Inlet?’

‘Terrible accident, dearie, didn’t you know? One foggy Saturday night, winding through the Blue Mountains on his motorbike with my dear friend Bobbie on the back. They went all over the place on that motorbike. Until that night. The road was wet and Earl took a corner a little bit too fast. The pair of them ended up half way down the mountainside.’

‘Oh, that’s awful. I didn’t know.’

‘It took hours for the ambulance and firemen and everyone to get them back up. Imagine it, lying there in the fog and the wet, unable to move, with your body broken.’ Mrs Pike’s speaking theatrically, taking pauses to lick her little finger and smooth her arched brows with it, showing off her ring, stringing the drama out. ‘Earl was unconscious. Bobbie moved in and out of consciousness. She told me the only way she knew she hadn’t gone to hell was because it was freezing cold.’

A surly waitress slams two plates of fish and chips on the table and flounces away. I pick at the chips, waiting for Mrs Pike to finish her story.

‘They both spent ages in hospital. One of Earl’s legs was amputated. The other one is too mangled for him to walk on. Bobbie had broken ribs and a punctured lung, and one arm was smashed. She still can’t use that arm properly. Wracked by pain all the time, both of them,’ Mrs Pike says, pretending to wipe a tear from her eye. ‘They are so very brave.’

‘Earl’s never said a word about it.’ And, I admit to myself, I’ve never given it much thought, which seems callous. Still, it’s not the sort of thing you can ask someone easily. I pick up the knife and fork in the hope that Mrs Pike will stop talking so we can start eating.

‘The heat up here means their bones don’t ache so badly. It makes life a little easier for them. And I get the benefit. They are such lovely friends for me,’ Mrs Pike pats her hair, ‘being

so cultured. Poor Earl does miss the real newspaper business though, I know that. He finds Hicks Inlet terribly dull. It's not so hard for Bobbie. She grew up here. Her expectations were suitably low.'

Mrs Pike finally picks up her knife and fork. I tuck in, famished.

When our plates are empty, Mrs Pike pushes them to the far side of the table and puts a cigarette in a long holder. She struggles to align the end of the cigarette and lighter, the sunray pleats of her sleeves fanning open towards the table top. When the cigarette's lit she sends smoke rings towards the ceiling. I'm thinking about whether or not I want to tell her about the woman in the park when she starts speaking again.

'How are you getting on in the House of Parsimony?'

Holy mother. What is she on about now? Doubt if she means the *FNQ Mail* office. That stuff in the fridge is free, apart from Charlene's biscuits. Is she talking about Mrs Swain's? I don't go anywhere else. I take a shot at it.

'Mrs Swain and I didn't get along,' I say tentatively, hoping they're not best friends.

'Oh, that's too bad. But no surprise. I note that you use the past tense. I haven't heard of Mrs Swain's passing, so I must assume that you have moved elsewhere. You do have somewhere else to stay?'

'Yes, I'm fine, thanks.' I can see an offer of a bed at Mrs Pike's on the horizon and hope that Chris's sister does take me in.

'Very good. Making your own way. I like to see that in a young woman. Now, let me see your article.'

'Article is a generous term for three short paragraphs about a hospital opening, Mrs Pike.'

I slide the envelope across the table. Mrs Pike retracts the cigarette holder, removes the cigarette and grinds it out in the

ashtray. She takes a bone-handled letter opener from her bag and slits the envelope open, glancing around the room to make sure no one is watching. I knew she'd get a kick out of the brown envelope. She reads the draft carefully, as if it was a mathematical equation, and gets a red pen from her bag.

'Oh well, everyone has to start somewhere.' There's condolence in her tone. 'What's this about Stanley Hunt's good works for women? Where does that come from?'

'It was Bernie's phrase.' And I put it there for you, Mrs Pike. I thought you'd find it as interesting as Earl did.

'Intriguing. She said that? Apropos of what?'

'When she invited me to their house to interview Stanley.'

'Oh yes! Please tell me that Earl is going to let you do it. Please let me come in your handbag. Pretty please?' she says, so loudly and imploringly that several people turn their heads to look at us.

'Charlene's supposed to arrange the interview.'

'Ooh, I am so looking forward to hearing about that. Meanwhile, we have this little piece to endure,' she says, and then she lifts my sheet of paper in front of our faces, aware of her audience. 'You shouldn't use that good works for women phrase,' she says very quietly. 'It sounds like the sort of thing Stanley Hunt would pay you to say and you don't want to give the impression you are on the take.'

'I have to put something about why he donated money for that women's wing, grand name for a small extension though it is.' Now I'm fishing. If I'm going to be an investigative journalist I've got to start acting like one.

Mrs Pike puts the piece of paper down, jams another cigarette in the holder and lights it. She blows more perfectly formed smoke rings towards the ceiling and watches as they dissipate into the thick air. Gravity tempts her beehive towards the floor. She has an air of contemplation. She doesn't bite. I flick the rod.

'Earl said you think Hunt was leaned on to donate money,' I whisper, prompting her, with my hand half across my mouth. 'What does that mean exactly?'

'Encouraged,' Mrs Pike says, blowing some more smoke rings, one hand now supporting her beehive. 'Leaned on is colloquial for encouraged.'

'By? Why?'

Mrs Pike gazes slowly around the room at the tables of well-dressed women and couples. She exchanges nods with everyone who catches her eye. I guess they're the bastion of Hicks Inlet society, the people who feature in the *FNQ Mail's* articles about progress groups, balls and charity events.

'All I can say is that one hears things,' Mrs Pike says quietly and slowly, as if she expects that to be the end of the discussion. Here amongst the assembled minor notables she's constrained. These are the people she was talking about when she said she knew better than to put her head over the parapet. All I'm going to get from her are hints and allusions. She's not as tough as she makes out.

'I don't hear anything, Mrs Pike,' I say, making one last attempt to wring some useful information from her.

She takes a deep breath, focuses her unblinking green eyes on me until I begin to feel uncomfortable, and lets out a long sigh.

'You are supposed to be a journalist, Miss Williams. You have two good legs. Use them,' she says, motioning to the waitress for the bill.

'What should I say then? About the donation?' I think I'm only persisting because I want Mrs Pike to be my friend. I keep telling myself that I'm going to strike out independently, but I'm just not much good on my own.

'Don't say anything. Let people wonder,' she says, picking up my little article and looking at it again.

'I have to say something, Mrs Pike. The mayor mentioned

it in his speech. He didn't mention any other donors.'

'True, that's true, the mayor did mention it.' She draws a question mark with red pen on the paper.

'I'll just use his words then. Mayor McCready thanked Stanley Hunt for his significant donation.'

'Leave out significant,' Mrs Pike says, and then she bursts with laughter that makes her whole body wobble and people turn to look. She raises our paper shield and starts whispering again. 'No, on second thoughts, leave it in. Significant is the perfect word. Was the donation a significant amount, or was it significant that Hunt made a donation? Excellent! Earl said you were good with words.'

I've got no idea what Mrs Pike means but I get a kick out of hearing that Earl said something good about me.

'Anything else I should add, Mrs Pike? Or leave out?'

'There are some people you must mention, or they will complain to Earl. Mrs Fairfax, for one, esteemed president of the Hospital Ladies Auxiliary.'

'Which one was she?'

'Fly swat,' Mrs Pike whispers.

'Who?'

'Mauve outfit,' she prompts.

I pull the piece of paper down and cast my eyes around the room but I can't see anyone in mauve, or anyone with a fly swat for that matter.

'Yesterday!' Mrs Pike hisses, with her arm in the air, flicking an imaginary fly swat.

And that does it. The woman who was commanding the cake stall and banging a fly swat on the wall at the hospital opening. The bitch in the car who refused to help me when the woman was dying in the park.

'Her!'

Suddenly all I want to do is tell Mrs Pike about the woman dying in the park, but when I pick up the piece of paper to

hold it in front of us and shield our discussion from the view of all the lipreaders, I stop myself short. If I tell Mrs Pike she might just clam up again, as if it's an inappropriate topic when dining in the Grand Hotel. And she would tell Earl for sure. And then he'll give the story to Ed. No, I'm going to keep a tight grip on this. I'm going to investigate. I'm going to find out who the woman was and why she died. By myself.

'You didn't take to the Ladies Auxiliary president?' Mrs Pike whispers, taking advantage of our shield. 'Neither do I. Makes out she's so very generous, serves on every committee in town, as if she's contending for the charity queen of Hicks Inlet. I've known her all my life. There's not a kind bone in her body.'

'I suppose that's something I shouldn't put in my little piece,' I say, with a giggle that is probably more due to feeling like I'm finally on my mettle than anything else.

'Probably best not to say that she presided over the cake table with a fly swat either.'

'I think she hit the mayor with it at one point.' We cackle together like a pair of teenage girls.

'Do you think she was making a pass at him? Or reminding him of past assignations?'

'What? I don't get it.'

'Better not to, dearie. Suffice to say the mayor is a notorious philanderer. But not in your little article, don't say it there.'

'OK. Who else should I mention?'

'Inspector Fawcett. In as few words as possible. You could say, "also attending was Inspector Fawcett", and, you'd better put someone else as well.' Mrs Pike takes the sheet of paper from my hand and begins to write on it with her red pen. 'I know, let's have "also attending were Inspector Fawcett and Mr John O'Dowd, President of the Hicks Inlet Amateur Fishing Society".' She cackles. 'That'll get them guessing! And

now I must go dearie, I can't leave dear Mr Dorade to handle the public.'

~

After lunch the office is still empty. Despite all their stirring and carping, Ed and Charlene know I've got the skills to finalise the paper. They wouldn't take a chance on pissing off all day if they didn't believe, deep down, that I was up to the job. They think they're going to upset me by leaving me with all the work, but instead they've given me a confidence boost. I can finish the paper by myself. I can find out why that woman died in the park. I just have to stay strong, cool and professional, keep sharp, on my toes, like a boxer. I can go the distance. They'll see.

The knacker's yard is my domain. I survey my territory. The new bits of text for typesetting for Monday's paper are committee reports and planning news Mrs Pike didn't think important enough to tell me about. There are some pics from Alec to accompany a school Parents and Citizens meeting. I expect to find some of the people from the dining room in the pictures, but no one stands out apart from the Annie hair-do woman who was with the mayor. They all look the same to me, these Hicks Inlet bigwigs and socialites. I don't recognise any of the people in the pics to accompany the report on a retirees' daytrip on the little train up the mountains to the Toolloola market. Looks like they're having fun though. Perhaps I should go there on Saturday. I have to find something to do. And, no, definitely nothing from Ed on the woman who died in the park. I wonder if there are complications with the police report, like there were with Aileen. Or, more likely, Ed just doesn't know about it. The hospital and police told me they didn't know about it. Is it a non-event? Do people often die in parks in this town? So many questions and no answers, but I put them aside and concentrate on this job.

I slide into the typesetter's seat and typeset the new pieces and the captions, check that there are no errors, and leave them in a heap on the layout table. I key in an amended version of my hospital article, complete with Mrs Pike's phrases, adjusting the sentences as I go, until it will fit the available space in tomorrow's paper exactly. It's one advantage of having started out as a copy-taker: I know how words work physically, on the line, on the page, like a stonemason knows stones. I reset the corrections from my morning's proofing. No new errors. Over to the layout table to slice the strips of text with a scalpel, slip them over the little waxer, just enough to make them stick, not enough to leave a bubble. Lay each correction slip in its place, straight as a die. Everything fits. All the folio sheets done. Just the final check left.

I take a break to get a Coke and ice from the freezer, and sit in the knacker's yard smoothing the melting ice over my smouldering mosquito bites and admiring my work. It makes me think of Levin in *Anna K*, ponderous, prevaricating, procrastinating Levin, who comes good after doing a proper day's work, mowing with the peasants, his scythe swinging, his muscles groaning. He loses himself in the work and finds himself in the work. What's he say to himself? 'Get it sharp and keep on sharpening and sharpening. Keep on making yourself better and better.' That's going to be me, from now on. Start small. Get that red nail polish off my toes. Charlene's desk drawer will have nail polish remover and cotton buds for sure. It doesn't me take long to return my nails to their pristine state. There you go Levin, I'm a little bit better already.

Back in the knacker's yard I skim read all the boring articles on all the pages, and make sure there are no duplicate advertisements. After that, the overview, pretending I'm Earl, standing back and surveying the folio sheets as double-page

spreads, checking the balance of headlines, pictures and advertisements. It's all good. Stack the folio sheets in the right order, slide them into the folio bag and put the offcuts in the bin. Job done. Folio bag under my arm, I lock the door, put the key under the mat and take the stairs two at a time. The printer is professional. He treats me like I'm just a journo. No teasing about me being a girl.

When I get back Chris's panel van is in the street, unlocked. There's a tatty copy of *On the Road* on the passenger seat. I scoop it up, put my feet on the dashboard and start reading.

15

Josie's house is one of those big Queenslanders past the park, not far from the hospital. Grapevines trail over the trellis that surrounds the lower floor. Purple bougainvillea flowers spill around the verandah posts. Luridly bright budgerigars, blue, yellow, pink and green, twitter in an aviary near the garage. There are tomatoes staked in neat rows, with basil growing amongst them. Red-flowered beans climb teepees in another bed. Cime di rapa and rocket flourish in another. It's just like home. But the banana trees, pawpaws and mangoes are 100 per cent Queensland. A black and white mongrel jumps up for a pat as we walk down the path to the house.

The cool kitchen smells of garlic. Josie looks like a mature version of Chris, but neater and more sophisticated. Their facial features are similar, but his are more angular. Her sleek hair is cut in a cropped, boyish style. His is longer and messy. She's wearing a buttoned sleeveless shirt that shows off her biceps. He's in a grubby, oversized t-shirt. The little boy drawing with crayons at the long wooden table looks too fair to belong to either of them.

Chris introduces me to Josie as a journalist.

'Wow! A journalist?' Josie kisses me on both cheeks. 'That's impressive.'

'Thanks!' I'm not sure if I'm thanking Josie for the compliment or Chris for saying it. 'I'm just a trainee journalist, though.'

'On holidays?'

'Working here for three weeks.'

'With the *FNQ Mail*? No kidding! The *FNQ Mail*'s got a girl journalist?'

'That's exactly what Chris said when I told him,' I reply with a laugh. If Chris didn't tell her what I was doing here in Hicks Inlet, I wonder what he did say about me when he asked her if I could stay. 'I'm just filling in while someone is on holidays. The boss calls it learning the ropes, but I'm just a dogsbody really.'

The little boy is tugging at Josie, clamouring for attention. She picks him up.

'This is Marco. Marco, this is Lou. She's come to help celebrate your birthday, and she's going to stay with us for a week or so.'

The boy lays his head against Josie's shoulder and gazes at me uncertainly when I say hello. The cake in a football shape with four candles now makes sense. There's a container of canoli beside it on the bench. Fresh salad greens sprout out of the kitchen sink. Unwashed potatoes are heaped up beside it. Looks like it might be a big party, and I didn't bring a present.

'You're so lucky to be a journalist,' she says, swinging Marco back down into his chair. 'How'd you get into journalism? I thought it was a hard field to break into, you know, for a girl without connections. Have you got connections?'

'No! I wish! It's a long story.'

'Sit down and tell me. Chris,' Josie commands, 'get the poor girl a beer. She's been working all day!'

Chris grabs three cold cans of XXXX out of the fridge, passes one each to me and Josie, and wanders out of the room. Marco slides off the chair and follows him.

‘Sorry about my brother! Lazy bugger doesn’t know what it’s like to work all day. Still, got to thank him for bringing home someone more interesting than his droogy mates for a change. So, tell me how you got to be a journalist while I do the potatoes.’

‘I was working as a copy-taker at the *Sydney Times*. After a while I started filling in a bit for one of the journalists, doing the little assignments he couldn’t be bothered with.’ I leave out the details. They’re not flattering. ‘I went to this little outback town, Collooney, to investigate so-called race riots. Interviewed people, wrote up a story, got a front page.’

‘The Collooney story? That death in custody story that came out just before the Royal Commission was announced? It was in the *Courier* too.’ Josie turns towards me, holding a half-peeled potato in the air. ‘You wrote that?’

‘I did.’ It’s unbelievable that Josie’s read it. ‘A few papers reprinted it. My first and only real article. My ticket on the slow train to a career in journalism.’

‘It stuck with me, that story. That bit with the cop pretending to hang himself in the cell was so creepy. It seemed like it would have taken a lot of practice.’

‘The stories I heard suggested Larry Jones was probably dead before they even got him into the lock up. Not a single Aboriginal in that town believed that he would have hung himself, or that he even could have, given the state he was in and the way the cops manhandled him. I don’t know what, but something real dark and dirty happened that night, and the cops got off scot free. I tried to capture that in the story.’

‘You did. It really stuck with me. Good for you. Are you going to uncover something like that up here?’

I’m about to tell Josie about the woman who died in the

park when Marco's calls of 'Nonna!', 'Poppa!' break into the kitchen, quickly followed by the doting grandparents themselves. There are introductions and more kisses. There's no more time for talking with Josie. I'm enlisted in the kitchen, helping prepare the crabs, make salads and set the table. Brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles arrive. More introductions and kisses. The men take beers from the fridge and go to the verandah. The women join the work gang in the kitchen. I'm right at home, except the woman are speaking in a rapid, unfamiliar Italian dialect that I can only get the jist of. The meal's enormous, delicious, with all my favourites. It's noisy around the table and no one's paying me any attention which suits me fine. Marco opens presents and blows out candles and everyone sings happy birthday in English. When it's over and the women start clearing the table and washing up, Chris drags me out to the verandah with the men.

'Got to give them room to talk about you,' Chris laughs. 'Wouldn't be surprised if they think I'm going to marry you.'

'I'm too old for you, Chris!' I blurt out, uncertain about whether or not I want to indulge the temptation of having a fling with him.

'Hey, Lou, don't blame me,' he says. 'It wasn't anything I said.'

'What did you tell them about me?'

'All I said was I met a nice Italian girl who needs a place to stay. That's all. Josie jumped at it. She rang my mum straight away. The whole family probably knew about you ten minutes after that.'

'My parents are just the same. They'd be over the moon if I brought home a nice Italian boy.'

'You know, it might be good for me if we let them think we're at the getting to know each other stage,' Chris says quietly, leaning in towards me. 'Keep them off my back for a while.'

'No harm in that. It's true, anyway. We are just getting to know each other.' The suggestion that he might not be interested in me is a bit unsettling. Even though it wouldn't be smart for me to get involved with him, it doesn't mean I don't want him to want me. The hint of rejection is making me keener. 'If you like I could give you a big kiss just for asking Josie to let me stay. And another one for calling me a journalist. Should I do that? Really give them something to talk about?'

'Nah,' Chris puts his arm around my shoulder and walks me a few steps further away from the men. 'The thing is, I don't think I'm really girl material.'

'What? I'd have thought you'd be fighting the girls off, Chris,' I say, surprised by his sudden lack of confidence, then suddenly I get it. 'Oh! So, you're saying you play for the other side?' I whisper in his ear.

'I'm not really sure, but ... ah shit,' Chris whispers back, 'I am sure that if there was a girl I'd get the hots for it'd be you, and sorry, but I've got nothing.'

'Hey, no offence taken Chris,' I whisper, with a sense of relief, 'and anyway, I've got a boyfriend.' Actually, this really simplifies things. Now I don't have to worry about what I'd tell Robbo if Chris entered the picture. 'Mates yeah?' I whisper, and I kiss him on the cheek.

'Mates. And it's our secret, ok? I don't want that lot asking me questions,' he whispers, with a look in his eye that makes it clear that him being gay wouldn't be an easy thing for the family to take.

'My lips are sealed,' I whisper back. And as we turn back to talk to the others I realise that our huddling and furtive whispering has been a perfect rendition of courting. I grab Chris's hand and squeeze it briefly and we share a smile as we join the men.

~

The morning starts with the music of a small boy whooping. Marco's sneaked into my room and I'm pretending I'm still asleep. He's wary for a bit, pushing up his pyjama shirt and scratching his belly. Suddenly his arm shoots out and he touches my nose. I open my eyes and glare at him. He's not easily put off. He insists that I get up, and chatters excitedly while I get dressed. He and Josie are off to visit his other grandparents down in Rockton for a few days, for more birthday celebrations with his cousins, for more presents. I let Marco drag me on a hunt for Chris. Light filters into the rooms through the bougainvillea on the verandah. The worn timber floors are gentle underfoot. Abandoned toys lie everywhere. There's a rich smell of coffee coming from the kitchen. I love it here.

Chris is at his panel van, preparing to leave.

'I'm going up to sell the family produce at the Tooloolo market. Have you been there yet?'

'I've heard about it.' Since yesterday, courtesy of my typesetting.

'Want to come?'

'I'd love to, but I've got work. And I have to find out about the woman who died in the park, Chris. Yesterday I phoned the hospital and the cops and both said they've got no record of her. And the police reporter at the newspaper hadn't heard about her either. Something isn't right, I'm sure of it.'

'Did you tell your boss about her?'

'No, he's in Sydney. He won't be back until Monday.'

'Then come up to Tooloolo. Get a bit of distance. You might think of something.'

Get a bit of distance. It worked on Sunday. I found out who the skipper was by taking a most unlikely path.

'It's a great drive, up through the hills. You can always catch the train back down to town. That's a pretty trip too. Say you were doing research for the tourist pages or

something.'

It's true, there's nothing more I can do in town for now. If Ed gets a report about the dead woman from the cops I won't be able to say or do anything about it anyway without talking to Earl first. And if I don't show up at the office Ed and Charlene will have to do all the work for a change. Payback. It's tempting. I can always go in Sunday afternoon to help finish Monday's paper off.

'Good idea. Why not?'

We drive out of town to Chris's parents' farm. He and his dad load a canvas-sided truck with fruit and vegetables for the market. I sit in the enormous kitchen with Chris's mother, drinking coffee and eating biscotti, being quizzed in broken English and unfamiliar dialect about how we make tomato sauce in my family and what we bake for christenings. She puts some cider vinegar on my mosquito bites, which stops them from itching.

The snub-nosed truck sits high above the winding road as we go up the ridge towards Toolloola. It's my first foray into the countryside around Hicks Inlet. Mile after mile of dense sugar cane grows right to the roadside. Every now and then a market garden breaks the monotony of the canefields.

'The market gardens were originally set up by the Chinese last century,' Chris tells me. 'They fed the gold diggers and the loggers. Unsung pioneers, they were. Most of them got driven out. They were bad times.'

'I'd have thought market gardeners would mostly be Italians.'

'They are now. My family came in the 1930s. They worked as cane cutters. Made enough to buy some market gardens. Opened a greengrocer's shop in Hicks.' He turns the truck into a side road. 'Just got to drop in at Uncle's farm.'

We bump down a dirt track, and finally stop at a small farmhouse on the edge of the forest. Chris's aunt is throwing

vegetable scraps to a fat pig in a pen. Chickens wander around the yard, picking at the grass, clucking and squawking, their heads bobbing in staccato. Uncle, a hulking great man, brings a hessian bag from the shed and puts it in the back of the truck.

‘Just a couple more stops half-way up the hill, then it’s straight to Toolloola,’ Chris says as the truck jolts and bounces back up the track.

‘Another uncle? A cousin? Second cousin once removed?’

‘Nah. Moonshadow.’

‘What’s Moonshadow? Home-made rum?’

‘Moonshadow’s a mate,’ Chris says. ‘Just going to call on him and Celeste on our way up the hill.’

‘Celeste?’

‘Moonshadow’s girlfriend.’

‘They grow vegetables too?’

‘Nah. Moonshadow’s a goat farmer, sort of.’

‘Cool. I love goat’s cheese.’

Chris swerves to avoid a dead animal on the road, so suddenly that I have to grab the panic handle above the window to stay in my seat.

‘They’re not milk goats,’ he says, as if dead animals on the road are par for the course, ‘they’re meat goats.’

‘Huh. I didn’t know there was much of a market for goats’ meat.’

‘There’s an export market, apparently. Anyway, Moonshadow doesn’t sell them for meat.’

I see another dead animal splattered on the road up ahead and grab the panic handle ready for the swerve.

‘What’s he do with them then? Keep them for pets?’

‘Well, yes and no,’ Chris says, bumping the truck over the dead animal, as if it was a piece of wood. ‘The story is, Moonshadow’s old man gave him a bit of money and told him to make something of himself. So he bought a few acres

of half-cleared forest and some young goats. The plan was to breed them and sell them for meat, like I said. But he made friends with the goats. He gave them all names, and he'd spend his days talking to them, giving them advice about how to get on better with each other, giving them lessons in political economy and astronomy and gastronomy and who knows what, and by the time they were ready for the market, he just couldn't bring himself to sell them. He couldn't bear to part them from their little babies. The thought of them being killed kept him awake at night. He told me it was the most existential of the existential crises of his life.'

'Am I supposed to feel sorry for him? He might have thought of all that before he went into goat rearing. People shouldn't try things they're not going to be able to manage.' Not a rule I apply to myself, obviously.

'You've got a point,' Chris says, crunching down through the gears as we approach a sharp bend.

'So now him and, what's her name? Cecilia? They've got zillions of goat friends living with them?'

'Her name's Celeste,' Chris shouts over the grinding cogs as he changes up through the gears again. 'A few months after Moonshadow discovered he couldn't sell the goats, he started to think it was wrong to keep them in captivity.' Chris turns to me with half a smile on his face.

'Let me guess.' This is fun. 'He took down the fences. The goats roam free.'

'They do,' he says with a grin.

'And now they're destroying the rainforest. And he loves the rainforest, and he's got himself another existential crisis, even more...'

I can't help laughing, which I worry might be cruel, but Chris joins in, and we get a bit hysterical.

'And what about Celeste?' I say, when I get myself under control. 'She didn't want to sell the goats either?'

'Ah, Celeste. She's a different case. I'm never too sure what she thinks, but my guess is that she'd sell the goats to the first buyer who comes along. And the rainforest with it.'

'Ok. I think I've got the picture. We're going to stop in on some troubled ex-goat farmers.'

'They've still got the goats, remember. Anti-goat farmers, or goat anti-farmers, does that make sense?' Chris suggests, beginning to giggle again. 'Just don't mention the goats, ok?'

As the road climbs into the rainforest Chris starts pointing out ancient tree ferns, strangler figs roping their way up trees, orchids and staghorns. Rainbow lorikeets chase each other through the treetops, flashes of colour among the vivid greens of the forest. Patches of ghostly mist hang in the valleys. Chris pulls into a viewpoint and stops the engine. Far below there's a green carpet of sugar cane surrounding the Hicks Inlet township and the ocean beyond that. Along the coastline I can see all the way from the muddy brown estuary where the marina is to the blue Cedar River in the north. Someone down there has disappeared the woman who died in the park. I'm going to find out who it was, and why she died. I don't know how, but I'm going to do it. I'll give myself until Monday, when Earl gets back from Sydney. If I haven't found out anything by then, I'll tell him. There's nothing I can do now, except sit on the passenger step of the truck and watch drifts of mist forming and evaporating, highlighting ridges and valleys in the mountains.

Chris has rolled up the side flap on the canopy and set up weights and scales. He hauls Uncle's hessian bag out from underneath a bag of potatoes. It's filled with lots of little plastic bags that look like ounces of marijuana. He pulls a much bigger bag out from beneath them, and a couple of big plastic bags from his pocket. I don't know if I'm supposed to look away, but I figure keeping quiet is discretion enough.

Chris scoops a couple of handfuls of marijuana into a

paper bag and puts it on the scales. He adds to it until it weighs one pound, licks his fingers, then sets about making another one pound bag. When that's done he checks the weight of what's left — two ounces. Now I can't keep quiet.

'You just divided a kilo into imperial portions, right?'

Chris doesn't say anything. He stuffs the two ounces behind the seat in the truck, puts the one-pound bags back in the hessian bag and puts that back under the potatoes. Then he turns around and looks at me.

'It's for Moonshadow,' Chris sighs. He sits on the sideboard of the truck, pulls his singlet up and scratches his chest, just like Marco does.

'He's going to buy the two pounds from you?' I'm not going to ask about the small plastic bags. I assume that's just part of the family produce for the market. That I'm going to pretend I don't know about, but this weighing out malarkey looks like it might have an interesting story.

'No, no. I give them to Moonshadow. He gives me the money. I give the money to Uncle. I'm just the middleman.'

'What I really want to know is why turn the kilo into two pounds and two ounces?'

Chris stands up, stretches, picks up stones, pitches them way into infinity.

'Moonshadow thinks metric is a government plot, to make us buy more than we need.'

'Metric? The government didn't make up metric. It's a measurement system. It can't be a plot.'

'I don't have a problem with metric,' Chris laughs, pitching another stone, 'but Moonshadow's obsessed with it. If I give him a kilo it'll start him off. Once he starts talking about government plots and conspiracies you can't change the subject.'

'So you convert the kilo into pounds.'

'It saves Moonshadow a lot of anxiety. He's a mate. I do it

as a favour.' Those cute smile lines are curling out around his eyes.

'He buys the two pounds from you, sorry, gives you the money to give to Uncle, and Uncle thinks the money is for the whole kilo?'

'It's not my fault that Moonshadow's crazy,' Chris says, scooping stones from the ground.

'So what happens with the two ounces?'

'Good question, Lou. I don't want to just throw it away. That'd be wasteful,' he says, throwing a stone so high in the air it arcs and lands right near us.

'Let me think. You could smoke it,' I suggest with a laugh. Or you could give it Perseus. I understand now what the backpack exchange on the day we sailed to the Cedar was about now.

'Smoking it would work. Would you like to help? Is that what this is about?'

Chris laughs, and sends a stone far into the distance, as if the discussion is over.

'Hold on, there are still unanswered questions. Why does Moonshadow get two pounds divided into two one-pound bags?'

'He only wants one pound.'

This is just getting crazier. It's like I've landed in a strange land where nothing is what it seems. But it's fun too.

'What happens to the other pound?'

'Moonshadow passes it on to some mate of his.'

'A gift?'

'I reckon,' Chris says slowly, pausing to throw the last stone, 'he charges his mate the same amount Moonshadow pays me. I don't know where else Moonshadow would get the money to give me, what with all those goats to look after.'

'So Moonshadow's a dealer, so he can care for his goats? I'm happy to let Chris stick with the middleman moniker. I'm

definitely not going to call him a dealer, despite those little bags.

'Hell no.' Chris chuckles as if it's a preposterous idea. 'Moonshadow smokes the whole pound. He and Celeste are stoned all day. All night.'

'The mate's a dealer then?'

'Dunno, Ms Investigative Journalist, I've never met him.' Chris's grin is wide and generous, the lines around his deep brown eyes are all crinkled up, and he's languidly scratching his belly again. I could hang around with him all day long.

16

We hairpin slowly up the mountainside, the clutch whining and gears grinding at each turn. Eventually we take an unmarked side track into the rainforest, the truck bumping and groaning over potholes and gouges until the track peters out at a timber hut with a rusty, corrugated iron roof. One last bump and we stall to a standstill near the house. There's not a goat in sight. A blue heeler runs up to meet us, barking loudly. A tall thin man in ragged bib and brace overalls comes out the door of the hut, followed by a girl with a sarong tied up over her breasts and a naked baby on her hip. All that talk about goats; not a word about a baby. Moonshadow's got the messy long hair and straggling beard you'd expect, but Celeste's hair is cut in a neat shiny bob, as sharp as if she'd just walked out of a salon in downtown Sydney.

'Mazzo, man, good to see ya.' Moonshadow says, and Celeste stands on tiptoe to hug Chris. He introduces me as a friend from town.

'Cool, so cool you're here,' Celeste coos as we crowd into the hut. It's not much bigger than a pigpen. Chris and Moonshadow sit on the only two chairs, as if that's their

usual spots, leaving me to choose between the two upturned tins. I guess that the one with the appliqué felt elephant cushion, with its bright threads and sparkles, is Celeste's favourite, and I lower myself tentatively on the plain brown cushion. Celeste hands Chris the baby and goes out the back door. Chris talks to it in a sing-song voice, tickling under its chin, making it gurgle. Moonshadow's rolling a joint.

'Amazing shit, this. Instant hit. Mate brought it up from down south, eh,' Moonshadow says.

He lights the joint and exhales into the baby's face. I take a puff when it's passed to me and straight away my head starts to spin. After my second puff the elephant on the cushion starts to shimmy and Moonshadow starts looking like a Hindu priest. He's staring at me, trance-like, with bloodshot eyes. I have to look away. The table's littered with drying flower heads, half-burnt candles stuck in patches of wax, and a pile of polished river stones. Wrinkled apples and black-skinned bananas in a cracked blue china dish are sending out a yeasty smell. Tiny insects are dancing around the fruit. My head feels like it's fermenting. I need something else to look at. There's a makeshift kitchen bench secured by rope to hooks in the wall, with its corners held up by two crooked branches. A cupboard with flywire walls holds sprouting potatoes and onions, wilted carrots and a small yellow-green sphere that's probably a cabbage. Above the sink there's a shelf of jars with pretty hand-written labels: sugar, tea, salt, red lentils, brown rice, pearl barley. Celeste would have put in some time drawing those labels. Trying to make a proper kitchen. Doesn't look like she's winning.

I can see her through the back door, hair shining in the sunlight, filling the kettle with water from a tap in a corrugated iron tank. The tank's balanced precariously on a stand overgrown with vines that writhe like snakes. A pair of luridly yellow birds with curved beaks cling sideways on the

vines. This dope's too strong. Celeste smiles at me when she comes back in, then lights a gas camping stove and puts the kettle on. She takes the baby from Chris, puts it in a basket on the cast iron bed, tucks a mosquito net over the top, and gently rocks the basket. All the while Moonshadow's talking non-stop in a slow slangy accent, his sentences littered with man and cool, but and eh, fuck and shit. He sounds like Perseus, especially when he starts talking about the new road being put in up to the Cedar.

'Going to ruin everything man. All the touros will be up there with all their cars and shit,' Moonshadow drawls. 'Went up to have a look the other day. Got a lift with me mate, eh. They've got diggers tearing up the bush, man, it's a fucken war zone.'

'Makes you want to cry,' Celeste chips in. 'People live up there, eh. It's bad enough for the trees and the birds and all the little animals, but what about the people who live there?'

Chris just nods, slowly. When the kettle whistles, Celeste makes a pot of tea, then puts the pot, a jar of lumpy sugar with ants in it, and four enamel mugs on the table. She perches on the spare upturned tin, on the shimmying elephant, and shrugs her sarong up, pushing her breasts around as if in search of comfort.

'Tits get so full up with milk, eh. So bloody heavy.' She laughs. 'Baby drinks one side then goes to sleep and I'm all lopsided.'

'I want to even her up,' Moonshadow says, leaning across the table to stroke Celeste's neck, 'but she won't let me.'

Celeste pours the tea, saying nothing, her eyes tightening, an old argument getting gratefully thin.

'New haircut Celeste?' Chris breaks the silence. 'Looks great.'

'Thank you Chris,' she says sharply. 'Moonshadow hates it. It was just too hard with it long and the baby and everything.'

Feels so much lighter now, eh. A hairdresser up on Lawless cut it. She's bloody brilliant. Cutting everyone's hair up there.'

The baby cries. It sounds like a bird or the mewling of a kitten. Moonshadow doesn't seem to hear it. Celeste slams down her cup and gets up to pick up the baby. Perching back on the upturned tin, she balances the baby, drops one side of the sarong and puts her nipple in the baby's mouth. Suckling sounds fill the room.

'Have my chair Celeste. Rest your back,' Chris says gently, standing up.

Moonshadow pushes his own chair back, raising a ring of dust on the floor.

'Good idea,' he says. I don't think he's referring to the chair for Celeste. 'Run me up to me mate's place, will ya Mazzo?'

When they leave, I take Moonshadow's chair. The baby's noisy suckling is dominating the room.

'What's the baby called?' I ask, trying to make conversation.

'We don't know,' Celeste says in her cooey voice. 'She's not big enough to have a personality yet, so we can't tell what she should be called.'

My head swirls, searching for a response, failing.

'Must be hard, living here with a baby.'

'Yeah, a bit. Sometimes. Close to nature, eh, but I can't get the nappies clean. Baby's got a rash. Makes her cry, poor thing. Could you ask Chris to get me some cream for her next time he comes?'

'You can't get into town?' I wouldn't want to be stuck in this hole with a baby.

'Oh yeah. Sometimes we get a lift in to pick up the dole, get some supplies. Moonshadow doesn't believe in cream for rashes, but. Nature takes care of its own, he reckons. He can't see that the rash just gets worse. Probably cos he doesn't

change her nappies.'

I change the topic.

'Interesting name, Moonshadow. Unusual. It's from a song, right?'

'Song?' Celeste shakes her head, confused. 'He used to be called Candle, eh. Changed it when the baby was born. Said her being in the world gave him more responsibility. A candle lights up a room, but moonshadow lights the world he reckons.'

I feel my eyebrows rise. How can a shadow light up anything? I can't think up a reply.

'It's really deep, eh,' Celeste keeps on, undeterred. 'Reckoned he had to light the world for the baby. And he really has changed since she was born.'

'Ah.' He could have called himself Sunlight. Or even Neon. That would almost sound like a real name. I don't say it. 'Different how?'

The baby coughs, splatters. Celeste pulls her away from the breast, lies her stomach-down across her thighs, and pats her back.

'Different how?' Celeste sighs, screws up her eyes, and draws a deep breath. 'He's just more like a man now, I guess. Before the baby we used to do the same things, you know, do things together.'

'Since the baby?'

'He just does man things.'

'Man things? Like fix the car?'

Celeste laughs, a tinkle, and her face lights up. She's more relaxed now that the blokes are gone.

'Always got his head under the bonnet of the fucking car. Never actually gets the thing to go.'

'Sounds familiar.' Finally a topic I understand. 'Communing with the internal combustion engine. I've had boyfriends who spent more time under the bonnet than they

did with me.'

'Yeah. That's not what I mean about him being different now, but.' Celeste picks up the baby, rearranges her sarong and helps the baby take the other nipple. 'Candle used to cook. And he'd wash the clothes, stomping on them with his feet in the big tub, singing out loud. Ordinary chores were fun with him, before the baby. Since then it's like a line's been drawn and now I do all the washing and cooking and all that house stuff. And I look after the baby, eh. I get to be Mother while he contemplates the meaning of fatherhood.' Celeste sighs again. 'Not that I should complain. He really does do man things, sometimes. Doesn't just sit there getting stoned all the time.'

'What man things does he do?' The dope's making me want to giggle. I think it's the dope. Giggling would be bad.

'He works a bit, digging graves, brings in a bit of cash. He's not much good with the baby anyway. Can't handle it when she cries. Reckons that when she grows up a bit he'll teach her to throw a ball properly. Need a dad to teach them that. Apparently. More tea?'

'I'll get it.' Movement might work as an antidote to the dope. There's enough water in the kettle to save me from going near the tank of writhing snakes.

Celeste lays the baby on the table and takes off her nappy. A harsh red rash flares around the baby's groin. I find the bottle of Oil of Ulay in my bag, put some on my burning mosquito bites and give it to Celeste.

'Keep it.'

'Jesus, thanks. Poor little thing,' she says, gently rubbing the lotion into the rash. 'This fucking rash is going to do me in. I boil the nappies in a 44-gallon drum out there. They're clean but they don't get all nice and soft. Baby Health Centre nurse says I shouldn't live out here like this. Moonshadow reckons she's a square, she's just part of the system. We're

living with nature, eh.'

Celeste sounds like she's trying to convince herself. I wouldn't live out here like this if you paid me, especially not with a baby. I keep my mouth shut and pour the tea. Celeste puts a new nappy on the baby, throws the dirty one into a bucket, and slings the baby up on her shoulder. She starts swaying, singing quietly.

*Hush little baby, don't cry and squall,
Papa's gunna teach you to throw a ball.*

Raucous birdcalls ring through the forest. Light dapples through the windows making the cobwebs shine like silk. Celeste puts the sleeping baby in the basket, heaves a sigh and slumps into a chair.

'I'm not saying Moonshadow doesn't do anything, eh.' She still sounds like she's trying to convince herself. 'He kills the snakes too, that's a man thing.'

'Snakes?'

'Yeah. They can get into the basket and strangle the baby.'

'Really?' I definitely wouldn't live out here.

'You hear about it. Got a friend who found a python completely wrapped around her baby. She had to stab the python to death before it killed the baby.'

I'm struggling to think of something to say that won't make me sound like the square nurse from the Baby Health Centre.

'So, ah, what do you do when you need help?' I hope this doesn't sound offensive. 'I mean, one of my friends had a baby and she had to keep asking her mum for help. She didn't know anything.'

'Yeah. It's hard. There's old Annie Whelan, across the hill, about half an hour's walk away, eh. Went to see her when I'd missed two periods. I was totally freaked out. Didn't know what to do and I didn't want Candle to know — he was Candle back then. If I'd told my friends eventually they

would have told him. No secrets in the rainforest!

‘She’s helpful?’

‘Old Annie? She was really weird at first. I was pretty upset, you know, confused I guess. Didn’t know if I could cope with a baby here. She told me I should get rid of it, that I was too young to have a baby and this was no place to bring one up. Showed me this thing, some kind of syringe thing with a rubber bag and a nozzle you put up yourself. Annie said to mix up soap and water and Dettol and pump it up inside. Said the baby would just come out after a bit. It was a horrible thing, scarier than being pregnant.’

‘Jesus! I’ve never heard of anything like that.’ The thought of pumping frothy antiseptic water into my vagina makes me retch.

‘She was really keen that I get rid of it,’ Celeste keeps on, ignoring my reaction. ‘When I wouldn’t take the syringe thing she gave me bit of stick, elmbark she said it was, and told me to use that. Stick that up myself. She made me bring it home but I threw it away.’

‘What was it supposed to do?’

‘Same thing. Get rid of the baby. She said everyone does it sometime.’

I’ve slipped through a time warp. I’ve met the drover’s wife, saving babies from snakes, shoving sticks up her vagina against the possibility of more hungry mouths, sweeping dust from a dirt floor. I drag myself back to the late twentieth century.

‘I thought, you know, if you need an abortion you go to a clinic.’

‘No clinics around here. Used to be a doctor who did it but he left town. You have to go to Brisbane now. Well, people say there’s a bloke in town does it, but he’s not on Medicare or anything. I didn’t have any money, didn’t want to ask anyone for it.’

'That's shit. In Sydney the doctor just refers you to a clinic. A friend of mine got pregnant by accident. Didn't even know for sure who the father was. She just went to the clinic. No hassle, no pain. She was so relieved. So were we, her friends. She would have been a crap mother.'

'Sydney's a whole different world. The concrete jungle. Is that where you're from?'

'Surry Hills, inner Sydney. I share a house with a girlfriend.'

'That'd be nice, eh. What do you do with yourself all day?'

'Work for a newspaper. Trainee journalist.'

'I didn't know girls can do that. That'd be alright, eh.' Celeste stares out the window. 'Bit different to living here.'

A rustling sound in the roof captures Celeste's attention. She points upwards, at a snake slithering along a rafter, grabs one of the river stones from the table and throws it, so quickly that the snake and the stone are falling to the floor before I realise what's going on.

'Jesus, I hate those bastards,' Celeste says, throwing another stone at the snake as it slithers out under the wall. 'More tea?'

~

When we're driving on up the mountain Chris tells me that Moonshadow thinks I'm a witch.

'Someone who calls himself Moonshadow wants to call me a witch?'

'Now, now, Lou. Don't be harsh. He's got the whole fatherhood thing to cope with.'

'Yeah.' I say it the same way as Celeste did. 'Having a bit of trouble with it, it seems. So why I am a witch?'

'Your eyes.'

'What about them?'

'Well, they're, um, slightly different colours to each other,' Chris says tentatively. 'You know that don't you?'

I hate it when people talk about my eyes. Out the window I spy several craggy goats in the undergrowth. I'm about to comment on them, to change the topic, when Chris speaks again.

'I think they're beautiful eyes,' he says, as if he's trying to make me feel good.

'It's congenital heterochromia. My dad's eyes are the same. Mum teases him about it being an occult Irish thing. It's not very noticeable though, is it? Anyway, talking about witches,' and not talking about my eyes, 'Celeste told me about someone called Annie, lives over the hill or somewhere. She really does sound like a witch.'

'Old Annie's a witch now?

'Celeste said she told her how to get rid of the baby. Told her to use some kind of grotty syringe thing and soap, and then she gave her a bit of stick to put up herself. You know, so she'd miscarry. Sounded like the dark ages.'

Chris, never judgmental, simply shrugs, and crunches down the gears to take a corner. It's forest all around now, as far as the eye can see. And there's another little group of goats.

'Real hillbillies, the Whelans,' Chris says. 'Been living up there in a hut forever.'

'What do they do?'

'When?'

'For work.'

'They used to be cedar millers. Now they're thieves. Maybe not Annie. She grows vegetables and keeps a cow. They'd all be dead if it wasn't for her. But the blokes are all thieves.'

'What do they steal up here?'

I can see nothing but trees, and, occasionally, goats. Every now and then we pass a track that must lead to a hut or a little farm or something.

'There's lots of stuff to steal.'

'Like what?' It's easy to accuse outsiders of being thieves. I want proof.

'Uncle's got a paddock not far from them, down the other side of the hill. He put in a new bore for water for the sheep, put a petrol pump on it. The next time he went up to the paddock it was gone. So he drove to the Whelans, sat in his ute for a while, and the old man walked out of the house with the pump, put it in the back of Uncle's ute. Didn't say a word, neither of em, so the story goes.'

'So they're honest thieves! Perhaps he just borrowed the pump.'

Chris laughs, and swerves to miss a dead animal on the road.

'Uncle sent me up there once. Reckoned they'd stolen some of his lambs, but when he drove up there he couldn't see the Whelans or the lambs. He wouldn't get out of the ute. He's worried they might shoot at him. So he sent me to visit. Guess he thinks I'm expendable. Of course, the Whelans don't shoot at me. They invite me in for tea instead.'

'Did you find the lambs?'

'They had three lambs with ribbons round their necks in the lounge room in a, you know, a little kid's playpen. And two lambskins hanging from the rafters. Still pink and pliable. Old Annie helped me carry the lambs out, friendly as anything, talking to the lambs, as though she'd been babysitting. Kissed the lambs goodbye and everything. I left them the skins.'

My head's awash with images of dirty syringes, lambs in baby bonnets, Celeste's baby's rash, mixed up with flashes of bull ants climbing on the dead woman in the park. The truck's creeping slowly around corners on the narrow forest road, a verdant tunnel, tree ferns brushing against the windows.

'There are a few tapes in the glove box,' Chris says. 'Can

you find something to listen to?’

I rifle through the tapes. Chris has the same music as my brother. Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Bruce Springsteen, none of which I feel like, but at the back there’s Rodriguez’s ‘Cold Fact’.

‘Don’t know many people who’ve got this.’ I hold up the Rodriguez tape.

‘It’s one of Pers’s.’

The tape’s halfway through. I slide it in the player and am about to rewind it when I take a chance and press play. It’s ‘I wonder’, my favourite track. I can’t stop myself from singing with it, embarrassed by my awful voice, but when Chris joins in with his warm baritone I feel fine.

I wonder how many times you been had

And I wonder how many dreams have gone bad ...

I concentrate on the music. I don’t want to think about hillbillies or dead people or anything. The dope just amplifies the oddities. I sing along with Chris as the truck winds up through the forest.

I wonder, I wonder, wonder I do.

17

Another turn off. Another bumpy track. The truck rattles over potholes and ruts until we reach another shack. Barking dog out front, slate-blue and white, scrawny. I can't take any more hillbillies. I stay in the truck and watch Chris pick his way through the weeds and around to the back of the shack, a bag over his shoulder. There's a burning in my ankles as if flames are licking up my legs. I scratch the swollen mosquito bites until they begin to bleed, and have to interlock my fingers behind my head to stop myself. Don't feel the itch. Just focus on the shifting patches of light shimmering through the trees. Until one patch morphs into the face of the woman who died in the park, forcing me to think about her.

I replay that afternoon in the park in my mind's eye like a film. The woman's ragged outline in the bushes. My too-slow approach. The gurgle of fear in my stomach as I lean down and move the dirty sheet. The woman's whisper, the croak in her throat. Nid Kelly lawless. The film halts, stuck in that groove, replaying her voice, a scratched record. Who is he? Her boyfriend? Some psychopath who fancies himself as Ned Kelly? Someone from a prominent local family? Is that why

the hospital and the cops say they've never heard of her? Are the cops still dealing with 'complications', as Earl put it, like they were with Aileen's death? That would explain why Ed hadn't filed a report. There's got to be something rotten in this town, and I want to find out what it is. And the only way I can do that is by finding someone who knew the woman in the park so I can start to piece her story together.

What do I already know? Concentrate. Swollen splotches on her ankles. Mosquito bites! Had she been on a boat? I pull my notebook out of my bag and write '*mosquito bites?*', '*check marina?*'. Or perhaps she was camping, '*check camping grounds?*'. I slowly reconstruct every part of the woman's face in the hope of more clues. The eye make-up, all run from crying, is hard to interpret. Some women wear make-up when they're going somewhere special, others won't leave the house without it. Sunburnt cheeks but very fair skin under her fringe. A tourist? From a place with sun more gentle than Australia's harsh rays, so the woman didn't know to protect herself from it? Overseas tourist? If she was from Hicks Inlet surely someone would be missing her by now. Concentrate. Blonde hair, cut in a neat bob, just like Celeste's.

Hair like Celeste's. Celeste talked about having it cut by a woman at, where ...? It could be the same hairdresser. If I can find her she might know the dead woman. Long shot, but long is better than none. Trying to dredge up the details from the bizarre conversation with Celeste makes my head start to whirl again. I curl up on the bench seat and focus on leaves turning in the breeze, and don't protest when Chris comes back and gently lifts my head and rests it against his thigh. I doze, half aware of the rhythmic rumble of the engine and light flickering through in the trees as we wind our way up the mountain to Toolloola.

~

When I wake up we're in the middle of a noisy market.

Chris has the canvas side of the truck rolled up. He's got a small queue of customers. I straighten my clothes and get down from the cabin. Chris, busy, talking, weighing, counting out money, nods at me, smiles. I'm dying of thirst.

Market stalls ring the park outside the railway station, which looks much too grand for such a small town. The clock on its tall tower shows ten o'clock. With a panic I realise I haven't done anything about work. I've got to get the train back to Hicks Inlet. Among the big pots of rhododendrons and begonias on the platform I find the timetable. One train up the mountain in the morning, one back down to Hicks Inlet late in the afternoon. I'm stuck. Now what? First, quench that thirst. Back in the market I get a fresh watermelon juice and a chocolate brownie and sit under a banana tree to think the problem through.

Justifications can always be found, given enough time. I finished Friday's paper while Ed went fishing and Charlene was being beautified. They'll be rested up, ready to take on today's work for Monday's paper. It'll be good for them. Most of it is sports and weddings anyway, and Alec will do that on Sunday. I can go in and help him. There's Chris's idea about writing an article on the market — there hasn't been anything about it in the *FNQ Mail* for at least a year. A very suitable piece of reporting for a girl journalist up from the south for a short stint to learn the ropes. It might even churn up some advertising. I queue for the phone at the station and ring the office, tell Charlene that Earl sent me on an assignment and I won't be back until Sunday, and hang up before she can complain.

Here I go. Investigating the market. Clothes stalls selling sarongs, tie-died t-shirts and singlets, long flowery skirts and hand-made leather belts. Stalls with pot plants and seedlings, jams and preserves, others with carved driftwood, home-made candles, second-hand books, plants. Food stalls with

juices and cups of tea and plates of scones. I introduce myself to stall-holders as a reporter from the *FNQ Mail*, notebook and pen in hand, taking names and phone numbers for Charlene in our 'advertising department'. The stall-holders are happy to talk. The market is mostly for tourists who come up on the little train in the morning and are stranded with nothing to do until the train goes back in the afternoon. Only the intrepid brave the heat to go beyond the market or the pub across the road. I'm starting to look forward to writing this article, getting into the groove, when, at one of the jewellery stalls, there are earrings the same as the ones the woman in the park was wearing.

'Did you sell a pair of these green and silver earrings to a blonde woman with a bob?' I ask the stall-holder when she finally at looks at me.

'They're jade. They'd be perfect on you,' she says, ignoring my question. 'Bring out the green in your eyes.'

'Thanks.' I wonder if my eyes look particularly unusual today. 'Blonde woman with a bob. Small. She's got these earrings. Do you remember her?'

'I can't remember everyone!' she laughs. 'Not even blondes with bobs.'

'I don't suppose you know who the hairdresser is?'

'You're kidding! Hairdressers are a dime a dozen round here,' the woman says, turning to a customer.

A tall young woman with a nose ring turns around and looks at me with bloodshot eyes.

'There's a chick up at Lawless doing the bobs. Great hairdresser.'

'Lawless?'

'You know, Lawler's Cove, up in the rainforest. Across the Cedar. Everyone calls it Lawless, because it is,' she says with a grin.

'What's her name? The hairdresser?'

'She's ...' the woman scratches her head. 'Dunno. Short-term memory's fucked. Ask around at Lawless, someone will know her.'

'Thank you! Thanks so much!'

I resist hugging the young woman, who has stepped back, looking at me as if I'm off my face. I don't care. Lawless is Lawler's Cove, of course. That's what the woman in the park was talking about. Maybe. It's not much evidence, really. Hang on, Celeste said the same thing about her haircut, at least I think she did. Chris will remember. And then I'll have corroboration. On the way back to the truck I line up for more watermelon juice, jiggling in a little dance in the queue. When I give a juice to Chris he drinks it in a single gulp and keeps serving customers.

There's a little patch of shade beside the truck, a patch of dirt to sit on, the front tyre for a back rest. I perch there, on my haunches, trying to stop jiggling, willing the line of customers to go away, needing to talk to Chris. Lawler's Cove is up past the Cedar River. Will Chris take me up in his yacht? Can we drive there? But he's got to do the market today and I can't wait until tomorrow. I've got to go now. I roll a cigarette for Chris and hold it up enticingly. He's giving me a smile, he's got more customers. I jiggle. Finally he gets a break.

'Got ants in your pants?' He lights the cigarette. 'Thanks for this. And the juice. I was dry as a dead dingo's donger.'

'As a what?'

'Some bloke said it to me while I was drinking the juice. New one on me. Anyway, what's up with you?'

'I've got to go up to Lawler's Cove. I think the woman from the park was from there. I think that's what she meant when she said lawless.'

'Why?'

'Well, she had the same haircut as Celeste.'

'The same haircut? Bit of a stretch isn't it?' Chris says

gently. He turns to serve another customer. It's a strong suggestion, coming from Chris, who rarely judges anything. It's a Chris equivalent of saying that I'm crazy. I get in the queue, wait my turn. See if he remembers what I don't.

'One banana, please. Where did Celeste say she got her hair cut?'

'Fifty cents.' He gives me a banana. 'Um, Lawless, yeah, I think she did say Lawless. I thought it was a strange place to go for a haircut.'

'And who did she say cut it?'

'A bloody brilliant hairdresser up on Lawless,' Chris says with a grin.

'See, that's it.' I drop out of the queue and return to my perch. Lawless is Lawler's Cove. Kelly might be the hairdresser's name. I thought the woman said Nid Kelly but she might have been saying need Kelly. Things are falling into place. Maybe. Long shot is better than no shot.

Back in Chris's slow queue, waiting my turn.

'Another banana please Chris. I've definitely got to go to Lawler's Cove.'

'On the basis of a haircut you'll go all that way?' Chris sounds like he's trying to calm me down. He puts a bunch of bananas in my hands.

'Chris, I can't find out anything about her in Hicks Inlet. I can't let it go. I have to try and find someone who knew her. How far is it? How do I get there?'

'With difficulty,' Chris replies. 'The Cedar's flooded, so the ferry's not running, and that means we can't go by road. I could take you up by boat on Sunday.'

'Thanks, but Sunday's too far away. Is there only one road in?'

'To Lawless? There's the long way.'

'What's the long way?'

'North up the main road from here and down Tin Miners'

Track. Rough roads.'

'Take me after the market?' I'm pushing it, I know.

'Dad's truck would fall apart on the Track. My panel van probably would too. You need a four-wheel drive for Tin Miners'. Anyway, it takes hours. Couldn't do it in the dark.' Chris shrugs, eyebrows raised, hands out. No way.

Shit. I leave the queue with my bananas. Put them in my bag. Wander round the stalls, looking for the girl with the nose ring, to try and find out if the hairdresser was called Kelly. I buy a jar of tea-tree moisturiser and a pretty teal-blue sarong, shot through with lime green in a wavy abstract pattern that reminds me of the sea in the dawn light. Nose-ring girl is nowhere to be found. I can't shake off that edgy feeling. I've got to go to Lawless now. I head back to the truck. As usual the only way to get to talk to Chris is by waiting in his queue.

'Lovely sarong,' Chris smiles. 'Highlights your eyes.'

He makes me laugh. I droop the sarong over my head and shoulders and clutch it together at my throat.

'Fee fie foe fum, Lawler's Cove, here I come.'

'Moonshadow's right after all. He's always seeing things that just pass me by,' Chris grins. 'How are you going to get there?'

'I'll hitch.'

'Desolate country out there. You might stand by the empty road for hours.'

'I'll be fine.'

Chris puts his hand on my shoulder and looks at me long and hard.

'You're pretty tough, aren't you? Like that about you.'

'I've got to find out who she was.'

'Take this.' He hands me a small roll of \$10 notes. 'Cash can get you out of all kinds of trouble. There's a mortadella roll for you in the lunch bag, and take the bottle of water.'

'Thanks Chris.'

'If you're not back by Sunday afternoon I'll sail up and find you. OK?'

'You're the best.' I kiss Chris on each cheek, like my mother would. 'Wish me luck.'

18

Tooloolo has one main street. Find it, turn north, put my thumb out and start walking out of town. So far so good.

A Holden ute pulls over. Old bloke. Akubra hat. Rheummy eyes. Red nose laced with thin veins. Khaki work shirt and pants, belly hanging over his belt. Kelpie, doleful eyes, tongue hanging out, shuffling on my feet. The old bloke says nothing for an hour, then tells me his wife has died and left him lonesome on the farm. When we stop at the farm gate he puts his hand on my thigh and invites me in for lunch. I give him my best smile, gently push his hand away, and get out.

Another ute. Surfboards in the back. Two young blokes, freckled, sunburnt, drinking XXXX beer from cans. T-shirts and board shorts, thongs on their dirty feet. They sit me in the middle of the bench seat like I'm a precious prize unexpectedly won. I'm ambiguous about destination, sticking with 'north'. They offer me a beer. I turn it down and have a swig from my water bottle. They don't know what to do with me and have no talent for conversation, so we all just sit nervously watching the road. I don't care if they're going all the way to Lawless. At the next one-pub town I get out.

I wait a long time for the next lift. Long enough for regrets.

Eventually a flat-bed truck pulls up. An Aboriginal couple with a baby and a grandmother in the cab at the front. I climb up into the back where half a dozen kids and two elderly women stare at me and make space. The women don't seem to understand me when I speak to them. They speak to the kids in a language I can't understand. The sun beats down on all of us. We go slowly along the empty dead-straight road, through rust-coloured earth barely bound by broken-down fences. Grey-blue saltbush blurs into the west. Cobalt hilltops ridge along the eastern horizon. One of the kids snuggles up to me and sleeps. Nothing but the road and the sun and the relentless blue sky. The truck's moving but time's stopped.

At a bridge everyone piles out, the kids suddenly lively, chattering and running down to the wide river below. They pull off their clothes and jump into the river, whooping, clowning, splashing and dunking each other. The older women and the couple with the baby sit in the shade of the only tree. I'm on the rocks with my feet in the water, scooping up handfuls to drink, envying the ease with which the kids had cast off their clothes, wishing I could do the same.

When the adults stand up and start to walk back to the truck the kids get out of the water, slip on their clothes and run to join them. One of the elderly women lets me take her arm and help her up into the truck. On we go, through the monotonous countryside. The sun slides slowly through the cerulean sky. No vehicles pass us, none approach. The women sleep. I'm hungry but one mortadella roll isn't going to go far. Thank you Chris for the bananas. The kids shyly take one each and I share one with the smallest. After that some of the kids play games with me, games that don't need talk. Rock, paper, scissors. Peek-a-boo. I'm stuck in some other world, wondering if I should have taken my chances with the boys with the beer.

When the truck stops at a crossroads with a pub on one corner, the man gets out and tells me that they're going west and the turn-off to the Tin Miners' Track is a mile or so up the road. Could drive me up to there, he says, but I might die waiting for someone to come along. He doesn't smile. It's not a joke. Easier to get a lift from the pub, he suggests. I thank him and the others in the cab up front, and wave to the kids as they drive away.

~

The pub looks deserted. The only sign of movement anywhere is the cloud of dust from the truck merging into the horizon. It's hot, but a drier heat than in Hicks Inlet, and easier to bear. On closer inspection it becomes clear that the pub is deserted. A scrap of paper on the door says 'Gone to town. Back about six.' I guess that's a while away yet.

There's shade on the verandah, and a rickety wooden bench. The only sound is the warbling of chooks, somewhere out of sight. I eat the mortadella roll and finish the water. I sit and watch the road, listen for an engine, ready to spring up. Nothing comes and nothing goes.

A snake slicks out of the shadow of the fuel bowser and winds slowly in my direction. I jump up and walk gingerly around the side of the pub, watching my feet, searching for a refuge. Cars without tyres and a row of straggly gums, a water tank and a chookpen in their meagre shade. I fill my bottle from the tap on the water tank. Two chooks are having a spat, squawking and kicking up dust with their horny feet. The rest watch from perches in the shady pen. I figure they won't tolerate snakes. I pick up a handful of stones, climb up on top of the pen, brush the leaves and dirt from the roof, and sit in the shadiest part. Still nothing comes, nothing goes. Just me and the chooks. I lay out the sarong, curl up on it, and shut my eyes.

~

The sky's pewter. Day's gone from the eastern horizon. It's hanging on in the west, layers of apple red and raspberry, apricot and tangerine, pineapple and butter yellow. There's a dust-mote sheen over the low scrub stretching out to the west. And there are lights in the pub. At last. I scramble down from the roof, say goodbye to the now quiet chooks, brush myself off and run to the door. The glare of half a dozen men at the bar slows me down. They're all muscle, whopping shoulders and biceps bulging out of singlets, thick calves disappearing into workboots. Short, clipped hair, tanned faces, eyes on me. I square my shoulders, take a deep breath, and walk to the bar as nonchalantly as I can.

'G'day. A beer, and some nuts please.'

'You can nibble my nuts,' one of the blokes snickers. I clamp my eyes on the beer flowing into the glass and watch the white bubbles foaming, imagining punching the bloke in the face, and the sound of his nose cracking.

'Don't suppose you know of anyone going to Lawler's Cove?' I ask the barman when he gives me the beer.

'I'll take ya, love,' another bloke says, more jeer than invitation. 'We'll both take ya,' the first bloke chips in.

Wham! Bam! Right hook. Left jab. If only.

'Lay off,' the barman tells them. He's got the weary look of a kindergarten teacher on Friday afternoon. 'They've been out in the shearing sheds too long. Lost their manners,' he says to me. 'Barney's out back. He likes a run down to Lawless. He'll take you for a price.'

'Old Barney?' the creepiest bloke sneers. 'Why should he get all the fun?'

'What kind of price?' I'm speaking as quietly as I can, leaning towards the barman.

'Petrol money.'

'Cool. Whereabouts out back should I look for him?' I didn't see anyone out there.

'Barn had a big day in town. He'll be sleeping it off. You can ask him first thing tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?' A whole night to kill.

'Can give you a room and dinner for a tenner. Nothing fancy.'

'That's great, thanks.' I fish one of Chris's tenners out of my bag and swap it for a key.

'Out that door, down the corridor. Bathroom's opposite. Dinner will be ready in about an hour.'

It's a bare room, reminiscent of Mrs Swain's, but clean enough and the door locks. I sit on the bed and drink the beer, throwing nuts into the air and catching them, sometimes, in my mouth. It's a long time until tomorrow. It's a long time until dinner. I take the scratchy towel to the bathroom. That door locks too. The shower's got one tap, and the water's neither hot nor cold but there's soap. I've got no clean clothes, so I put the dirty ones back on, go to the bar and sit at the end near my door. The blokes ignore me. They must have got a lecture.

Dinner's a meat pie with peas and tomato sauce, and just fine. Beer washes it down and makes me sleepy. I give a nod of thanks to the barman and go back down the corridor. Wipe my teeth with my fingers, rinse my underwear and shirt in the tepid water, roll them in the towel and dash back across the corridor in my sarong. Lock the door. I don't want to be raped and beaten and left to die. I hang my wet clothes from the chair in the hope they'll be dry by morning, and collapse on the bed.

~

The melodic warble of magpies wakes me before the sun's up. The blind threatens to tear when I open it. Smouldering orange light rims the horizon. I creep out to the bathroom for another tepid shower before I put on my damp clothes.

In the yard an old man's throwing handfuls of grain to the

chooks, calling them by name as he goes, asking one if it still has a sore foot and another if it's going to deign to lay an egg. He's dressed the same as the farmer who gave me a lift yesterday, but his silvery hair is in a plait down his back. He smiles when he turns around and sees me. He's bald up top.

'You must be the girl.'

'I guess I must. The only girl for miles around it seems.'

'Blokes in the bar give you a hard time?' He gives me a sympathetic look.

'They did.'

'Get a bit rough, the boys, when they've had a few.'

'Yeah, they were a bit rough.' I'm a Sydney girl with a hard-earned resistance to being hassled by men, but it's nice to hear someone suggest I didn't deserve it.

'You're safe with me,' Barney says. 'I'm too old for that sort of thing.'

'I'm Lou.' I stretch out my hand. 'I'm too old for that sort of thing too.'

'Pleased to make your acquaintance Lou,' he grins, shaking my hand firmly. 'We're going to be ok. 'Come on, it's a long trip. We'd better eat.'

In the hotel kitchen Barney cooks eggs and bacon for our breakfast. Makes a big pot of tea, pours two large mugs, and puts the rest in a rum bottle with a couple of spoons of sugar. We eat at the big workbench in the kitchen, then I wash up. Time to hit the road.

Barney fills the diesel tank in his old jeep and a couple of jerry cans. He tells me how much to pay for the fuel and I put a couple more of Chris's tenners in the tin behind the bar. The jeep's open-topped and noisy. Barney starts a conversation that mostly consists of him yelling out aspects of his life story and me yelling 'what?' in reply, but after we turn down the Tin Miners' Track we go so slowly I can hear everything he says. He's happy with monologue and my occasional grunts

to show that I'm listening. He tells me that he's worked all over the country as a shearer or stockman, anything on a farm but picking fruit or cotton, which he considers beneath his dignity. He points out houses in the distance and tells me the history of each property, how many sheep they ran, and how many shearers they used to have back when he was young.

When farmland gives way to bush Barney grows quiet, concentrating on negotiating the rough track. We pass small clearings with corrugated iron huts surrounded by washing on lines and rusty car wrecks and scratching chooks. Dogs bark and run alongside the truck and Barney waves to the people who come out to see what the racket's about. Around lunchtime we turn into one of the little clearings. A small, grey-haired woman is sitting in the shade of her hut with a dog. She gets up in a slow ratcheting movement and hugs Barney with delight. When I get introduced to Elsie all I get from her is a curt hello. The dog is friendlier, bringing me a stick.

'What treats have you got for me today, Barn?' the woman says, looking in the back of the truck.

'Sausages from the German butcher in town. I was lucky he had some,' Barney says proudly, as if he'd brought fillet steak. He carries bags of biscuits, dry and canned food and potatoes, onions and carrots to the table. He's right at home, putting the sausages in a frypan on a gas burner and poking at them with a fork while she puts the vegetables in a hessian bag hanging from a branch. I play with the dog, throwing the stick which it catches every time and brings back covered in slobber for me to throw again.

Barney wraps the sausages in slices of bread and we sit on rickety chairs outside the hut to eat them. They're bloody good for Australian sausages, meaty and peppery. Elsie puts on the kettle for tea. The dog brings me his stick, and I play

with him while the others yak. When we leave Barney promises Elsie fresh fish for dinner. If he's going to get back here with fish we can't have far to go.

After Elsie's place the track becomes steep and corroded. I'm holding on tight to what Barney calls the panic bar above the door and he's fully concentrated on the track. There are no houses any more, just trees with branches reaching to the sky, ferns in the undergrowth, and the terrifying track. Barney's still talking.

'This forest is more than 135 million years old,' he tells me, 'and it's got one third of the world's frogs, marsupials and reptiles. One third! Did you know that?'

The jeep slips and slides. I cling to the panic bar and shake my head.

'Two-thirds of all the types of bats and butterflies in the whole world are here too,' he says, clutching the steering wheel. 'Amazing, isn't it?'

We skid down a deep rut in the track. I grip the dashboard and nod.

'More than four hundred species of bird. Four hundred! The mind boggles. I can name about a dozen. Twenty if I'm lucky.' Barney ploughs on. 'That green one flying across the track, the one with the purple chest, for example. Did you see it? I know that's a Wompoo pigeon. Glorious, isn't it?'

The jeep stalls in a creek crossing. Above us a waterfall catches the sun in a rainbow. Barney acts as though he stopped on purpose, just so I could take in the beauty of the rainforest.

'And more species of trees than they can count. See that bull kauri.' He's pointing, I'm seeing hundreds of trees, all different. 'Stately old thing eh? The bull kauri grows more than forty metres tall. See those little orchids, green ones? Pretty eh?' he says as the starter motor grinds without effect. 'More than ninety species of orchids, and more than forty

species of fern,' and on he goes, as though he spends his days reading encyclopaedias and studying tree books.

Finally the engine turns over and Barney does a little cheer and we bump down the track towards Lawless.

19

Barney leans forward, peering through the windscreen, his sun-spotted hands locked tightly around the steering wheel, and slowly manoeuvres the jeep down the hill. I'm still clinging to the panic bar, rising from my seat like a jockey as we jolt over deep potholes, struggling to remain upright as we swerve around fallen rocks and branches. Vines looping down from trees like party streamers bang against the windscreen and the sides of the vehicle, long slow wallops breaking up the harsh mechanical crunch and grind as Barney changes gears. Around a sudden corner we run into a creek overhung with lime green ferns, water sparkling as it sluices over rocks down the hillside before turning brown and treacherous in a slippery mud-bath across the track that makes the jeep slide dangerously towards the sheer drop into the rainforest below. Neither of us speak. We're battling the track, consumed.

Then suddenly brilliant blue sea flashes through the treetops. It makes me cry out in delight and relief.

'Nearly there, girlie,' Barney yells over the roar of the engine. 'Always a relief to catch that first bit of blue. Just

before it comes into view I start thinking I'm descending into hell, prettiest version of hell that ever was.'

As we creep and wind and jolt, wide white sands and wisps of smoke from campfires come into view.

'Lot of people living down here these days,' Barney yells. 'Used to be just Bill and the odd person passing through. People camp here for weeks on end now.'

The track ends in a small clearing. Barney switches off the engine and stretches.

'You looking for someone? Or just looking?' Barney asks. It's the first time he's asked me anything about myself.

'A hairdresser,' I say, knowing how ridiculous it sounds.

'A hairdresser? You're kidding me! You came all the way up here for a haircut?' Barney says, his face lit up with fun.

I just shrug and grin. What could I say?

'Oh well, it takes all types, as they say. Bill'll know who it is. Knows everyone on Lawless, Bill does.'

Barney and I walk along the beach. It's idyllic, a fanciful paradise with palm trees waving gently in the wind where the forest meets the beach and the ocean glistening in the afternoon light. Men and women in sarongs, singlets and shorts sit motionless in front of small tents under the trees, watching us as we walk along. We're a curious pair, I guess.

Bill's place is a conglomeration of corrugated iron huts at the far end of the beach. An aluminium dinghy with an outboard motor is pulled up onto the sand in front of it. A boy in baggy shorts and a cricket hat is playing in the shade, bouncing a ball on a bat. A small wiry man, skin leathered by the sun, appears in the doorway.

'Bill!'

'Barn, me old mate!'

Barney asks me to wait on the beach while he goes to talk with Bill. The boy listens to the two men closely, then comes out to me.

'Got to take you to Kelly's.' He does a cartwheel and sets off back down the beach.

Kelly! Need Kelly from Lawless. Is it possible? I want to do cartwheels too. Barney gives me a wave, as if to say goodbye, and I call out a feeble thanks, torn between wanting to give him a hug of gratitude and catching up with the boy. He stays ahead of me, running and stopping to do cartwheels while he waits for me. He slides to a halt in the sand by a little creek. There's a small tent encircled by mirrors hanging in the trees.

'Kelly! Visitor!' the boy announces, then he takes off back up the beach, running and cartwheeling. A woman with long dark hair and a welcoming smile comes out of the tent. She's looking cool in a bikini top and sarong, making me conscious of my grubby, stinky shirt and shorts.

'Hello! Come for a cut? Need a bit of a tidy up?' she says, with an accent just like the woman in the park.

She's Irish! She sounds a bit like my dad. Of course! Listened to that accent all my life and I didn't pick it up! I miss things that stare me in the face. But finding out that she was a hairdresser was the clincher. There must be loads of Irish people around, and hardly any of them hairdressers. I feel sure I've made the right connection. Kelly must know the woman in the park. I didn't expect it to be this easy. Now what do I do? My hair feels like wire. God knows what it looks like. It's as good a place to start as any.

'My hair needs a wash, I think. I've been on the road.'

'Cup of tea? I'll put some water on. Have a seat.' She points at a flat rock. 'It's not too bad if you get your bum in the right bit.' She picks up the billy can and goes carefully over stones up the little rocky creek to fill it.

I slump onto the rock, suddenly exhausted, as if I've been tense as a stretched rubber band since I left Toolloola. A mosquito lands on my arm, rises high on its legs, ready to bite, and I slap it, leaving a small splash of blood and its

squished black body. I've been wondering what I was going to say if I found the hairdresser, but as usual I'm not prepared. My story, my search for someone who might have said something about needing Kelly in Lawless seems pretty flimsy, but hairdressers must hear the craziest things.

'Best way to do the wash is if you put your head right in here,' she calls from the creek. 'That alright with you?'

'Sure.' I'd like to put my whole body in the creek, get the grime off.

'There's a little pool back up there, bar of soap on the rocks. Have a bath. Makes you feel brand new.'

'Thanks, I feel filthy.' Guess I must look it too. Kelly shows me which rocks to step on to get to the pool, and leaves me to it. The ferns give me privacy. I pull off my clothes and test the water. The pool's cool with a stony bottom, and if I squat in the middle I can get in up to my neck. I soap myself a bit, then see Kelly sitting on the rock above me.

'Turn around and I'll wash your hair.' It's more command than suggestion. 'Stretch out here and put your head back.'

I turn and lie on the stones. I'm pricklingly conscious of my nakedness, of my erect nipples and pubes jutting out of the water. Kelly's squatting at my head, washing my hair, businesslike, as if we were in a salon.

'Going to put this tea-tree oil on it for conditioner. Makes it easier to comb, stops it getting so dry.'

She massages my head, smiling down at me. The water is trickling over my body. I'm tingling down to my toes.

'Slide up here in front of me and I'll comb it before you get out.'

I slide and the pebbles ripple under my back and my bum. She holds me tight between her legs.

'It's going to look so much better, feel so much better. The creek water is so good for your hair,' she says in a professional hairdressery tone, as if I'm not naked, not

couched between her legs. 'Chuck your clothes in the pool. They'll freshen up. Not the same as a washing machine but better than caked-in dirt. You'll dry real fast. You can wear this sarong.' And then she lets me go, and I miss her touch.

By the time I've stomped on my clothes in the pool for a while my body is dry. I tie the sarong the way Celeste tied hers and hang my clothes on the trees. I'm going native already.

'Tea's ready,' Kelly calls out.

On the table there's tea in two enamel cups and a tin with biscuits. Kelly's dark eyes are crinkled up in a smile. She's bewitching. I wasn't expecting that.

'So,' she says slowly, in her pretty Irish voice, 'haven't seen you around here before. What brings you to Lawless?'

'I ..., there was a woman, in the park in Hicks Inlet.' I still haven't worked out what to say. 'I think she talked about you.'

'My fame spreads far and wide.' Kelly laughs, swatting a mosquito.

'Blonde hair, nice bob. Earrings like these.' I pull the earrings out of my bag.

'Oh, they're lovely.' She reaches out and touches them, holding them up to the light. 'Get them at Toolloola market?'

She didn't hear what I said, or pretends not to. I want to say I took them off the ears of a dead woman but it's too hard.

'They belonged to the woman in the park. I thought you might know her.'

'Lots of women around here with earrings like that.' She's dodging. There's a guarded edge in her voice that wasn't there before. The crinkles are gone from around her eyes. 'So many girls turn up for haircuts, it's unbelievable,' she says, shifting the topic again.

'You've got a good reputation. I heard about you at the

Toolloola market.'

'People come for haircuts from all over. Some customers give me food and stuff instead of money, which means I hardly ever have to leave the beach. I'm doing better here than I did in the salon back home.'

'Tell me about back home.' She's shifted the topic so far I decide to run with it. I've got all day, all weekend.

Kelly launches into a description of grey streets and skies, interminable soft rain and heavy mists, about small cold houses crowded with noisy kids, and about escaping to the warm pubs to listen to music and to dance. It sounds just like the stories my dad tells, as if Ireland hasn't changed in thirty years. It's comforting to hear such familiar things; it makes me feel safe. And then she makes me laugh, describing how a trip to the beach with a boyfriend meant driving down narrow lanes, sitting in the car, snuggling under a blanket to keep warm, putting the wipers on every now and then so they could see the big waves. Such a contrast to here where the blue sky stretches over the ocean to the horizon and a sarong is clothing enough. Perfect, she says, except for the mosquitoes that we slap at as they land on bare skin and poise for the bite.

'Worst at dawn and dusk, the little blighters,' Kelly laughs. 'You get used to them after a while. Main thing is not to scratch the bites,' she adds, looking at my scabby ankles. 'Worse up here in the bush than down at the water. Come down while the sun sets. This is such a special place. Have to take the time to enjoy it.'

We sit on the sand, not talking, watching the water reflect the gold-red hues of the setting sun. I promise myself I'll broach the topic of the woman in the park again when the first star comes out. And then it does, unexpectedly bright above the horizon. As soon as it appears others follow in rapid succession.

'Anyway, that woman ...' Here I go. Hold my nerve.

'Which woman?'

'Blonde, bob, those earrings. Oh, a cross around her neck.'

'This is about the woman in the park again? What's she got to do with me?' Kelly hasn't forgotten. She's looking at me intently through the darkness.

'I think she said your name. I want to know who she was.'

'Why didn't you ask her?'

'She ...' I take a deep breath. 'She was on the ground, under the bushes, in the park. I went to see if she was alright, and she wasn't. She said something about needing Kelly, about Lawless, at least I think that's what she said. And then she ... she died.'

'She died, this woman, in the park?' Kelly straightens up, shock in her voice, on her face.

'I went to the hospital to get help and when we got back she was dead.'

'Bloody hell. That's awful,' she says, putting her arm around my shoulders for a moment.

'The nurse from the hospital thought she'd been raped and beaten.'

I can feel Kelly tense up. The air goes still.

'Shit! And she's dead?' Kelly whispers.

'She died before I got back with the nurse. They took her to the morgue.' I'm whispering too.

Kelly is staring out at the sea, hugging her knees tight. I'm sure she knows who I'm talking about. I watch the light sparkling on the water and wait for her to speak. On the water's edge waves break in a white frill and dribble towards us. Kelly shakes herself and turns to me.

'So the cops are on it now? Looking for the bloke who did it?'

'Not last I knew. The cops told me they have no record of her. The hospital said the same thing. It makes no sense. I

seem to be the only person who remembers her and I don't know who she was.'

'That's not possible,' Kelly says. 'That's insane.'

'I know, it sounds bizarre, but if I had her name or something ...'

'Didn't she have a purse? Driver's licence? Utility bill?' she says, with her hand on my shoulder.

'Utility bill?' I don't even know what that is. 'Nothing. No bag. No purse. The earrings I showed you, mascara smudged all round her eyes, gold cross around her neck, a blouse with little orange and blue flowers, mosquito bites on her ankles.'

'The earrings you showed me? Those exact ones?'

'I took them off her ears. I don't know why.' I'm glad I did. I might be doubting that she existed by now if it wasn't for the earrings.

'And you think she said my name?' Kelly whispers. She definitely knows who the woman was. I'm sure of it now.

I nod, and Kelly puts her arm around me and pulls me close. Her body is soft and warm against mine, and it feels good, safe. I explain that I first thought the woman was talking nonsense about Ned Kelly, and then I have to explain what bushrangers are. I tell her about Chris and about Celeste's haircut, about the woman at the jewellery stall who told me about the famous hairdresser, about hitching up the back way and the blokes at the pub, about Barney and Elsie. Words pour out of me in a flood.

'You hitchhiked up here the long way around just to find me?'

'The Cedar is flooded. I had to do something.'

'You're a crazy woman, you know that?' Kelly murmurs and puts her other arm around me and hugs me tight. Small waves break near the shore and burble towards our feet, gentle, rhythmic. I can feel Kelly's heart beat. I don't want to move.

Two Down in Paradise

20

'Come on,' Kelly whispers in my ear. 'It's getting late. We should eat.' She gets up, takes my hand and pulls me up, and leads me back through the soft sand to the forest.

Kelly hauls a plastic box out of the tent and puts a blackened pot on the burner. She lights a candle, jams it into a pile of wax on the tree trunk, and passes me vegetables to cut: onions, garlic and ginger, potatoes, pumpkin and wilted carrots.

'Watch out for that bastard,' she points to a tree behind me with serrated heart-shaped leaves. 'Those leaves sting. Stay clear of them. This place is full of hidden dangers. Onions first. Sliced.'

She pours some oil into the pot and lights the gas. I slice the onions. If I cut myself with this blunt knife I'll probably get an infection. The whole world's full of hidden dangers.

'So, what do you do?' Kelly asks me, reaching for the onions. She's checking me out.

'I'm a trainee journalist, in Sydney. I'm in Hicks Inlet for three weeks' training. One week to go.'

'You want to find out about this woman for a newspaper

story?' Kelly's tone is accusative. She puts my sliced onions in the pot. They sizzle. 'Ginger and garlic next.'

'No, no, not for a story.' I hear defensiveness in my voice. I don't want to lie. 'Well, maybe, I don't know. I was the last person with her. It's incredible that the cops and hospital say they don't have a record of her. I want to know why.'

The ginger and garlic go into the pot.

'Did you tell the cops what you know?' she asks, spooning spices into the pot, stirring.

'It smells so good. No, I didn't tell the cops. I assumed the hospital would, or the morgue. She had no name, no ID. I just assumed the police would be notified.'

'Potatoes, about one inch dice. But why didn't you tell the cops?' Kelly says, going to the creek to wash lentils, or to give me time.

I peel potatoes, cut them as directed, try to think. When Kelly comes back she stirs the potatoes into the spices in the pot.

'Carrots and pumpkin. Same size,' she says, waiting, investigating me.

I'm concentrating on the pumpkin, the knife's not sharp enough to get through the skin, it keeps sliding off, threatening to cut me.

'You're going to think this is nuts,' I finally say. 'Last Saturday a woman, young woman, was brought in from the sea, dead. I was at the office when it was phoned in and went down to the dock to report. I thought it looked suspicious. She had this blue rope tied around her waist. The other end was frayed, like she'd been tied to something. The cops who were there, bringing her in, had to saw the rope away. I tried to ask questions, you know, interview them, but they just ignored me. They treated me like shit, actually. And then the boss wouldn't let me follow it up, even though I was the reporter on the scene. And Ed, the journo they call the police

roundsman, did this tiny report for the paper as though it was just a normal death, an everyday drowning.'

Kelly puts the carrots and pumpkin in the pot, adds lentils and water. Stirs slowly, looking at me, judging.

'And now you've got another dead woman.'

It's exactly what Chris said. Makes me feel like an ambulance chaser, like I'm just after the byline.

'Maybe it is for a newspaper story. Maybe I just want to investigate something, a story that's my own,' I concede. She's forcing me to come clean with myself. 'With the first woman, the report suggested she'd got in trouble snorkelling, but she was wearing a dress. When I pointed that out to Ed he just laughed it off. Even the boss, who is way more decent than Ed, wanted me to shut up about her, keep out of it. So when the woman died in the park and the hospital and the cops said they didn't know anything about her, and Ed never came in with a report on it, I guess I decided to find out myself.'

'I pretend these are greens.' Kelly holds up a handful of wispy seaweed. 'Big Bill put me on to them. Says they're good for you. OK with you if I put them in?'

'Anything for more greens.'

I figure Kelly's not going to say anything more about the dead woman for now. There's no rush. The curry smells great and I'm starving. At least she hasn't told me to piss off.

~

'Let's walk.' Dinner's done, plates and pots are washed. Kelly hasn't broached the topic of dead women and I've stayed clear of it too. I don't want to put her off. We set off down the beach, paddling in the shallows. A whisper of balmy breeze caresses my skin. Every now and then Kelly's warm arm touches mine, sending a tingle down to my toes.

'Your woman in the park might have been Rosie Gardner,' Kelly says quietly.

'Rosie Gardner?' Here we go. All things come to those who wait.

'She had those earrings. She had a shirt with blue and orange flowers. A gold cross. Blonde bob. Rosie had all those things, but then, other women could have them too.'

We walk along, splashing in the water. I see the woman's face as vividly as if she is in front of me right now.

'You know, she had a little mole, brown.' Why had I forgotten that?

'Where?' Kelly stops abruptly and faces me, her hands on my shoulders, her beautiful dark eyes on mine.

'Here.' I touch the spot above her lip where the woman had a mole. Kelly touches my finger, her hand enclosing mine, and brushes it against her bottom lip, not quite a kiss. There's a shiver of light on the water, moonshine on her beautiful face. We turn and walk again, hand in hand. I don't know where this is going but it is so good to touch and be touched, so simple and easy, after the crap from the blokes in the pub last night, after being with Rosie while she died, after everything.

'Rosie had a mole there. She hated it. I used to tell her it was a movie-star look but she wouldn't buy it. Covered it up with make-up. Couldn't find a way to like it, accept it. She always made her life harder than it needed to be.'

'Tell me about Rosie.' The dead woman has a name. She has a friend. I'm not on my own on this any more.

'Rosie. She came out to Oz with Dave, an old mate of mine. They're from home. They were camped here at Lawless. I came up because they were here. But we didn't really get along, Rosie and me.'

'No?'

Kelly's thumb is circling slowly, gently on my palm.

'Dave, my mate, is such a lovely bloke, gentle, slow, reliable. We went to school together. Rosie was from a better

part of town. She went to a private girls' school, run by nuns. They put the fear of god in them and taught them to be nice ladies. She had this air of being superior to Dave, to me. She was always complaining about the bush and the mosquitoes and how hard it is to get food. She was a real bloody princess, Rosie. Here we were, in paradise, and all she could see was hell.'

'Is Dave still here?'

'Dave went back home after Rosie dumped him. Not long after I got to Lawless Rosie started hanging around this surfer hunk type. At first I thought she was jealous of me being so close to Dave, you know, that she was putting on a show, but she really went for the surfer. He seemed rich, had a posh accent for an Aussie. Nathan. I thought he was up himself, but Rosie didn't see it. Nathan was athletic, muscular. Dave was soft, round. Rosie used to flirt with Nathan in front of Dave, go off up the beach with him, hang around in his tent. I felt so bad for Dave, but he just put up with it. Never complained. He's such a love. When Rosie finally took off with Nathan Dave moped around for a couple of weeks, shattered, then he decided to go back home.'

'When was this?' I know the Nathan type. He sounds like those north shore toffs at the paper in Sydney.

'Ages ago. Two months, three, probably. Lose track of time up here. Anyway, a couple of weeks ago Rosie came back, looking for Dave. Nathan had dumped her, surprise, surprise. Rosie was devastated when Dave was gone. Expected he'd be here to pick up the pieces. God knows why. Rosie thought it was my fault Dave had left. She reckoned she couldn't go home and she didn't know anyone else in Oz, so she stayed with me. Didn't even ask if it was ok. Just expected me to look after her.'

'That's a bit rough.' And here I am, just expecting Kelly to look after me.

‘Rosie didn’t have anything. No food, no sleeping bag, no money, just a bag of clothes. Big Bill lent her a sleeping bag, bless him — people leave stuff here and Bill collects it and redistributes it. But I had to feed her, clean up after her. She never washed a dish, never helped with anything. Moped around. Always saying she felt nauseous. Who uses that word? Sick, people say. Or crook, you Aussies say you’re feeling crook. Nauseous is posh talk. She was miserable all the time, bloody Rosie. Blamed Dave. Blamed Nathan. Everything was someone else’s fault.’

Kelly stops and points out phosphorescence sparkling on the sea, and kicks a hole in the soft wet sand with her heel. She slinks her arm around my waist and rests her head on my shoulder and I hold her tight, feeling the skin on her neck, feeling her chest rise and fall against mine. It’s different being like this with a woman. We are soft to touch, which I should have known but didn’t really, until now. If she was a bloke I’d be backing away, nervous, but instead I don’t want to let her go. It’s one night in paradise. I’m going to roll with it. I bet Robbo would do the same. Probably does, if I’m honest with myself.

When we turn back towards Kelly’s tent she starts talking again.

‘I thought of Rosie when you first showed up. Recognised her earrings right off. It seemed too much of a coincidence. I had a feeling something bad was going to happen with her. She was the kind of woman who’d throw herself under a train. But, well, a stranger turning up and asking about her made me want to be careful.’

We walk without talking for a while, listening to the suck and pull of the little waves, watching out for tiny crabs skittling across the sand.

‘Rosie wore a little cross round her neck,’ Kelly said quietly. ‘She used to kiss it all the time, and raise her eyes to

the sky. Used to pray at night. I could hear her, mumbling under her breath for god to save her as if she'd committed some great sin. It drove me up the wall. A few days ago I got angry and told her she should stop sulking. She burst into tears and stomped off to Big Bill's. She hung around him a lot. He's the patron saint of the Lawless lost and lonely.'

Kelly stoops to pick up a piece of driftwood and throws it in the sea, making a loud kerplunk and a glistening splash, and puts her arm through mine again.

'I should have gone after her, but I'd had enough. After a couple of hours Rosie came back and said Bill was taking her down to Hicks Inlet in his boat. She went into the tent to get her bag and put on her mascara, and, it turned out, to help herself to my money. I've always got a heap of cash. And then she was gone. Wearing that shirt with blue and orange flowers, her favourite shirt. She used to say it brought her good luck. I feel awful now, but I helped her out about as much as I could have. And she stole my money. You know,' Kelly adds, 'now that I think of it, I've got a photo of her and Dave and me here at Lawless.'

Back at the tent Kelly fishes through her bags for the photo. In the light of a match I see Kelly with a plump young man and a small blonde woman in the blue and orange flowered shirt. Her hair's in tight curly rings.

'Looks like the woman from the park,' I say slowly, 'except for the hair.'

'She used to get it permed. You know, the orphan Annie look. She was miserable because her perm had grown out, so I gave her a bob. She was miserable about that too. Saw herself as a curly head.' Kelly's voice has a quiver in it that wasn't there before, a breaking up.

I light another match and study the woman's face. Same eyebrows, made-up eyes, same brown mole above her lip.

'Definitely her. Can I borrow this?'

'You can have her.' Kelly sniffs and wipes her eyes, and pulls a pair of scissors out of her hairdressing bag. With a quick snip Rosie is excised, with only Dave's hand on her shoulder left to suggest that she'd had any friends. 'Damn her. Bloody Rosie. I shouldn't have got angry with her.' Kelly starts to cry and crumples onto the sleeping bag, legs crossed, head down, shoulders heaving as she weeps.

'It's not your fault,' I murmur, my arm around her shoulder, 'it's not your fault.' She leans into me, sobbing, her cheek wet on my skin. I wrap my legs around her, pull her close, the way she did when she washed my hair. Hold her tight, feeling her body throbbing, until she stops crying. When she quiets she holds tight to me for an eternity. And then she pulls her bikini top off over her head, and I see the fur of hair in the dark cavities under her arms as she raises them, her hair lifting and falling around her shoulders. She puts her fingers under my chin and lifts my face until I see nothing but the dark pools of her eyes and the glisten of tears in them. And then she kisses me, long and slow.

~

Late, late in the night a loud scratching noise outside the tent frightens me awake. I sit up and look at the shadows breaking the moonlight that streams into the tent. A monster's there.

'Cassowary,' Kelly whispers, wrapping her arms around me, pulling me back under the sleeping bag. 'Big old cassowary, scratching for food with its nasty sharp claws.' She nibbles my neck. 'Just don't let one get a run at you. They go straight for the jugular.'

21

In the morning we wash in the creek and rub tea-tree oil into skin that's already soft from mountain water. We do it lingeringly, dawdling, dallying, encircled by the ferns that hide us from the beach and the forest towering behind us.

We're putting off the next thing. The visit to Big Bill, patriarch of the beach, the last person at Lawless to see Rosie. I know why I'm putting it off. I'd rather stay here with Kelly, on the beach, on the rainforest edge, with the ocean and the stars. She's dulled that ache for Robbo, filled that need, that hankering for touch, for feeling, for completion. Part of me wants to stay here and let the long days lope into one another for as long as Kelly will have me. Let Rosie go, let journalism go, let Robbo and Noel and the city go, all of it. Part of me, the more insistent part, knows I can't let any of it go. I roll onto my stomach in the water and look up at Kelly.

'Kelly, I've got a boyfriend in Sydney. I'm going back next week.'

'Hey Lou, that's cool. I'm not looking for anything serious,' she says in her pretty accent. She slides down into the pool and lies next to me, draws a line down my back with one

finger. 'I'm on a break from relationships, from real life.'

'I don't know what I'm going to tell him, Robbo, my boyfriend.' Last night I didn't care. This morning it feels like betrayal.

'There's only two ways for it to go, Lou. You tell him and he gets jealous, angry. You don't tell him and if he finds out he thinks you're a liar, a hypocrite. At least that's my experience. My hard-won experience, from both sides of the fence.'

'Or I tell him and he's ok with it?' I say, thinking about Robbo. He loves women, flirts all the time. I wonder if he screws other women, or men even, when he's away working. He's so convincingly in love with me when he's with me that I've never thought about it. I've always just resented his work for taking him away.

'Or that. But it might make you wonder why he doesn't mind,' Kelly laughs. 'Sex just brings trouble. Even monogamy's got problems. I'm on a break. No relationships, no commitments. And every now and then someone who takes my interest shows up, like you,' she strokes my cheek, 'and I get lucky.'

'Oh bloody hell. I'm worried now. Don't know what I'll tell him.'

'Don't worry,' she says, putting her arm around me, her face so close. 'It's not real life here at Lawless. You'll have so much to tell him when you get back you probably will have forgotten about it.'

'Not likely! You're going to be hard to forget. I ...'

She stops me talking with a kiss.

~

In the end, it's Kelly who makes the move. I submit when she dries me with her sarong and wraps it around me. Back at the tent we finish dressing, converting ourselves into people of the public world, and out we go. Armed with tribute, a

bunch of bananas, a minibar bottle of scotch and a packet of biscuits, we set off to the far end of the beach. Kelly waves and calls hello to people out in front of their tents as we go. It's as neighbourly as my parents' street.

Big Bill and the boy are in a lean-to built from palm fronds, father and son, side by side, the same height and wiry build, sorting through nets and fishing rods and a heap of paraphernalia left by campers: discarded tents and sleeping bags, pots and gas burners.

'Visitors!' Kelly calls out, and they turn in unison. Big Bill greets Kelly with a hug, delighted with the scotch and bananas, and gives me a nod when Kelly introduces me. The boy takes the Tic-Tocs biscuits with a whoop, and skips to the boat where he sits and opens the packet.

'What brings you to the best end of the beach?' Bill asks. He's got a friendly grin and bright eyes.

'Rosie is dead.' Kelly is blunt. The cheerfulness in Bill's face drops away.

'Not in front of the boy,' he says in a whisper, shuffling us towards the table out in front of the main hut. He retreats inside, putting the kettle on the burner, fussing with a teapot and mugs. He's more composed when finally he joins us at the table.

'I just took Rosie down to Hicks,' he says quietly. 'Just a couple of days ago. She can't be dead.'

'Lou found her, dying, in a park. Raped and beaten.'

'Not Rosie. She wasn't that sort of girl,' he says bluntly.

'Lou went to the hospital for help and Rosie was dead when she got back,' Kelly persists. 'They took her to the morgue.'

'Which park?' Bill asks me suspiciously, as if I'd made the whole thing up.

'The one they call the blackfellas park, in Hicks Inlet.'

'Not Rosie. Not in that park. Why do you think it was her?'

'It was her.' I hold up the photo as if it's solid evidence.

'It can't have been Rosie.' Bill's dismissive. 'You can't be sure who someone is from a photo. I've seen photos of me that don't bear any resemblance.'

'Bill, Lou came up here to find me,' Kelly is earnest, pleading. 'She came looking for me. Rosie told her my name.'

'What did this girl in the park tell you? Exactly?' Bill's tone is not friendly.

'Before she died, she said need Kelly and she said Lawless.'

'That's all she said? Nothing else?'

'That's all she said. She was very sick.'

'And you knew who she meant? You knew who Kelly was? I haven't seen you around here before. Barney said he picked you up at the pub on the back road.'

My tenuous link — a haircut — isn't going to convince him. I'm sure not going to tell him I thought the woman said Ned Kelly. That won't help at all. What seemed clear and indisputable in the dark with Kelly has gone flimsy again in the light of day.

'I believe Lou,' Kelly cuts in, saving me from interrogation. 'She described Rosie so clearly, I'm sure it must have been her.'

'You didn't go with this girl in the ambulance?' Big Bill asks me.

I shake my head, feeling like a witness being badgered by a barrister.

'You just let them take her away?' he demands.

'I would have gone with her, but they told me to go home.'

'Did you go to the morgue later? The next day?' Bill's tone is harsh, disbelieving.

'No. No. I didn't. I didn't know what to do.' A quiver in my voice.

'Did you go to the police?' Bill persists.

'I didn't do anything,' I say defensively. I don't get why

he's giving me the third degree. 'I mean, I went to the hospital for help, and when we got back the girl was dead and I sat with her until the morgue bloke came and he told me to go home. The nurse told me to go home too. I was a bit of a mess.'

'Of course you were,' Kelly consoles, putting her arm around my shoulder. 'Lou came here, Bill, didn't she?' Kelly says. 'She's tried to find someone who knew Rosie. Lots of people would've walked away at the park and not looked back.'

Bill stands up and retreats into the hut. I watch him making the pot of tea. He looks up and catches my eye, then quickly looks away, and I get the faintest of impressions that he knows more than he's saying. He calls the boy who promptly jumps out of the boat and comes to the table with the biscuits.

'Share those biscuits, boy,' Bill says, bringing mugs of sweet black tea to the table.

'OK,' says the boy, opening the pack. 'This one's for you. Eight o'clock! "Time for bed, boy", that's you.' He mimics his father's voice perfectly as he passes him the biscuit.

'Four o'clock, pink icing, that's for you Kelly.'

'Twelve o'clock, white icing. That's for me,' he says with a cheeky grin.

'Hey!' I say, 'I always have twelve o'clock with white icing. It's the best one. The clock's only got one hand.'

'I know! Twelve o'clock is the best,' the boy grins, 'and it's mine.' He holds the biscuit high in the air.

'Not if I get it first!'

I leap out of my chair towards him and he charges off down the beach, twisting and ducking as I try to catch him. The kid's taunting me for being a slow coach. When he makes a sudden turn I grab his shirt, and he rolls to the sand, taking me with him. We lie on our backs, panting. He holds the

biscuit high in the air, giggling. I roll over and swipe at it, but he's faster than me, springing to his feet.

'Race you back!'

'Hey, wait! Let me get up!'

The boy's in the start position for a race, elbows and knees bent, back foot poised on toes. I line up beside him, mimicking his position, my fists tight.

'Go!' he yells, taking off as he says it, like all kids. And he's back before me, hiding behind his dad, barely puffing, a great gleeful smile on his face, holding the twelve o'clock biscuit high in the air. I sink to my seat, puffed out.

'Good try, girl! Just not good enough!' The boy says triumphantly. 'You get a point for effort.' He breaks the biscuit in two and passes me half.

'Thank you! So kind!' We share a grin.

Bill smiles at me for the first time, gives the boy his tea and the packet of Tic-Tocs and tells him to go and sit in the boat.

'If Rosie's dead, she'll be in the morgue,' Bill says quietly. 'Let's go and find out. We can enquire at the hospital. That nurse you saw might be there.'

'Really?' What brought on this change of tone?

'Better to do something than sit here and talk about it.'

'Thanks so much Bill. I knew you'd come up with something,' Kelly says, standing up and hugging him.

'We can go right now. Lou, can you buy me some more fuel when we get there?'

It's the first time he's called me by my name.

~

The boat is small for four, an aluminium tub with water pooling in the bottom and two little bars across the middle for seats. Big Bill sits at the back operating the outboard motor. The boy crouches in the front, gazing seaward, hand shadowing his eyes, hunting for whales, with the pointed stick he calls a harpoon at the ready. Kelly sits beside me on

one of the little bars, holding my hand tightly. The trip takes forever, down along the wild and rugged rainforest coast. At the mouth of the Cedar River the boy begins to hunt for crocodiles, changing the focus of his lookout and commentary from the distant sea to the water beneath us. Every time he calls that he's spotted one, Bill tells him to shoot his harpoon quick, and the boy pretends to launch his stick. He never lets it go. A good stick is hard to find.

As we pass the big houses on the north shore where Stanley Hunt lives the boy jumps up and begins to point excitedly. Big Bill shakes his head, fixing the boy with a steely glare, and the boy sits down and faces forward, chided, stick low at his side. I wonder what he's pointing at but don't ask. Eventually we come to the marina and pull up at the fuel bowzers. Bill fills his motor and two jerry cans with fuel. I hand over a couple more of Chris's tenners. We putt down to the end of the marina, and I jump out with a rope and tie up to a cleat. I catch Bill's surprise that I know how to do it and hope my credibility's gone up a notch.

While we wait for Big Bill to cover the jerry cans with a tarpaulin, the boy dances on the dock with excitement, begging me to buy him a hamburger and chips. In town, at the only open take-away, the last of Chris's money goes on four burgers with the lot, chips and cans of Coke, and a yo-yo for the boy. We eat on the grass in Hicks Square, which is empty for a change. Big Bill stretches out for what he calls a 'little kip'. I help the boy read the sign about Lieutenant Hicks of Cook's *Endeavour*, who rowed into the mangrove swamp in search of water in 1770 and gave his name to the town. He shows me the bird that's making a raucous call, and tells me that it's called a Friar bird. Kelly teaches him tricks with the yo-yo. Her dark eyes gleam with joy as she makes the yo-yo loop the loop several times then roll back up into her hand. She's gorgeous. I could watch her all day.

Big Bill wakes moments after he begins snoring and wants to get going. He leads the way to the hospital, avoiding the street where the blackfellas park is. At the Emergency room the nurse on the desk is curt and unhelpful. I show her Rosie's picture and she shakes her head blankly. It takes much coaxing to get the nurse to deign to open the record book. Slowly she examines the records for the last week.

'Rosie Gardner. No name here like that.'

'No one knew her name,' I insist. 'She had no ID. She was dying. She was dead.'

'There's a difference. Dying and dead ain't the same,' the nurse snarls. 'In any case, nothing here about a woman dying or dead. We had a couple who didn't make it in a car accident. We had broken bones, cut lips, snake bites, food poisoning, infected toenails, asthma attacks, even a stupid tourist who got bit by a bluebottle, but no dead or dying woman.'

'It was Wednesday, in the afternoon.' I leaned across the bench to try and read the entries. 'Who was on duty?'

'None of your business who was on duty!' The nurse snaps and glares at me, slamming the book shut. We are dismissed.

We find our way through the hospital grounds to the morgue and bang on the door. There's no answer. Hot and tired, we sit in the shade on the steps, the boy's head on Big Bill's knee. Not only have we failed to find evidence of Rosie, but my credibility is dissolving like mist in the mountains.

'I'm not making it up,' I say quietly, looking at the picture of Rosie. 'I spent all afternoon in the park with her.'

'I know you're not,' Kelly murmurs without conviction, putting her hand on mine. 'Her body must have gone straight to the morgue. But there's no one here to verify it. We should go to the police. Report that Rosie's missing.'

'Look,' Big Bill cuts in sharply. 'We don't know for sure that it was Rosie you were with in the park. We can't go to the

police and file a missing person report because we just don't know that Rosie's missing. We're done here.'

'What about the youth hostel?' Kelly suggests. 'Someone there might have seen her.'

Big Bill stands up and looks over at the boy playing with his yo-yo.

'I've had enough. I'm taking the boy home. Kelly, are you staying here or coming back up to the beach with us?'

'Just give me half an hour?' she begs. 'To check the youth hostel?'

'Alright,' Bill relents. 'We'll wait down at the boat. But we've got to get going soon. Want to be home before dark.'

'Thanks Bill.' I shake his hand. 'Thanks for coming and looking with me.'

'That's all right, Lou. But, you know,' he holds my hand, more friendly now that we've failed, 'I don't think it was Rosie in that park. You should go to the morgue tomorrow. Find out who it was. Get yourself some peace of mind.'

'I will.'

'You did a good thing. You shouldn't have to suffer for it.' Bill speaks with genuine warmth, and I'm grateful. I give the boy a light punch on the arm.

'Nice meeting you kiddo.'

'See you round like a rissole,' he says with a grin. Big Bill gives him a nudge and he adds, 'Thanks for the yo-yo.'

'Come on fella,' Bill says, dragging the boy away. 'Don't be late Kelly.'

~

It's a trudge through the hot empty streets to the youth hostel. Lawless, the beach, and the rainforest seem an eternity away. I wish I was there instead. I'm losing faith in whatever it is we're doing, in this fruitless hunt for a woman no one's heard of. Adding insult to injury, the youth hostel is closed when we finally get there. Not open until 5pm.

'Bloody stupid hours these places have!' Kelly explodes. 'They think everyone should go hiking during the day.' I sink to the steps. Kelly, like the best of partners, unseats my lassitude with her verve. 'Let's try out back in the garden, Lou. People hang there, waiting for the doors to open.'

Sure enough, under a big Moreton Bay fig tree out back, four or five hippie types are sharing a joint. A sunburnt woman with a sharp brunette bob waves her arm in greeting.

'Kelly! Best hairdresser in Queensland! Finally left the beach?' She has a different accent to Kelly's, less lilting, English, perhaps.

'Still on the beach,' Kelly smiles, squeezing in next to the woman, patting the grass beside her to encourage me to join the circle. 'We're looking for Rosie Gardner. Do you know her?'

'Don't know the name.' The woman shakes her head and shrugs her shoulders and takes the joint.

'Blonde, small. From back home. Lived up the beach for a while.' Kelly keeps trying.

'Everyone's lived up the beach for a while,' the woman says, holding back the smoke, her face pinched in the effort.

I show her Rosie's photo.

'There's an American here looks a bit like that, same curly hair.'

'Rosie's Irish. Straight hair now, bob,' Kelly says, taking the photo and passing it to the man beside her. 'Have you seen her?'

He looks too stoned to see anything clearly, but he examines the photo as if it might have hidden meaning, then shakes his head. He passes the picture across the next bloke who's sitting cross-legged with his fingers curled upwards on his knees and a vacant gaze on his face. The woman next to him, pretending to read *The Glass Bead Game*, glances at the photo and passes it on. Around the circle it goes, at the same

speed as the joint. No one recognises the face or the name.

'Why are you looking for her?' the Englishwoman asks Kelly.

'She's gone. She, my friend Lou here, she ...' Kelly hesitates. She doesn't want to tell my story to this stoned bunch, luckily. It would blow their minds. 'She left her passport behind,' Kelly says abruptly, and I'm relieved she's so quick on her feet. Perfect story.

'She'll be back,' the first man chimes in. 'Easier to get to Lawless than it is to get a new passport!' Laughs all round. Even the yogi gives a fleeting smile. Someone passes me the joint and I take a drag and pass it on to Kelly. She's chatting with the sunburnt woman about people they know in common, where she's going, where she's been, good places to stay and the best buses to catch, the geography sharing of travellers everywhere. I'm only half-listening, wondering what I'm going to do next.

~

Kelly and I amble back to the marina. The slight breeze from the sea makes the going easier. She keeps dragging me into bushes for a kiss, with an appetite more urgent than the kid's desire for hamburgers. When we get to the dock Big Bill's sitting on a seat overlooking the glass bottom boats, talking with another man who looks much like him. The boy is doing loop-the-loops with the yo-yo in the dinghy.

'No Rosie?' Big Bill asks.

'No, no luck. No one's seen her.'

'People come. People go,' he says, getting up slowly, hand on his back. 'We've got to go ourselves.'

'Come see me, let me know what you find,' Kelly says, giving me a hug and a kiss on the neck. I'm going to miss her. I hold her hand to help her into the dinghy, to not let her go.

Big Bill starts the outboard with a roar, and I let the rope off and throw it. The boy catches it and poses like a muscle

man, proud of himself, then waves until the little boat is out of sight.

I wander down to the end of the marina, past lone men fooling about with ropes on moored yachts and small parties of dressed-for-drinks middle-aged people lounging in the shady cockpits of big launches. Kelly's gone. Chris's yacht isn't there. Josie and Marco are away. The dead woman from the park really has disappeared. There's a black hole where life used to be.

22

Town is desolate. Empty footpaths. Closed shops. No one at the phone booths. I've got two twenty-cent pieces. I slide them into the slot and phone Noel in Sydney. Sunday afternoon. She'll probably be at the pub but it gives me something to do.

'Hello?' Noel's voice is groggy, thick.

'Noel! I didn't expect you to answer!'

'Lou! You never call!'

'You never answer when I do. Thought you'd be at the pub with the gang.'

'Got flu. Feel like shit warmed over.'

'Oh, poor Noel. If I was there I could make you hot lemon and honey. Put some brandy in it.'

'Robbo made me some.'

'Robbo's there? With you?' Robbo, my boyfriend, who is never to be found, who is always busy.

'He's got flu too. He didn't want to give it to his aunts and their kids and that, so he came here.'

'Huh.' That's my Robbo. Always thinking of others.

'I'd put him on but he's sleeping.'

'Huh.' In whose bed? I don't want to know. Suddenly I don't want to tell her about Rosie, don't want to share anything with her. The first coin clunks down into the guts of the phone.

'So what about you?' Noel says. 'Written any world-shaking articles yet?'

'A couple of paragraphs on an official opening for a new wing in the hospital.'

'Oooh! A real journo now?' she says, her voice rich with sarcasm. 'So, where are you living?'

'With an Italian woman and her kid. Her brother's there sometimes too. He took me sailing.'

'Sailing huh? What's it like? What's the brother like? You're not two-timing are you?'

'He's only eighteen! It'd be cradle snatching.' She's got a cheek. Me two-timing when she's got Robbo staying there. I'm definitely not going to mention Kelly. The last coin clunks down. 'I'm going to get cut off, out of coins.'

'So get some more. You must have loads to tell me.'

'Everything's shut. The whole town. It's like a morgue.' I had so much I want to talk to Noel about and now all I can think of is Robbo in her bed.

'I can hear the pips. Can't wait til you get back Lou. We miss you.'

'OK. Give Robbo a kiss from me.'

'Will do,' she says lightly, without a trace of guilt. 'Talk soon.'

'Bye.'

That did not go well. Sure didn't cheer me up. Should have gone back to the beach with Kelly. Now what? Josie's house will still be empty, which would leave me stuck with *Anna Karenina* and the mind-numbingly bleak Russian countryside where Anna pines for everything she's lost and will never have while Vronsky and Karenin live it up in Moscow. It'd

make me more miserable than I already am.

~

On the post office steps again, staring at the heat coming off the road in translucent waves, wishing for dark clouds and lightning and thunder, for rain to teem down in torrents. Noel wouldn't have talked about Robbo like that if there was something going on with them. She wouldn't do that to me. I overreacted. Out of sheer pettiness I missed my chance to tell her the important things. A woman died in the sea, then another woman died in a park. While I was there. That it was awful. The woman in the park might have been disappeared, might have been Rosie Gardner. I did an insane trip through the outback and down a mountainside to a beach full of hippies. She would have asked the same questions as Big Bill. Why didn't you go to the hospital, to the morgue, to the police? Why that crazy trip? Not what a real journalist would do. Looked at in this too-bright light of day I'm an imposter with an improbable story in which I've played a questionable role. I'd imagined myself into some kind of fantasy figure, an investigative journalist who could unravel a mystery single-handedly and present it in nicely turned paragraphs. You're a real journo now? In my dreams.

A battered bronze two-door Ford Cortina GT slows as it goes past the post office. A yobbo's car if ever there was one. The driver's checking me out. He drives around Hicks Square and comes back, slowing to a halt in front of me. I get up, primed to tell him to piss off back to the zoo he escaped from. The bloke winds down window and sticks his head out, goatee first. He yells my name. Gives me a friendly smile. It's Alec, the *FNQ Mail's* photographer and weekend layout artist. My thumping heart slows down.

'Don't suppose you'd have an hour or two to spare?' Alec yells. 'Help me with the sport and weddings?'

'Sure!' I spring up. What a relief! Something to do. Alec

pushes the passenger door open and puts his camera bags and a tripod on top of the pile of spare clothes and shoes on the back seat. I make space for my feet among the empty cans and Twisties bags on the floor.

'Sorry Lou! Tools of the trade. Football one minute, wedding the next. Got to try and look the part.'

'No worries. I'm so glad you came along. Sunday's a bit slow in Hicks Inlet.' Wonder what part he's trying to look in that Dolly Parton t-shirt and those flowery boardshorts.

'You're the lifesaver!' Alec says, scratching his neck. 'I've got a hangover that'd kill the dead. Don't think I could get the paper done by myself if I tried!'

In the office Alec puts a Gram Parsons tape in the tape-recorder and sings along while I start up the typesetter.

Then I got myself a factory job, I ran an old machine

And I bought a little cottage in a neighbourhood serene

Then every night when I'd come home with every muscle sore ...

When I've got the typesetter ready Alec reads aloud the horse racing highlights he's noted from the radio and I typeset as he speaks. He develops the rolls of film while I typeset reports from his notes on the football and cricket and bowls. He trusts me to get them right. I already feel a whole lot better. We take a Coke break, then lay text strips and photos in the back pages, Alec taking as much room as he can for his pictures, me stripping in the text which overhangs for every piece. We argue about what should be cut until Alec holds his head in mock pain, so I relent and typeset shorter versions to fit the meagre gaps Alec permits. Sports done, we turn to weddings. Alec hands me the contact sheets and the magnifying glass.

'You choose, three weddings, one shot from each.'

He sits in the typesetter's chair and croons.

Love hurts, love scars

Love wounds and mars

The three sets of contact sheets are a photographic record of Alec's Saturday. Shots from a football game, taken from the fence, the field curving away to the far fence, men jumping for the ball. A wedding party in a church doorway, the bride in white, the crooked-faced groom's mother already looking like she's drunk too much, her hat and dress awry. Dressed-up kids chasing each other around headstones. Close up of a black bird with a mohawk sitting on a branch, eyeing the camera. Another football game, cars parked around the fence, people leaning against the hoods. Another wedding, small timber church surrounded by cane fields, a kid mooning the camera in the front of the bride and groom. A flock of black and white birds rising over a cane field, cut-outs against a cloudless sky. A group of young people marching beside the cane fields on an empty narrow road, carrying placards.

'What's this?' I point at the little group of marchers.

'Magpie geese. Magnificent, aren't they?'

'No, next to the birds. The people with placards. What are they doing out there?'

'Right to Life loonies. Best ignored,' he says, scratching his neck. 'But look at those magpie geese. Those elegant long black necks, the arc of their wings.'

'In the middle of the cane fields?'

'Magpie geese love the cane.'

'What's on the placards?'

'Gruesome stuff. Pictures of fetuses sucking their thumbs. Shit like that. Look at this.' He points to a shot of a long-legged long-beaked bird. 'Bush stone-curlew. So hard to get a good shot of one.'

'I thought it was a beach stone-curlew.' That's what Chris called it.

'They're cousins. The bush stone-curlew's got a smaller beak than the waterbird.'

'This is the one that wails in the night?'

'Wails? They make beautiful music, Lou. You need to listen carefully, without prejudice. Such a bold sound yet such a timid bird. I've told you before.'

'Why are they marching past the cane fields?'

'Curlews don't march. They're dainty. Small careful steps.'

'Alec! I'm talking about the anti-abortion march! You know it!'

He strokes his goatee as if it helps him think.

'Some priest probably told them they'd save souls.'

'But in the middle of nowhere? Weirdest thing I ever saw.'

'Par for the course in Hicks Inlet. It's a weird old place. Come on, let's get this job done. My hangover's crying out for some hair of the dog.'

One more contact sheet. More football, in town this time, houses in the background, and another wedding, with a great shot of a miserable plump bridesmaid, her gown too tight, her feet bulging out of slingbacks. She goes in my wedding selection. The unhappy bridesmaid, the mooning kid, the drunk mother. I circle the three shots and hand the contact sheets back to Alec with a flourish.

'No, no, no,' he moans, holding his head. 'Lou, a wedding is a fragile thing. At every moment you can see that the whole thing might fall apart. In this one,' he points to the drunk mother, 'the daughter-in-law already doesn't talk to her. It's going to be hell for them until death do they part. No, we'll have,' he scans the sheet, 'this one. Just the bride and groom, nice demure look on the bride's face. We'll take the ammo away. We don't need to feed the gossip.'

He scans the other weddings, and circles two classic bride and groom shots.

'These we shall use.'

'But they're the most boring. Some of these others are fabulous. Why take them if you won't use them?'

'To keep myself alive. That's how it works in the

newspaper industry. We do the interesting stuff for ourselves, and give the public what they want. Or what the boss wants them to have.'

'Is that how it works?'

'If you don't pursue the things that take your interest, you'll desiccate. You'll end up like Ed.'

'Ed gives me such a hard time.'

'He's envious. You're young. Smart. Earl respects you.'

'Get out of here!'

'He does! Earl told me you're, what was it? Tenacious and talented. He's delighted that you can do typesetting and layout and all the hands-on stuff.'

'He's delighted he's got someone to fill in for Roger.'

'Roger's back. Saw him at the footy. Decided holidays aren't really his thing.'

'Wonder what Earl will find for me to do. Clean out the storeroom?'

'Lou, really! Look, Earl's one of those people who started at the bottom. Became a great journalist but he knows the whole trade. You don't get many people prepared to do that these days, Earl reckons, but you can do it, will do it. He likes that.'

'He's supposed to be giving me practice at interviewing and writing.'

'Isn't he?'

'Only thing he's asked me to do is a report on a stupid opening of a hospital room, hospital wing, they call it.'

'If I know Earl he'll be watching to see what you come up with by yourself. Fancies himself as a bit of a patron. I spend most of my time taking photos of birds, trees, you know, art photography. Earl has bought some prints to send to his fancy Sydney friends, and he hooked me up with an exhibition once, but the best thing he ever did for me was give me this weekend work. It pays the rent, pays for the art.'

'So you reckon he'll be ok with it if I come up with articles

myself?’

‘For sure. If you’ve got some ideas, work on them. He doesn’t want to know your ideas, he wants to know when you’ve turned them into something, the background work done, everything thought through. Write the best draft you can and show him. Ask for advice. He’s not necessarily going to print it, but he’ll take it seriously, show you how to improve it.’

I can do that. I haven’t told Alec about Rosie but it’s as if he’s telling me to stick with it. Big Bill seemed certain it wasn’t her in the park, but I’m sure it was. Bill might be hiding something. And her absence from the hospital notes, and the fact that the police say they don’t know about her, even that might make a story. If I don’t stick with it I’ll never know.

‘Wakey wakey! Lou! Work to do! It’s getting late. I’ll print these pics up, and you do the headlines and articles. Basic information only. Here are the notes. Headlines are bride’s surname, em dash, groom’s surname. Text is full names of bride and groom, parents’ names, names of maids of honour and best men, the church and the location of their reception. About one hundred words. None of those fancy words and flowery sentences you kept doing for the sports.’

Alec disappears into the darkroom while I typeset headlines: ‘Boy’s Bum Ruins Wedding’, ‘Marriage Drives Mother to Drink’, ‘Bridesmaid Again!’ I lay them into the spaces, then typeset the reports Alec wants. I can hear him singing from the darkroom.

*I saw my devil and I saw my deep blue sea
And I thought about a calico bonnet ...*

When Alec reappears with the photos he stares at my headlines in mock horror.

‘Oh, you ...! You just can’t help yourself!’ Grinning, he removes my headlines from the flats and puts them on the

noticeboard. Below them he pins five by sevens of the pictures I selected.

'For you, for fond memories of the Sunday afternoon we wasted in here. You can look at them while you're typesetting reports of council meetings, you know, if you need to cheer yourself up.' He sits back in the typesetter's chair, singing along with Gram Parsons, while I lay in the boring pictures and text.

And with all the invitations sent

The young bride went away.

By the time the paper's finished the afternoon is gone. Alec takes the paper to the printer and I wander home.

~

Josie and Marco are in the driveway, unpacking the car, just back from visiting the in-laws in Rockton. Marco drops his big bag of presents and runs to hug me. Josie is looking as sophisticated as ever in another sleeveless shirt and cropped linen pants combo. She takes off her sunglasses, and gives me a big wrinkle-eyed smile and a kiss on each cheek. I'm home.

'Did you have fun?'

'At the in-laws?' Josie laughs. 'Marco had fun. Yet another birthday party. Trev's brothers are working in the mines out west too. Their wives dropped their kids off for the party and disappeared. So just me and the in-laws and all the kids to look after. Bit of a slog.'

'Looking after all the kids?'

'The kids are fine. It's the in-laws. It's not so bad when Trev's there. They just ignore me then.'

'My sister says the same thing about her in-laws.'

'Nagging me about having another baby. Telling me I shouldn't work. Poor little Marco, they say, such a lonely life.'

There's a crash as Marco empties a box of Jenga blocks on the kitchen floor.

'Marco seems ok to me. And he doesn't have to share those

toys with anyone.'

'I shouldn't complain, but the in-laws are hard work. Nice, you know, but we've got nothing but Trev and Marco in common. And I resent having to go there in the little spare time I get, which I shouldn't. He's their grandchild too, as Trev keeps telling me. But it makes me feel like I'm just for delivery, first vaginal and now by car!' Josie laughs and shakes her head. 'I'm stuffed. I feel grotty. It's such a long bloody drive, and I've got to open the shop in the morning, early start. It never ends.'

'Go and have a shower and a rest. I'll look after Marco.' I give Josie a push towards the door.

'Complain, complain. I'm sorry! Where's Chris? How was your weekend?'

'Don't know where he is. Out on his boat this afternoon, I think. I worked on the paper this arvo. It was fun!'

'I go to a party and you go to work and you're the one who gets the fun. That's not fair!' Josie says with a worn out look on her face. 'I feel like I've been away for ages. What else have you been up to?'

'It's a long story. Why don't you have a cool shower while I get dinner? I'll tell you everything after Marco's gone to bed.'

'Not for the ears of babes eh? Sounds intriguing. You start dinner, I'll bath Marco, then I'll have that shower.'

'Rapa frittata?'

'Perfect. Had nothing all day but rice bubbles and crappy bread with margarine and 100s and 1000s. My stomach feels like hell.'

'With a glass or two of your dad's homemade wine?'

'Now you're talking. And a cold beer first.'

The frittata's done by the time Marco reappears in his pyjamas, scrubbed pink and smelling of baby powder. We build towers out of Jenga blocks until they topple, then build them again. We unwrap the new Lego set and build a house

with big windows, then smash it up and build a tower. We break that up and build a bridge. I'm tenacious and talented. The woman in the park was Rosie Gardner. The woman in the sea had a blue rope tied around her waist. I'm going to find out why they died.

Part Three

23

'You're in for it!' Charlene warns me with barely concealed glee when I get to work. 'Earl's back. Said to send you in first thing.'

Earl tells me to close the door and sit down. He briefly praises my report on the hospital opening, and thanks me for finishing Friday's paper and helping Alec yesterday. I want to ask for reimbursement for all the fuel I bought with Chris's money but it doesn't seem an appropriate moment. Earl's praise has the quality of bread in a compliment sandwich. I wait, ready to defend my absence on Friday by telling him I'm working on an article about the Toolloola market. I've got nothing, it's not ready to go, like Alec advised me, but it might keep me out of trouble.

'Mrs Swain tells me that you departed without notice,' Earl says.

'Mrs Swain?' I wasn't expecting this.

'You are under my care up here, young lady.' Earl's using his headmaster tone. 'I've got enough to worry about without you disappearing into the wild blue yonder.'

'I couldn't bear the food,' I say, truculent. Even my parents

stopped asking me to account for my whereabouts long ago.

'I dare say Mrs Swain's food is normal for these parts. You've probably noticed a lack of ethnic eateries up here in FNQ.'

'Actually,' I say, in the combative tone I refined when I was thirteen, 'I'm staying somewhere that does have an ethnic eatery, as you put it.'

'And that would be?'

'With the Mazzolini family. Just past the hospital. They're distant relations,' I add, hoping for authenticity.

'Long lost relatives? The Mazzolini family no less? Who? Josie?' Earl asks, eyebrows raised. I don't know if he's incredulous or impressed.

'Josie.'

'She's a smart woman. I've got a lot of time for her. You're lucky she took you in. But it doesn't explain why you left without telling Mrs Swain where you were going. The poor woman was worried sick.'

'Really? She kicked me out.' I wonder if this is about the patchwork quilt.

'Kicked you out? Mrs Swain said that you just upped and left.'

'Actually, Mrs Swain wrote me a letter telling me I'd broken the rules by having a shower that was longer than the regulation three minutes and by turning up late for dinner. It said I should leave. Let me get the letter, it's probably in my bag.'

'Don't worry about the letter,' Earl says sharply. 'I'm more interested in what made you break those rules. The way Mrs Swain told it suggested that you were upset by something more than having to follow the rules.'

I didn't think compassion was in Mrs Swain's range. She doesn't care about the quilt. Earl is fishing for something. Telling him about the Toolloola market isn't going to cut it.

Without asking me directly, he's got me to a point where I have to tell him about the dead woman in the park. He seems to know about everything I do. Does he know about that too? If he does and I don't fess up I'll look like a liar. It's an interviewing skill: pretend you are talking about something else and the subject will fall into the trap. I need to learn how to do that.

'Lou?' Earl whispers, leaning forward and taking off his glasses. 'You might as well tell me.'

Earl listens to my account of that harrowing afternoon in the park with Rosie, cleaning his glasses all the while, without reaction or comment, as if I was recounting the events of a council meeting.

'Yet on Thursday you have a jolly lunch with Mrs Pike and don't say a word about this traumatic event,' he says, putting the glasses back on.

'I rang the hospital and the police the next morning. Neither had heard of any woman dying in the park. She had no ID, no bag — the nurse checked — so I couldn't ask for her by name. They treated me like a crank caller.'

'Please don't tell me you phoned the police on behalf of the *FNQ Mail*,' he says gruffly.

'No Earl, I didn't. I just said I was a friend. I didn't even give my name.' Phew! I've done something right.

'Well, that's something I suppose. So, they might not have told you for confidentiality reasons. They may not hand out information like that to someone who won't identify themselves.'

'I didn't think of that.'

'However, your story is confirmed, in the negative, because Ed hasn't heard about it,' Earl eventually says. 'Because Ed definitely would have told me. White woman is raped and beaten to death in the blackfellas park. He'd have wanted a story like that on the front page.'

I know Earl's waiting for me to say something, but I feel like the thin grasp I've got on facts is getting thinner. I haven't been thinking of it as a blackfella rapes and murders a white woman story.

'And you haven't told me any of this because?' Earl says very quietly. He's leaning so far forward I can see the hairs in his nose.

'You weren't here. I didn't want to tell Ed. I didn't know what to do, so I just did my work. I met Mrs Pike so she could have a look at my hospital article.'

'Ever heard of the telephone? You knew where I was.'

'Sorry!' It never occurred to me that I could phone Earl.

'Showed a bit of common sense, by the way, checking the draft with Mrs Pike,' Earl says, leaning back. 'So what happened Friday? I heard you didn't come to work.'

The trip to Lawless will sound like a wild goose chase. The clues I've woven together are flimsy as cobwebs. Earl rocks back and forth in his chair, waiting.

'I went to Toolloola market with Josie's brother. I thought it might make a good article, interest the tourists.' I'm speaking too quickly. 'There hasn't been anything on it in the paper for at least a year. I got stall-holders' names and phone numbers for advertising.' Feels like I've got a tentative look on my face.

'Good work,' Earl says. 'Great idea. Hope you got some quotes. Write up 250 words and we'll put it in Friday's. I'll ask Charlene to contact the stall-holders for a few ads.'

'Okey-dokey.' I smile with relief, sensing a close escape, and leap out of the chair. 'Will do.'

'Sit,' Earl commands. 'And perhaps you'd like to share the rest of the story with me? I didn't come down in the last thunderstorm.'

Earl is rocking back and forth in his chair again, its scratchy squeak etching through the silence in the room. I slowly sit down. I don't want to share my half-baked ideas,

but I've got nothing else. I tell him the dying woman's last words and describe how they led me to Lawler's Cove, to Kelly and Big Bill, to Rosie Gardner. I leave in Celeste's bob and the earrings at the market, and leave out the weed and the hitchhiking. I explain that we came back to Hicks Inlet on Sunday but found no trace of Rosie, and that Big Bill is certain it couldn't have been Rosie in the park.

'I'm sorry, Earl, for wasting good time on such a fruitless line of enquiry,' I finish up, in my posh journalist's voice, the only tone suitable for saying such a wanky thing.

'You can park that tone of voice at the door next time you come in, Lou. And the irascible adolescent tone too, for that matter.' Earl drums his fingers on the table and looks at me with his eyebrows raised. Charlene was right. Now I am in for it. I keep my mouth shut. My hands are in fists, out of Earl's sight.

'You found out a dead woman's identity from her hairstyle?' Earl asks, eyebrows raised. 'Most people wouldn't have got past Ned Kelly. Not bad.'

'I've got a photo,' I say eagerly. I think I just got a compliment! I dig the photo out of my bag and pass it to Earl. He examines it.

'Hairstyles aren't my strong suit, but isn't a bob short and straight?'

'The photo was taken before she had it cut, but I'm sure it's her.'

'The hand on her shoulder. Who does that belong to?'

'Ex-boyfriend. Gone back to Ireland. Rosie was from there too.'

'Details like that are important. Good. And, at risk of sounding like a broken record, you didn't tell me any of this before because?'

I sit on my hands, trying to recall when Earl went to Sydney, to see if I could use that as an excuse. Lies are

complicated. I opt for what might be the truth.

'Because of the woman brought in from the sea ... I mean, it would be a story for Ed, the Police Desk.'

'I don't understand. What has this got to do with that?'

'When I told you about the dead woman brought in from the sea you told me to keep out of it and gave it to Ed. Earl, I don't think Ed's report on the woman from the sea, that stuff about snorkelling, was right.' Might as well blurt it out. I'm in deep shit anyway. 'There was something suspicious about that woman's death. She was wearing a dress. She had a rope tied around her waist. Isn't it right to want to know why?'

Earl rocks back and forth, the chair squeaks. I've all but accused him of a cover-up.

'More is now known about that woman found in the sea,' Earl says slowly and carefully. 'According to her uncle, the honourable Mayor McCready, she was out checking their crab pots. Apparently the sea was a bit choppy and she must have got caught up in a rope and fallen off the boat and the rope got tangled around coral.'

'There is a rope now? Ed assured me there was no rope. He basically called me an idiot, reckoned I made it up.'

'Well, perhaps because you've been going around talking about a rope, there is now an explanation for said item.' Earl's language suggests that Mrs Pike has been talking to him too.

'So what happened to Aileen's boat in this scenario? It just floated out to sea?'

'I must assume the police are investigating the matter. And I am certain that the *FNQ Mail* is not carrying out an investigation,' Earl says sternly, as if he was underlining every word twice. 'Lou, it is for the family to deal with. The poor young woman has been buried. You will not get involved in this. Am I making myself clear?'

'She went out to get some crabs for dinner and she died. Just another far north tragedy.'

Earl takes off his glasses and gets his handkerchief out of the drawer and starts cleaning them again. His mottled eyes look more sad than angry. I wait patiently, holding his gaze.

‘People do just die up here, Lou. It’s in the nature of the place, like the bloody heat and the pounding rain,’ Earl speaks gently, as if talking to a child. He’s not going to answer my question. ‘Just a couple of months back, a body — so decomposed it took George a while to figure out it was a man — was found in the bush up near Toolloola. No one knows who he was or what happened to him. The month before that a shop assistant from Brisbane on a package holiday was axed to death in his motel room. No one knows why or who did it. You might think no one cares because he was a lowly shop assistant, but the month before that an actor from Sydney was found dead on the beach. No one knows how that happened either. Maybe it was your Average Mr Nice Guy murderer from last week’s *Courier*, but he seemed to prefer to do his dirty work out of town. Up here you can never be sure that suspicious-looking deaths aren’t due to natural causes. Nature is hard in these parts. Looks beautiful, but it’s real damn hard. The same week that the bloke got axed a croc dragged a child out of a boat and ate it. Someone should have told the kid not to dangle his hand in the water. Another croc lunged at a bloke while he was casting a fishing net and slid back under the water with most of his arm. Crocs must have been hungry that month. About the same time a nice couple from America dived off a glass bottom boat way out on the reef and didn’t come back up, but a croc doesn’t go that deep so something else must have got them. A bloke walking north from Lawler’s Cove hasn’t been seen for five months. His parents keep coming up here from Woollongong, trying to get the police to do something, demanding I write articles about it, but once you’ve said he’s missing there’s not much else to say. A snake might have bitten him. Or a

poisonous spider. Who knows? It's a hard bit of country. In the last wet season, some tourists from Norway or somewhere got stranded up on the Peninsula. They lit fires on the beach to try and keep the crocs and the wild pigs away. Lived on ants and birds' eggs while they walked for three days to the nearest settlement. Nearly dead when they got there. Had to be hospitalised. Silly bastards thought they were going to have a nice peaceful holiday.'

Earl puts away the handkerchief and raises his glasses towards his face, but doesn't put them on. They're hanging in the air between us, lightly held in his trembling hand.

'I could go on like this all day. Even if you don't get lost or bitten or killed, it's a bloody hard place. A metre of rain will fall in a week. Mould ruins your books. Cockroaches multiply in your cupboards — they make Sydney cockroaches look timid. Rats eat your wiring and mice nest in the dirty laundry basket. Mosquitoes you're acquainted with, going by the look of those scabs on your ankles. And I've barely started on what the humans are capable of.' Earl pauses, puts his glasses on and scratches his head. 'Ah, sorry Lou, I always get like this after I go to Sydney. I shouldn't go there. It reminds me how very much I miss it, miss everything.'

I've got no idea what to say. I don't even know what the topic is any more. When the silence gets uncomfortable I pick up the trophy on Earl's desk.

'Must have been amazing to get this Walkley Award.'

'Wasn't even my best work,' Earl replies gruffly. 'Did a lot of great work back in the day, even if I do say so myself. Learnt in a good school. Started from the ground up, like you. After a few years ordinary journo experience I went to the *Truth* in Melbourne, worked with Evan Whitton there for a bit — that was bizarre, all sex and drugs and gossip with a bit of hard-hitting investigative journalism on the side — then I went to the *National Times* in its early days. Oh, that was a

place to be. Worked with very talented people. Got to write some in-depth pieces. Ever read the *National Times*?’

‘Don’t think so.’ I’ve never even heard of it, but that doesn’t sound like a smart thing to say. Instead I get my notebook out and write it down. I came here to learn from Earl and finally he’s teaching me something.

‘It’s gone now, of course. It had some great investigative journalists. Published proper stories. The broadsheets had some great journos too, a lot of them women. Anne Summers got a Walkley for her story of a prison guard attack on inmates. Fearless, Anne was. Wendy Bacon. Marian Wilkinson. Tough, those women. Did their homework. Out west there was Catherine Martin, Jan Mayman. You must have heard of Mayman. Wrote some excellent stuff about John Pat, young Aboriginal bloke who got beat up by cops and died. When I read your Collooney story it reminded me of Jan. I assume you read her articles.’

I shake my head. I’ve never heard of any of these people, but I’ve got their names now. Something to go home with.

‘You should read some of them, for inspiration, you know, to have someone to look up to, learn from. Great journalism looks easy. The story flows. The facts are obvious once they’re sitting there all lined up nicely on the page, like they were just there for the picking. But it’s not easy. You have to work hard. Have to have the courage of your convictions. A bit of tenacity. A lot.’

‘OK. I’ll ...’

Earl cuts me off.

‘Listen, Lou. There’s journalists and there’s journalists. If you want to be great, you have to work at it. You’ve got talent, a spark, I see that. Your boss in Sydney thinks very highly of you, you know. But you’re going to have to work at it. Believe in yourself a bit. Be more assertive in a less aggressive way. Try to get along with other people.’

'I ...'

'Ed, for instance. You could hide your contempt. Ed's report wasn't wrong exactly. I wouldn't have printed it if it was. He reported what the police told him. Whitton used to say that a police roundsman is a prisoner of his sources. I've never been sure that he's right about that, but it certainly describes Ed. He does a decent job on the police desk. Now, I'm not saying he's a decent bloke; that's a different thing. But as a police reporter, well, Ed drinks with the coppers, he knows them all by name, knows if they've got kids, if their missus is still with them, all of that. It makes him good at his job. If Ed reports something different to what they tell him, they'll cut him off.'

'That makes sense,' I concede. 'I hadn't thought of it that way.'

'There's the story, and then there's the story behind the story. That's where you want to be.'

Earl rolls his chair forward, leans across the desk, and takes his glasses off again. His eyes look even more watery up close.

'So, back to Rosie Gardner,' he says quietly. 'It's possible the police wouldn't give you information because you didn't provide a name. Neither yours nor hers. Or perhaps they have encountered complications in preparing their report on her death. We'll leave them alone for now. And no one at the hospital is saying anything about her?'

'No. I've tried twice. By phone and in person. I even got a look at the log book or whatever they call it.'

'They can be careful about confidentiality too. Did the nurse who came to help you tell you her name?'

'No, I don't think so. I've racked my brain. I can't remember any name.'

'But it was George who came to collect the body?'

'An American. Pretty sure he was called George.'

'Californian. Casual pathologist at the hospital, on call. Bit of an oddball, artistic type. Medic or something in Colombia. Peace corps type. He might have done an autopsy, especially with a body that turned up in unusual circumstances and with no ID. George doesn't trust the authorities. He must have seen some terrible things. He's a dope fiend but harmless enough.'

'A dope fiend?'

'Pay attention to the right things Lou. It's just colour. Concentrate,' he says with a flash of a wink.

It makes me grin and relax for the first time since I walked in. Earl and Mrs Pike suit each other down to the ground. Adding colour to their small world. I've got to tell Noel about them. She'll love it.

'Find out what you can about Rosie Gardner. That bloke Bill from the beach might have something to hide. Everyone lies, you know, at least some of the time. Don't trust anything you can't verify. Don't go blabbing to all and sundry. Go a bit quietly and see what you can find out without stirring up a hornet's nest. Start with George. Ask him if he can identify her from the photo. Find out why she died.'

'It's an assignment?' I cannot believe it.

'No, it's not an assignment. It's just something bubbling along in the background. Something we're taking an interest in. It might turn out to be a story, it might not. But as it's your last week and you're so keen to have an assignment, we can call it a preliminary investigation, if you like, off-the-record.' Earl puts his glasses back on. 'Don't talk to the police, or Ed, in fact don't mention it around the office at all. Do go and talk with George. He might help you find the nurse. Talk to me again when you've seen them. I might be old and broken and washed up at the end of the earth but I can still teach you a thing or two. And just so it's very clear, don't say anything to anyone that you don't need to. Word travels fast through the

fetid air of Hicks Inlet.'

'Thank you. Thank you Earl!' I leap out of the chair and twirl in a little dance, arms above my head. Inappropriate but there it is. Makes me dare to ask for some money so I can pay Chris back.

'Earl? Can I claim expenses? I mean, I spent a lot of money on fuel, one way and another. And hamburgers.'

Earl leans back into his chair and stares at me, torn by the accountant's need for details and his desire not to know. Eventually he slides open his top drawer and takes out a petty cash tin.

'Money for fuel? You haven't even got a vehicle have you?' Earl laughs for the first time this morning. 'Expenses claims around here are usually for drinks. How much?'

When I'm at the door Earl calls me back.

'By the way, Charlene's set up that interview with Stanley Hunt for tomorrow. Do tell him you're impressed with his philanthropy. You might even say that his generosity to women suggests an unusual lack of misogyny that makes him stand out among the men of this nasty little backwater. And let him do the talking.'

'Sure.' Earl wants me to lie. Dissemble, I guess he'd call it.

'Don't say the bit about the backwater. Hunt thinks this town is god's personal gift to him. Have a good perve at the house, for Mrs Pike. Take the old camera. Say it's for the women's pages. And you might want to disguise that thing on your neck.'

'Sure Earl, will do.' What thing on my neck? I don't know what he's talking about. I don't care. I've got an investigation. I'm trying not to dance again on my way to the door.

'And Lou, Roger's back. A week early. Didn't take to the holiday. He'll do the proofing, typesetting, layout, etcetera. He won't want you fooling around in the knacker's yard. It's his domain. Ed's going to give you notes to write up. Good

practice, writing from someone else's notes. Just type up the reports and give them to Roger.'

I turn around and walk slowly back to Earl's desk, the dance gone out of my step.

'I thought I had an investigation,' I say quietly, looking down at him. 'When am I going to do that? What's the priority?'

'A journalist has a busy life. Always juggling the humdrum and the exciting. Write up Ed's notes. Write something on the market. Prepare for the interview. Do the interview. Write it up. In between you'll be sure to find time for the other thing.'

'Sure, Earl. No worries.' I hold back the recalcitrant adolescent tone.

'Good girl.'

24

Ed is ogling me as I come out of Earl's office. Impossible to avoid him.

'What's new?' he asks, as if he's expecting me to complain about Earl giving me a hard time.

'Roger's back, so now I have to write your articles,' I grumble. 'What have you got for me?'

Ed rolls his chair forward to his desk and picks up a manilla folder.

'Notes for a six-paragraph piece on protests against new developments on the Cedar,' he says, giving me that crooked grimace he uses as a smile, flashing his dirty teeth.

I flip through the folder. Scrawled notes from a meeting protesting the development and a bunch of brochures. Ed rolls his chair away from his desk and puts his feet up. His hand cups his crotch. He moves it slowly back and forth, leering at me.

'Not a lot here to work with, Ed.'

'You want to be a journalist. String the bits you've got together with some other words. That's the general idea,' he saying, picking up a copy of *Playboy* with his free hand and

opening it to the centrefold.

I'm not going to dignify it with a comment. I'm impervious to you now Ed, you bloody wanker. Earl takes me seriously. That's enough for me. I strut away, shoulders pulled back.

The developer's brochures depict a grand holiday resort with swimming pools and jacuzzis, bars and restaurants. On the architect's drawings guest rooms with large glass-fronted balconies protrude right into the rainforest. Ferns line a cascading waterfall. Neon-bright birds flit in the trees. A white, empty beach stretches out between emerald-green mountain and azure-blue sea. The developer's tag line is 'paradise perfected'. It's simultaneously the same as and the opposite of Kelly's little tent next to the stony creek. Other glossy pictures show a seafood buffet, glasses of effervescent champagne, women in slinky evening gowns with manicured faces and hair. That's the paradise the developers promise to sell on a large scale. Thousands of guests every year, a personal experience of paradise for every single one of them, with no luxuries spared.

Ed's scrawled notes from the protest meeting tell a different story. A bridge across the Cedar River with a four-lane road either side of it, ruining hundreds of acres of rainforest, filling the Cedar with sludge, just to get the tourists to the hotel. Hundreds of people walking on the pristine beaches, wandering through the rainforest, inciting erosion and destroying flora and fauna. The numbers of unique species Barney had rattled off in the jeep are repeated in Ed's surprisingly thorough notes. His disdain for the protesters is captured in the names he gives them: Wannabe MP (Old Bag), Hippie Girl (see-through skirt), Hippie Girl (see-through top), Retired Pollie. At the bottom of the pile of notes there's a flyer for the meeting with the speakers' real names, which I try to connect to the quotes in Ed's notes. There's nothing in the flyer to help me identify the Hippie

Girls.

I type up six paragraphs that give equal weight to the developers and the protesters in so-called fairness, relieved that Ed will get the byline. He's snoring, no doubt sated. In the headline space I scribble 'developers plunder rainforest' with a pencil. Earl will rewrite it no matter what it says. The door to the knacker's yard is closed, so I knock. Roger is much older than I expected, and clad in various shades of beige: a crisp, short-sleeved shirt with a tie, pressed shorts, long socks and sandals. He slowly gets up from the typesetter and comes to open the door. Now the antiquated typesetter makes sense. He's too set in his ways to change; too good at what he does to be dismissed. He must be an embodiment of some chunk of Earl's past.

'You must be Lou.' Roger holds out his hand. His voice and his handshake are as muted as his appearance. 'Thank you for taking over while I had a break.'

'Nice to meet you Roger, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to learn something new.' Oh, how nice I am when someone treats me good.

'You've left your mark.' He gestures towards Sunday's wedding headlines and photos on the noticeboard. The rest of the room is neat, the desk's clear, the machines are clean, the floor's swept, the bin's empty. He's reclaimed my knacker's yard.

'Oh, I'm sorry! It was Alec's idea!' I say, embarrassed, dissembling.

'It is the sort of high jinks young Alec goes in for, that's true,' Roger says with a genial smile. 'What can I help you with?'

'This is Ed's piece on the new development.'

'Thank you for getting it done in good time.' Roger takes my page and closes the door. I'm shut out. Turns out I liked the knacker's yard. It was the only place in the office I felt at

home.

~

Outside the air is close and sticky. Even hunkering into the shade I work up a sweat on the way to the hospital. The morgue door is locked. There's no answer to my knock. At the hospital reception desk a skinny woman with green eyeshadow and bleached hair tells me that George doesn't work nine to five.

'People don't respect working hours when they get born and they don't respect them when they die,' she cackles, her laughter breaking into a hacking cough.

'His telephone number? Address? Could you give me that?'

'Who's asking?'

'My mum's his second cousin. She asked me to look him up. Wants me to give him a jar of her marmalade.' I listen to my story as if I'm the third person in the room. This talent for fabrication is new. Might be picking up tools of the trade.

'Marmalade? Likes marmalade, does he? Unusual in a Yank. Still, wouldn't want George blaming me if he misses out on it. Got a temper if you cross him, George has.'

George's address in hand, I drop into the Emergency room, hoping to find the nurse who came with me to the park. An Aboriginal kid about the same age as Big Bill's boy is sniffing in the waiting room, cradling his arm. He tells me that the nurse is in the 'sickbay', stitching the lip of the other kid.

'I won, so they're fixing him first.' He snuffles. 'I don't care. I need the practice. I'm going to be like Lionel Rose when I grow up. He's a famous Aboriginal boxer.'

'I've heard of Lionel Rose, kid.' I sit beside him. 'What are the fights about?'

'Normal stuff. They call us names. Say shit about our mothers and sisters.'

'Who's they?'

'Gubbas. White boys.'

'I know what gubba means too. Do you think I came down in the last thunderstorm?' The kid looks at me like I've got a screw loose. 'Why don't the teachers stop them?'

'Teachers don't care.'

'They're paid to care. They're not allowed to let you fight.' I don't know why I'm saying that. My school was a war zone.

'Everyone fights.' The boy shrugs.

The other boy comes out of the surgery with stitches in his lip and high fives the kid who wants to be Lionel Rose. 'Beat you next time,' he says with a grin as he walks out the door.

The nurse, who is not the nurse who came to the park, turns to us.

'Now, let's investigate that impressive swelling on your arm. How did it happen?'

'He was fighting dirty. Shoved me into a heap of rocks,' the kid replies with a sniff.

'Come on then,' the nurse sighs. 'One of these days we'll stop patching you kids up. Think that might make you stop fighting?' She doesn't wait for an answer. 'He will be a while, Miss,' she says.

'Actually, I'm looking for one of the other Emergency nurses.'

'Who?'

'I don't know her name. She came to help with a woman who was dying in the park last Wednesday.'

'I don't know nothing about it,' the nurse says abruptly. 'Only three of us work here, and one does nights and weekends. The other one's gone south on one of her big holidays. Said she won the lottery again and took off. Who has that much luck?'

'When will she be back?'

'Won't be back for a couple more weeks.'

Damn. Going down south myself at the end of the week,

for good. And now I have reasons for staying.

~

George's street, down past the cemetery towards the estuary, is lined with fibro-cement cottages. It's a far cry from the houses on the north shore. Wooden crates blockade the little front porch of the house George is supposed to live in. In the drive there's a ute with duct tape holding the front blinker in place and caked-on mud in plumes behind the wheels, and a caravan deep in grass. Tree trunks of various types and sizes are strewn all around as if they were dumped there by a cyclone. I'm about to leave when there's a roar of chainsaw from the back. Someone's home.

I knock on the house windows as a formality, then go down beside the caravan to the backyard. It's like walking into an art gallery via a junkyard. The lawn is neatly mown and studded with tall poles, carved and brightly painted in swirls and dots. In their midst a shirtless man with a long plait down his back is sculpting a tree trunk with the chainsaw. He's wearing tie-died, cerulean-blue harem pants with bejewelled bands at the ankles. He turns suddenly as if he hears me coming, dropping the chainsaw and letting it swing, its sharp teeth disengaged, its roar dissipating into silence. He's all muscle, with black skulls tattooed on his chest and red roses on his shoulders. He pushes up his red baseball cap so that he can see me.

'Finally! The girl from the park,' he says in an American accent.

'Are you George? The pathologist? You look completely different to what I remember.'

'I'm out of uniform.'

'I'm Lou.' I hold out my hand and George shakes it, his gnarled fingers rasping against mine.

George lays the chainsaw on a table beside a collection of chisels and files, organised first by type and then by size. The

chainsaw's spot is beside the largest chisel. He gestures towards the tools.

'Rough, the chainsaw, but it's got its place. Lets me get the outline in while it's vivid in my mind. You know, when the inspiration's flowing. Once the outline's there the detail's easy, slow but easy.'

'Totem poles? They're beautiful.'

'Memorial poles. Got the idea from those Arnhem Land people. They do them a lot better than I can. That's what thousands of years of experience does for you.'

'Can I touch?'

'Of course. The whole point is to touch, to get the feeling of the person, you know, of their spirit.'

I walk around a pole as high as my shoulder, my hand following a smooth yellow-painted groove that leads me round and round the pole, my knees bending as if I'm doing one of those joke going-down-the-stairs routines. When I reach the bottom of the groove I'm on my knees, looking at a pair of dark ovoids circled in black, like vacant eyes staring at me.

'Follow the groove back up. Do it quickly,' George says.

I can't tell if he's teasing me because he's got his cap down over his eyes again, but I do as instructed. Round and round the pole until I arrive dizzily at the top, which is bright red with small yellow spots. It's like staring at the sun and then shutting your eyes. The next pole, much taller, has a series of concentric circles carved all the way up, the colours vivid and jagged-edged.

'Harder life, that one,' George says. 'Longer, more complex. Human. That short pole you were playing with was for my dog. Not a very complex animal. He liked to jump around in circles. It was my first pole. Missed that dog so much when he died I had to do something.'

'They're amazing. They should be in a gallery.'

'Nah. They're just for me. To help me get through the daily grind.'

'The poles are memorials to people from the morgue?' I guess even pathologists take their work home.

'Some people die and their loved ones come and get their bodies and commemorate their lives with a headstone or a tree or something. They're mourned, remembered. Some people die and no one comes for them. Those people used to haunt the small hours until I started making these poles. Once I've made a pole for an unclaimed body, a forgotten person, I feel like I've given them a ... a kind of memorial.' George puts his arms behind his head and flexes. Muscles ripple down his naked stomach. I can see his clear blue eyes beneath the visor of his cap. He doesn't look like a dope fiend to me. 'I dig the poles into the ground and I carve them and paint them. Embed a memory of that person in the earth. And then I'm ok.'

'It's a form of therapy?'

'It soothes the soul.'

'Who's this one for?' I reach out to the barely begun pole George was working on when I arrived.

'That one is for your friend. The woman from the park. I can't get it to start right. Usually there's some notion deep in my subconscious and it guides my arm, guides the chainsaw. But this time it won't run.' He pulls at his chin, as if he had a beard. 'I can see why, now that you've turned up. She's not forgotten after all. Where have you been all this time?'

'Where do I start? It took me ages just to find out her name. On Thursday I phoned the hospital and the police and they said they didn't know about her, but that might have been because I didn't know her name. Or because I didn't give my name.' George has pushed back his cap and is looking at me askance. 'Friday I ended up going to the Toolloola market and on the way I met this woman with a bob and ...'

‘Hold that thought,’ George says. ‘I’m going to need fortification for this. Tea?’

He disappears into the house, leaving me to walk among the poles, feel them, run my fingers through the carvings, along the smooth vivid paint. So many unclaimed bodies for such a small town. When George finally comes back he’s got glazed eyes and two glasses of iced tea with mint in them. He passes one to me, moves the chainsaw to the ground, and sits on a tree-trunk stool by the tool table. I take a metal chair painted in the same bright colours as the totem poles, all swirls and dots. The chisels and files are laid out between us.

‘So who was she?’ George says softly.

‘I think she was called Rose Gardner. I have a photo.’ I pass it to him.

George studies it, gives a deep sigh, hands it back.

‘Bone structure is right, eye colour too. Her hair was straight, but these curls are fake anyway. Terrible photo but it is the woman from the park.’ He turns to me. ‘If you didn’t know her, where did you get the photo?’

‘I found someone who was sort of her friend.’

‘A sort-of friend?’

‘They lived in the same tent for a bit. Rosie wasn’t happy there.’ Something’s making me careful about bandying Kelly’s name around.

‘Rosie. Such a cheerful name. She had the aura of an unhappy woman. Even in death.’ George pulls at his non-existent beard. I imagine a goatee, long, grey, straggly, like Ho Chi Minh’s.

‘If you were raped and beaten to death would you look happy?’

George stares at me for a while with his sharp blue eyes. Eventually he speaks.

‘What makes you think that’s how she died?’ His voice has an accusative edge, his eyebrows are raised.

‘There was blood ...’ I stop myself. I’ve got that too-familiar feeling that I haven’t thought this through. ‘Because that’s what the nurse said,’ I offer, trying to shift the focus off me. ‘More or less.’ I have let the nurse’s tentative comments in the park harden into facts in the short space between telling the story to Chris and to Earl. I’ve played Chinese whispers with the facts.

‘The nurse examined her body?’ George says sceptically. He stands up and picks up a chisel. Twirls it in the air, catching it by the handle. ‘Or she took a glance, muttered a suggestion? Based on what? Blood on her hands, her crotch, a bruise on her face? Being in the blackfellas park?’ Disdain in his voice now. ‘Put those things together and it’s got to be “raped and beaten to death”?’

I watch the chisel spin, watch George catch it. Yeah, I get all that George. Got it just before you pointed it out, but nevertheless. The chisel spins. George catches. Would have been better if I’d figured it out earlier, I know. George sends the chisel high, catches it and puts it back in its place, then sits on the tree trunk again. He won’t want to hear *mea culpas*.

‘What did the nurse say when she phoned you?’ I ask George.

‘The nurse? I was paged by the hospital. They were short of staff to go out, and they know I like to see a body in situ,’ George says.

He stretches, arms back over his head. Must lift weights to be built like that. Reminds me of Robbo. It’s diverting. I look at the poles and pull myself back on topic.

‘You didn’t talk to the nurse?’

‘I talk to as few people as possible,’ George says, pulling at his non-existent beard. ‘I’m only talking to you out of some sense of obligation to your Rose. I too would like to know why she chose to die like that.’

‘She chose to die like that? How can that be a choice?’

‘It was as if she’d crawled into those bushes to hide away and die. She wasn’t far from the hospital. She must have been headed there and then decided not to go.’ George twirls the ice blocks round and round in his glass. ‘She didn’t seem to want to live, that poor Rose. Antibiotics would have worked if she’d gone to the hospital instead of lying there under those bushes. She’d have been ok.’

‘Are you sure she wasn’t hurt in the park? There was definitely a bruise on her face, blood between her legs. Do you think that happened somewhere else?’

‘I’m a scientist. I can only tell you what I learnt from an examination of Rose’s body. That bruise was caused by someone wearing a heavy ring slapping her across her face. It may have happened in the park. It may not. It’s not what killed her.’ He’s speaking to me quietly now, seriously, like a doctor breaking bad news.

‘Then what?’ My neck is prickling. I feel nervous, jittery, and have a swig of the sweet tea to calm myself down.

‘Rose had been pregnant. She had a miscarriage, or, more likely, an abortion.’

‘She’d been pregnant?’ Whoa. It’s a shock, upending everything, spilling my little stack of knowing Rosie every which way like Marco’s Jenga blocks. I jolt off the chair and grab hold of Rosie’s roughly started memorial pole, run my hands around it, risking splinters. I need to start over. What do I know that I cast aside because it didn’t fit my story? Kelly said Rosie was miserable all the time. Moping around. Complaining of nausea. Dumped by the boyfriend. Big Bill was defensive about where he’d taken Rosie. What did they know that they didn’t tell me? I’m so shit at interviewing, asking the right questions, finding out. I hold the Rosie pole tightly to still my shaking hands, and take deep breaths. I did follow it up. I found out where the unknown woman came

from, I tell myself. I informed her friends. I came to see George. They weren't my assumptions about the blackfellas park, I just let them run, didn't challenge them. But I'm learning.

'A miscarriage or an abortion? There's a big difference, isn't there? One you really don't want, and the other you desperately need.' I lean on Rosie's pole, looking down at George. He flexes back in the chair, stretches his arms above his head. The eyeholes in the skull tattoos on his chest are looking right at me. It makes me sit down again, keep my eyes focused on the poles.

'You're talking moral matters, social questions, politics,' George says, holding my tea out, encouraging me to drink it. 'I don't deal with those things now. I've spent half my life fighting for women not to die in this unnecessary way. I was in Colombia a long time, and the whole time I was there women were dying from complications of backyard abortions or self-mutilations, but the only deaths in the news were from the drug wars. The women didn't count. It was hell for them,' he says, staring out at the memorial poles, 'and it still is. But I've done my time on the front lines and I'm worn out. You young people have to step up. It's your turn.'

'But what happened with Rosie?' I ask. I know it sounds like I didn't just hear what he said, but I don't know anything about Colombia. I don't know how to step up. I don't even know what it means. Right now I'm struggling with finding out what happened to Rosie. I need to hold onto that.

'If it was an abortion it was professional work, or would have been if it wasn't interrupted,' George says, resuming the doctor tone. 'I am as confident as I can be without digging up the bushes in that park that Rosie didn't lose the fetus there.'

'You checked?'

'I looked. But my job is only to determine cause of death. Both miscarriage and abortion can lead to infection in certain

circumstances. Bacteria doesn't judge.'

'She died from infection?' I recall the sweat on Rosie's forehead, her hands clutching her crotch as if to hold back pain. Mrs Pike talked about infection following miscarriage in connection with the new hospital wing. Weird the way you've never heard of something and then it starts cropping up everywhere.

'Yes. Infection took hold, got into her blood, and ran very fast.' George is inspecting his chisels, not looking at me, waiting for me to catch up.

'The technical term is septic abortion,' George continues. 'That was the cause of death, although Rose seems to have died very quickly.'

'I've never heard of septic abortion.' Abortion yes, miscarriage yes. The first you choose, the second you don't. Septic abortion is a whole new quagmire.

'You don't see much of it in rich, developed countries like Australia. It's a terrible, tragic, unnecessary way to die.' George picks up a chisel and twirls it into the air as he speaks. Catches it by the handle. 'Usually it takes a few days to kill, which is why it could have been treated if only she'd gone to the hospital.'

'Bloody hell. Her friend didn't say anything about Rosie being pregnant. She'd have said if she knew, wouldn't she? So now what? Did you tell the police?'

'Of course I contacted the police. She had no name, no relatives, no friends.' He picks up his drink and drains it, crunching ice cubes between his teeth. 'Inspector Fawcett came for the death certificate. I asked if I should contact Palm to organise burial. Fawcett said, snarled would be the right word, that the police would take over and that my services were no longer required.' George twirls the chisel into the air. Catches it by the handle and flexes into a warrior pose, chisel as sword. 'I don't trust Fawcett, but more than that, I really

don't want to get involved.' George releases the pose, throwing the chisel into the ground right in the middle of the totem poles. It cuts deep. He stares at it, then at me. 'It's up to you now.' He pulls his cap down and walks around Rosie's pole, sizing it up.

'George, I don't know what to do! You have to help me, please,' I implore him. He can't tell me all this and walk away.

'You're doing just fine,' he says, running his hands around the pole that is to become a totem for Rosie. 'I've got to do Rosie's pole now. Take care of her spirit. And mine.'

He picks up the chainsaw, pulls the zip cord, sending a roar through the backyard. I watch him start slicing strips out of Rosie's pole, then pick my way back down the driveway to the bleak street.

25

George's street peters out into reedy wetlands. A flurry of birds takes to the sky as I approach. They glide across to the mangroves on the far side of the estuary, disappear, then rise up and glide into the mangroves again further long. I envy the birds their easy escape. There's nowhere for me here, nowhere to sit, nowhere to stroll. The tide is low, making the estuary look like a slow flow of weak milky coffee. The reeds on this side are as inhospitable as the spiky legs of mangrove roots shooting out of the water on the distant bank. A long-legged bird with a red comb on its head is walking across some lily pads. I wait for it to slip into the water until I'm bored. There's nothing for me but to climb back up the slope. The heat's tempered a little by low lying cloud, but I can feel the humidity in my lungs. Or perhaps it's the effect of finding out that Rosie was pregnant. I don't know what's harder to deal with, that she was pregnant or that she died after an abortion, or that I got no hint of either from Kelly or Big Bill. What do they know? Bill was a bit strange, but no more than I'd expect from an old bloke who lives on a beach. Kelly was reticent at first but then she seemed so open and honest, so

keen to find out what had happened to Rosie. Now it appears that they were both hiding something from me. The whole thing's too bloody tragic.

This street's all fibro-cement, old cars in the driveways, net curtains on the small windows. An elderly Aboriginal woman is walking down the other side of the street, plastic shopping bags in her hands, eyes on the ground. I wonder if she might have seen Rosie in the park, but can't bring myself to cross the street and ask. I watched those bushes in that park for a long time before I saw Rosie move, that little lift of a blonde head from beneath the dirty sheet. If anyone else in the park had seen her they would have done something.

The dismal houses give way to the cemetery. George said that Fawcett was going to organise Rosie's burial. Five days since she died. Would she be buried already? Might as well look. It's too late to go back to the office and too early to go home. I turn through the ceremonial gates and wander around reading headstones. So many women who died in their teens and twenties, so many buried with their newborn babies. Children buried before the age of five, in the days when diphtheria still existed and kids could die from diarrhoea. Men who died in their twenties, Tragically Taken as so many headstones say, making me imagine loggers hit by falling trees, farmers bitten by deadly snakes, fishermen drowned. Earl's bloody hard place. Dry thistles and grasses lap the graves. Steel grey clouds mass across the inlet and shafts of cold air pulse up the hill. I'm feeling a little creeped out. I can even hear my name on the wind. I'm getting out of here.

'Lou! Lou!'

Someone really is calling me. Near a corrugated iron shed at the bottom of the cemetery I see Perseus waving. My sailing mate. I breathe out, and the lump in my guts fades away. The path crunches under my feet as I go down. Pers

comes up to meet me.

'Hey, Lou. Flirting with the dead zone?' Perseus says with a big grin. His dreadlocks are pulled back in a ponytail. 'Or lost?'

'Looking for someone.' I have to hold myself back from giving him a hug.

'Aren't we all, eh?' Pers puts his hand on my shoulder, half way to a hug, best you'll get from an Aussie bloke who picks up that you're in need of care. 'Chris was looking for you yesterday. Came up to the Cedar to get me to go with him up to Lawless and bring you home.'

'I wondered where he was. Saw his boat was out.'

'He said you hitched up the back way, eh,' Pers says. 'Long trip, specially for a city chick.'

'If I'd known how far it was I probably wouldn't have gone.'

'Chris's words exactly. We saw you coming back down, in Big Bill's little boat, eh. With the kid and what's her name, the hairdresser.' He lets my shoulder go and starts scratching his dreadlocks.

'Kelly.'

'That's the one. Kelly.' He's looking at my neck. 'That hickey looks cute on you, eh!'

I've got a lovebite on my neck? Is that what Earl was talking about?

'How did you see me? Where were you?'

'Up in the tree hut. Saw you through my scope. I can see everything, eh. Lord of the rainforest.' Pers bangs his chest gorilla-style and gives me another big grin. 'We waited a while then saw them coming back without you. Figured you made it back to Hicks ok.'

'Yep, all good.' Weird to think they were watching out for me. You feel alone on the water. Wonder who else saw us. Wonder what they thought.

‘So what are you doing here in the cemetery?’ Pers is scratching his dreadlocks again. It’s making my head itchy.

‘Looking for someone who died, you know, for their grave.’

‘Chris reckons you’re big on dead people, eh. Moonshadow reckons you’re a witch.’ Pers grins again.

‘Because of my eyes,’ I say, rolling them to show contempt.

‘Because he reckons you put a spell on Celeste.’ Pers flutters his fingers in the air.

‘A spell? Why?’ If I could put a spell on someone it wouldn’t be Celeste.

‘You don’t know? Celeste took off after you visited them. Said she wanted to look after the baby better, make something of her life.’

‘That’s a surprise. Good for her. It was bloody hard way to live, up there. I had nothing to do with her leaving though.’ Did I? I was so careful not to be judgmental when I was with Celeste, but she might have picked up on something. Rosie mightn’t be lying dead in this cemetery if I’d got off that bench sooner, if I’d run to the hospital faster. How did everything become my responsibility all of a sudden?

‘Moonshadow just needs someone to blame. He’s death warmed up right now.’

‘Ah, poor Moonshadow. First his beloved goats wander away, then his wife and child walk out.’ Rosie’s death is messing with my head, making me feel bitter and angry and culpable. All I can think is that he should be grateful his girlfriend didn’t die from one of Old Annie’s potions.

‘Be nice, Lou!’ Pers says, smiling. ‘I’ve never seen him so sad, eh. He can’t even bear to go home. He’s sleeping here, in the shed.’

‘Here?’ The man sleeps in a cemetery and he’s calling me a witch. But Pers is right. A little compassion won’t kill me. ‘That’s tough. Sleeping in a shed in this place.’

'He works here, digs graves and stuff, so I suppose he feels at home. If you're looking for someone's grave he'll know where it is.'

'So I guess I've got to ask him. Want to come with me? Moral support? You can be the warlock.'

'No can do Lou. I'd love to be your warlock but I've got to make tracks. Moonshadow will be fine. Good for him to dance with his demon, eh.'

'Really? Don't see myself dancing with Moonshadow.'

'Figuratively,' Pers chuckles.

'Wish me luck!' It's good having someone on my side. Involuntarily I lift my arms to hug Perseus, breaking all kinds of codes.

'Great to see you Lou.' Perseus wraps his long arms around my shoulders. I only come up to his chest. 'We've got to sail together before you go. We're a great crew.'

'I'd love to. We will.'

'Cool. Got to go. See you soon.'

Moonshadow's sitting in the doorway of the shed on an upturned fuel can, staring at the ground. He looks older than I remember. Must be the overalls and working boots.

'Funny place to see you,' he says. No smile. Expecting me.

'Didn't expect to see you here either.' I smile, trying to be friendly, a genial demon.

'Work here a bit. Need the moolah.'

'Perseus told me about Celeste.' No point beating about the bush. 'You must miss them.'

'She's gone to stay with her sister.' Moonshadow takes a long drag on a joint, one eye shut against the spiralling smoke. He offers it to me.

'Can't. Sorry. Working.' I don't want to get stoned right now. Specially not on Moonshadow's strong stuff. Then I realise that he's probably working too, and I worry about being inappropriate, judgmental, what did he call it? A

square. 'Go on then, just a puff.' I don't inhale.

'Celeste's probably just taking a break,' I say, trying to sound conciliatory. 'First babies are tough, people say.'

'Celeste had me,' Moonshadow retorts. 'She wasn't doing it on her own.' Glaring at me with glazed eyes, taking another long drag, passing me the joint.

'Guess her sister's got a washing machine and a fridge,' I venture, but regret it as soon as it's out of my mouth.

'You hang around graveyards a lot?' Moonshadow says, changing the subject abruptly, his tone jagged.

'I'm looking for a new grave,' and I'm relieved we're not going to talk about Celeste and the baby any more. 'Rosie Gardner. Buried yesterday or the day before. This week anyway.'

'Just the one down in the ground this week.'

'Could you show me please? She was a friend. I just, I want to pay my respects.'

'Mind if I finish this first?' Moonshadow waves the joint in the air. 'Want another drag?'

'No, no thanks, but there's no rush.'

I find a fuel can to sit on in the shade. Flocks of birds are swooping over the estuary. The cloud over the distant bank is darker, denser.

'Going to rain?' I'm trying for small talk, using the fail-safe.

'Looks like it. Hope it pisses down.'

Moonshadow finishes the joint and grinds it out beneath his foot. We sit silently side by side, watching the cloud build over the estuary, until I'm brave enough to ask about Rosie's grave again.

'Could you show me?' I offer a smile.

'Show you what?'

'Rosie Gardner's grave.'

'I don't know who all the graves belong to.'

'You were going to show me the new grave. You know, my

friend who just died.' That thing about dope making you lose your short-term memory might be true.

'Got it. Sorry. I remember now. Brain's a bit, you know. Um, new grave. Way over the other side. No one comes this side any more. It's boggy.'

I nod, as if I'm familiar with the problems bogginess causes for graves. Moonshadow stands, stretches, and drinks from a grubby water bottle. He spits the water out, narrowly missing me.

'Hey, man. Sorry. Tasted like shit.'

I give him a smile that I hope indicates that I didn't think he was spitting at me. As we walk up the hill I try to make conversation that isn't about Celeste.

'You dig the graves?'

'Mostly I look after the paths and grass, but, yeah, I dig graves too. Not that many needed in a small place like Hicks.'

'Hard work I guess.'

'Just like digging any other hole,' Moonshadow replies, warming up, seeming pleased to talk about his work. 'It's putting people in the graves that's the hard part.'

'I thought the family did that.'

I've only been to one funeral, my grandfather's. My father and uncles carried the casket on their shoulders, lowered it into the grave. The women wore black and wailed.

'When people don't have their own pallbearers, me and some of Palm's blokes have to get the casket in the hole, eh. If it's been raining the ground's slippery as shit. You don't want to send someone's casket flying across the ground. It's disrespectful.'

'Who's Palm?' It's a familiar name. George talked about someone called Palm too.

'And it might come open.' Moonshadow's still putting caskets in holes. 'Then you've got a dead body slipping across the mud. That's really bad.'

'Has that happened?' I'll stick with him, go at his pace, try to get along with him, like Earl advised me.

'Not yet,' Moonshadow smiles for the first time since I arrived. 'Gonna quit the day that happens.'

'Find something more lively to do,' I say, a weak attempt at a joke. Moonshadow misses it. But that won't be the dope. Most people miss my jokes.

'That woman the other day. Shit! Was she heavy!'

'Rosie Gardner was heavy? She seemed small to me.'

'I don't know her name. It'll be on the thing. But definitely bloody heavy.'

When we arrive at the grave I read the ticket on the small post at the head. 'Mrs Olive Peach. 89 years old.'

'It's not her.' I look at Moonshadow. 'I'm looking for Rosie Gardner's grave. She was young. She was small.'

Moonshadow stands with one hand in his overalls pocket and the other above his face as if to block the glare of the sun, surveying the cemetery, in search of an unremembered grave.

'Sorry Lou. Pretty sure it's been just this one this week. Your friend must still be over the road. At Palm's.'

~

I'm tired. Hot. The dark cloud's bubbling up over the estuary now. It is going to piss down. I've got time to call in at Palm's Funerals. Palm has got to be more straightforward than George or Moonshadow. Surely funeral directors can't be dope fiends. They've got to be normality incarnate.

Palm's bell is melodious when I ring it. Something classical that I've heard before, probably in an advertisement. When the door opens there's a bald, plump man in a pale pink shirt. He gives me a little bow, and with the slightest flourish of his arm, he ushers me in.

'Good afternoon. May I help you?' he says in a smooth tone.

'Mr Palm?' I ask, and he does another slight bow. 'I'm

Rosie Gardner's cousin.' There it is again, facility with fabrication. Thought I was going to say friend, but claiming blood is so much stronger. 'I'd like to see Rosie, I mean, have a viewing, pay my last respects.'

'Rose Gardner?' Palm says, anxiety rippling through the smoothness in his voice.

Palm seems to recognise her name. He's not surprised. He doesn't say 'Rosie who?' Doesn't say he doesn't know what I'm talking about. He calls her Rose. How does Palm know her name? George didn't know it, so he couldn't have put it on the death certificate. How did Palm find out?

'This is her, Rosie, but the photo's old. She had short hair, a bob, when she died.'

I give him Rosie's photo. He takes it with shaking hands, studies it, and gives it back.

'Rose Gardner.' Palm sighs. 'He said she had no family, no friends, no one at all.'

Palm looks around the door, as if checking that no one is in sight, then hustles me into the sitting room, and leaves. I'm surrounded by a display of caskets, some hanging on the wall, others standing like statues, and one open to display the deep blue padded lining. Palm's gone so long that by the time he comes back I've inspected the ornamental and plain caskets and the large map of the cemetery with its old Chinese section, its Protestant and Catholic and Jewish sections. He's carrying a tray with a floral teapot and matching milk jug, two dainty, gold-rimmed cups and saucers with gold teaspoons, and a plate of top-shelf biscuits. He arranges it all carefully on the low table and gestures to me to take a seat.

'Allow me to extend my deepest sympathy, Miss?'

'Williams. Lou Williams.'

'I'm afraid that I was assured the deceased had no next of kin, Miss Williams,' Palm says evenly. 'Inspector Fawcett

showed me the death certificate.' Beads of sweat shine on his forehead.

Fawcett. When George gave him the death certificate it had no name on it. When Fawcett showed it to Palm, Rosie's name was there. How did Fawcett know it was Rosie?

'The police officer, I meant to say,' Palm stumbles, 'the police officer who showed me the death certificate. I don't recall his name.' Stumbling backwards uncomfortably. I want to ask why he's worried about naming Fawcett but he's already in a pickle. This is so not what I expected. I have to keep my cool. The less I say the more Palm tells me. Let him do the talking. I'm a bereaved relative.

Palm pours the tea with shaking hands. A clacketty sound echoes around the caskets as he passes me the cup and saucer. I stir a couple of spoonfuls of sugar into my tea, enjoying the echoing clinking sound. Palm sips at his tea like a bird, his little finger cocked in the air, then coughs, clearing his throat.

'I am sorry to have to tell you that I cannot show you Rose Gardner's body.'

'But Mr Palm, I've only just learnt of her passing.' Rosie's cousin has a very proper turn of phrase. 'As next of kin I surely have a right, Mr Palm.' I wipe my cheek where a tear might lie.

'Miss Williams, I'm terribly sorry, but Rose has already been buried. The heat, you know,' he says, mopping his forehead with a nicely ironed handkerchief.

First George with his bloody chainsaw, then Moonshadow with his spells, now this lunacy. Somewhere along the line I slipped into another dimension. I didn't even inhale.

'Mr Palm, I've just been to the cemetery. I spoke with the gravedigger, Mr Palm. He told me that Mrs Peach was the only burial this week.'

'Rose is in with Mrs Peach,' Palm whispers, leaning

towards me, sweat beading all over his face now.

The heavy coffin. Of course. An 89-year-old woman isn't likely to be very heavy either. I zip my lips.

'I was told to get rid of her fast.' Palm's whisper is so quiet I have to lean close to him. He oozes eau-de-cologne and sweat.

'To get rid of her fast?' I can't contain myself. It's probably a mistake. Silence makes him blurt out such amazing stuff.

'No, no, Miss Williams. I didn't mean that. You've caught me unawares.' Palm draws back and coughs, takes a deep breath, shakes himself. He's developing wet circles round the armholes of his shirt. 'It was very dishonourable of me to speak of the dead in that way. Please don't tell anyone I spoke like that. This is going so badly. I really didn't expect ...' Palm wrings his hands, takes a deep breath. 'The thing is, without next of kin, there was no one to pay for her grave, and it was time she was buried. That's all I meant to say. Old Mrs Peach was tiny. There was enough room for both.'

A long ring on the melodious door chime gives him an excuse to escape. He springs from his chair, and half-runs out of the room, talking quickly over his shoulder as he goes.

'There's someone at the door. I can arrange for a headstone. At another time. I have an appointment. I am sorry. You must go.'

By the time I reach the door Palm is speaking in his smooth undertaker's tone to an elderly woman dressed in black. She's wearing coral lipstick that jars with the sallow skin of her cheeks. I slip past them. There's a crack of lightening, jagged across the sky. A long slow rumble of thunder. And suddenly it's teeming. I'm going to be drenched by the time I get home.

26

'He wants you again this morning. The boss,' Charlene says, feigning disinterest, not looking up from filing her nails. 'Didn't see you around much yesterday. Probably wants to know where you goofed off to.' I can feel both her and Ed's eyes boring into my back as I knock on Earl's door.

'Shut the door Lou. Take a seat.' Earl's serious. No twinkle in his eye, no teasing smile, no sarcasm. 'Did you find the nurse?' he asks quietly.

'No, I didn't.' Phew! I'm not in trouble. 'Can't even find out her name. Only that she's gone south.' I'm matching Earl for quiet and serious. I think they call echoing it in the interviewing advice manuals.

'Very interesting. So many of your witnesses seem to go there.' Earl's eyes keep flitting towards the window in his door, giving the impression that Ed is hovering nearby. He leans forward, speaks even more quietly, hands clasped on the desk. 'What about George? Is he still in town or has he flown the coop as well?'

'Still here.' I lean forward too. 'George makes totem poles, memorials for dogs and the unclaimed dead. Did you know

that?’

‘Heard he was artistic. Didn’t know about the poles. Are they any good?’

‘They’re phenomenal. He was doing one for Rosie. He makes the outline with a chainsaw. Reckoned he was having trouble getting an outline on Rosie’s pole because someone was looking for her.’

‘Amazing notion. The man’s supposed to be a scientist. Did you show him the photo?’

‘I did. George was sure it was Rosie. Same bone structure. Same eye colour.’ I can’t hide a note of satisfaction.

‘Hmm.’ Earl leans back and rocks his chair. ‘Did he tell you anything about her?’ Ed must have moved away from the door.

‘George said Rosie died of septic abortion.’ I watch Earl carefully to see what effect this statement has on him. He stops rocking, leans forward and hunches over the table.

‘Septic abortion?’ Eyebrows raised.

‘First time I’ve heard of it.’

‘You really don’t know very much, do you?’ Earl’s rubbing his forehead, easing pain. ‘Septic abortion used to be a lot more common. Usually following botched backyard abortions. The Women’s Hospital in Melbourne had a special wing for women suffering from it, back before abortion became more or less legal. Women used to get dumped near the hospital when abortions went wrong. Ah, the fine things I learnt when I worked for the *Truth!*’

‘That was back ...’ Shouldn’t say it was back in the dark ages. ‘In Sydney you just go to a clinic. Straightforward. I thought it was like that everywhere.’

‘This is Queensland, Lou.’ Earl leans back, starts rocking. ‘For an idea of the reactionary extremes that appeal to the local rulers, perhaps the most egregious example might be Joh and his National Party cronies’ attempt to pass a bill with

draconian jail sentences for doctors, nurses, social workers, even friends who help a woman get an abortion.' He heaves one of those big sighs. 'You should know these things Lou. Then again,' he gives me one of those flirty smiles that I've come to appreciate as praise, 'you were probably about twelve when that happened. All the more important that you read more, pay attention, learn a bit of history.' And he sits up straight and crosses his hands on the table. Earl's here-endeth-the-lesson position. 'Did George think Rosie's death was worthy of police investigation?'

'George contacted the police. Fawcett went to the morgue and picked up the death certificate. He told George the police would take care of burial.' Serious adult tone. Resisting the temptation to flirt.

'Ah, the esteemed Inspector Fawcett. A man with a hand in every pot.'

'Bribery, corruption, rumours of murder, you told me.'

'Ah, so you do pay attention.'

I'd forgotten until just now, Earl. Didn't seem relevant. Not that I'm going to tell you that. But what is it relevant to?

'Is Fawcett the bloke dressed in blackface with a noose around his neck in that fancy dress party photo above Ed's desk?'

'I don't think I know the photo. I avoid Ed's desk for health reasons. I did hear that Fawcett considered that appropriate attire for the mayoral annual fancy dress bash.'

'It's outrageous. He should have been sacked for that.'

'For that and all the rest. An embarrassment down south so they sent him up here. He'll be headed out west next.'

'I suppose they can't sack all the crooked ones or there'd be no cops left.' Where I come from we don't have much time for cops.

'You go too far Lou,' Earl says sharply. 'They're not an amorphous mass. There are good police officers.'

That didn't go well. Better to segue than to argue with the boss.

'George seemed a bit intimidated by Fawcett.'

'That's Fawcett's style,' Earl mutters, opening his diary.

'There's more.' I do Earl's lean-forward hands-clasped thing. I'm getting a kick out of not having played all my cards yet. Earl looks up from his diary with an air of annoyance at being interrupted. 'I talked to Mr Palm. He was, what, peculiar.'

'Palm's a bit different. Can't hold that against the man. Did you show him the photo?'

'Yes. He recognised Rosie. But the surprising thing was that Palm knew Rosie's name. He had seen her name on the death certificate. George didn't know her name. He didn't write it there.'

'Oh. Oh. Oh.' Earl closes the diary and turns it slowly round and round on the desk. 'Fawcett picked up the death certificate from George?' Earl asks. 'That's what you said?'

'Yes. And Fawcett assured Palm that Rosie had no next of kin.'

'Fawcett went to Palm? Personally?'

'That's what Palm said, then he backtracked and said he was unsure which police officer it was.'

'Has Rosie been buried?' Earl is starting to reel a little. I'm enjoying this.

'Palm said that he had to get her in the ground quick. She was buried in the same grave, the same coffin, as an 89-year-old woman.' I'm leaving out my visit to the cemetery. Don't want to have to explain my association with Moonshadow.

'Oh, this is not good. Not good at all. Poor Mr Palm.' Earl drums his fingers on the table loudly and then leans back in his chair and studies the ceiling until I begin to wonder if he's slipped into a coma. Letting out a long heavy breath he leans in close to me again. 'Alright, Lou. First thing. I'll talk to

Palm, get things straightened out there. And I'll tell him that you've already forgotten your visit and suggest he does the same.' Earl gives me that smile again. 'We call this confidentiality. Understand?'

'Understood.'

'I don't want to drag George or Palm into this if I can avoid it. I hope you haven't told anyone about your adventures with them.'

'No.'

'Second thing. Don't mention the death certificate to a soul. And keep that photo in your pocket for now. Who else knows about it?'

'Only Rosie's friend from Lawless.'

'Third thing. Our friend Mrs Pike tells me that the treasurer of the Hospital Ladies Auxiliary is putting about a story that a crazed girl who bore some similarity to a certain *FNQ Mail* reporter accosted her last Wednesday. Apparently the girl's only excuse for her appalling behaviour was her outlandish claim that there was a young white woman in the blackfellas park who was extremely ill. She ignored the crazy girl, as anyone would. Everyone knows that respectable white women don't go to that park.'

'I did ask her for help. She wouldn't stop. Nasty b ...'

'Now, now, Lou. I believe the president was in a hurry, attending to her many responsibilities.' Earl has a wide grin on his face. 'Mrs Pike is retailing the story with unbounded enthusiasm, and, of course, embellishing it with a rumour that the young woman who was ill subsequently died because help came too late. The story is now well and truly in the public domain. It gives me the perfect opportunity, nay, the responsibility, to take up the matter with the police. It's not the sort of thing we like to have happen in our lovely town, and therefore it's something that Hicks Inlet's prime newspaper should report.'

'Only newspaper.' Jestng is now allowed.

'No need to rub it in, Lou,' Earl says, opening at his diary again. 'So, your last week is turning out to be busy. I see you've got your interview with Hunt at 11.30 this morning. You be careful with him.'

'I can handle Stanley Hunt. But can you remind me why I'm interviewing him? I mean, what's my take here? What's the purpose of the interview?'

Surely no one is going to be interested in reading it even if I do have time to write it. Surely what happened to Rosie is more important. These things I don't say. I don't want to irritate Earl.

'I promised that you would get some practice interviewing and writing up. Is that purpose enough for you?'

It seems Earl is irritated anyway.

'What should I ask him?' I say as pleasantly as I can manage.

'I thought you were going to ask him about his good works for women,' Earl says with a chuckle.

It's a practice run for me. It has no purpose. I get it.

'Take the office camera,' he says. 'I've asked Charlene to book you a taxi for 11.15. Pay attention, act like a journalist.'

'Got it Earl.'

'Do you think you could go back up to the hippie colony tomorrow and tell your friends you found Rose Gardiner? It'd be the decent thing to do.'

'Do the interview. Take photos. Write up Ed's notes. Go up to Lawler's Cove tomorrow. No worries.'

Is he having me on? Does he even know where Lawless is? How am I supposed to get there and back in a day?

'Good girl,' Earl says, studying his diary.

~

Ed calls me when I walk out of Earl's office. It's the first time he's called me by my name. He's waving a page of

handwritten notes, a cassette tape and some more brochures about the new tourist development up on the Cedar.

'I believe you've been instructed to turn this into a few paragraphs. The byline's mine, of course, so I don't want any half-way job.' He's got a sneer on his face that he might consider a smile. I remind myself that I've got a secret assignment that should technically be his, bite back aggression and give him a cheery grin.

'Oh, wonderful! Thanks Ed, this will be great practice.' I look at the notes. One side of one piece of paper. Barely legible. His standard's slipped. He's trying me out. 'I might need to ask you some questions.'

'I've got to go out and it's for tomorrow's. Apprentices have to learn to work with the tools they have. All part of the training.' Ed launches himself out of his chair and tucks his shirt into his trousers, belly bulging through the buttons. 'There's a few choice quotes from the ringleader on the cassette tape. Alec got some great shots. This one's going in.' He hands me a photo. 'You can borrow my typewriter and cassette player. You can even use my desk, so long as you don't paint it with nail polish.' This time he does give me a smile. Clearly thinks he's made a big joke. 'Four paragraphs. Roger would like to have it in an hour.' Ah, a whack below the belt when I'm off guard to finish off. Thought he was treating me like a colleague for a second there.

Ed's gone. I sit on his uncomfortably still-warm chair. Roger would like to have four paragraphs in an hour. I've got a taxi to catch in an hour and a half. What fresh hell is this?

The photo shows people on a half-made road standing in front of a bulldozer. Sarongs and thongs, work overalls and boots, ponytails and wide-brimmed hats, a cross-section of Hicks' population. Hah! There's Perseus, up in a tree. And more lurid resort brochures, all exclamation marks and unfinished sentences, glossy women, cocktails with

umbrellas, kidney-shaped swimming pools, platters of prawns. I put them on top of the other rubbish on Ed's desk.

Ed's bare notes: Another Cedar protest. Hippies block bridge again. Long-hair spokesman on tape.

I put the cassette in Ed's grimy cassette player and hit play. Loud hissing crackles through the office.

'Use the bloody headphones!' Charlene yells from the fridge, freezer door open, half-licked Mint Slice biscuit in her hand. I hunt amongst the junk on Ed's desk, through the empty crisp packets and the haphazard piles of paper. Seeing the photos of Ed with Hunt, Fawcett and the mayor reminds me that Perseus said they met up in the rainforest on this half-made road. When was it? Weekend before last. Must find a way to ask Hunt about that. I'm losing time. I hunt again for the headphones and find them inside the latest copy of *Playboy*, in the centrefold. A little taunt from the absent Ed. I want to wash the earpieces, sterilise them, but there's no time so I put them on, gingerly, trying not to wonder about what kind of gunk he harbours in his ears.

Fast forward. Hiss. Again. Still hiss. Again. More hiss. My ears hurt. Bloody Ed. Fast forward again. I catch a voice. Fast back. Hiss. Slow forward. Hiss. Again. Hiss. Again. Voice. I push the back key a little, a little more, until I find the end of the hiss and the start of the voice.

'God has told me that the rainforest should remain in its pristine state.' Hiss. 'My hair is an antenna to God.' Hiss. Hiss. 'All men should get their minds above their belts and follow my example.' Hiss. 'Romance and idealism would be restored to Australia by collectively enhancing the vibratory power of the population.' Hiss. Hiss. Hiss.

Further on there's some unclear shouting and the grind of a bulldozer. I fast forward and back, hunting for something else to quote. Nothing but noise and hiss. I must be missing something, but I've only got thirty minutes left. Bloody Ed.

Bloody journalism.

I've listened to Perseus wax loquacious on the topic of saving the rainforest and read enough about the protests to be able to write the 'facts' off the top of my head. The spokesman should have a name, but Ed never bothers with those niceties, and the spokesman will be grateful for the anonymity in years to come. I type an introductory paragraph — who what when where — and yank the carriage return lever twice for a paragraph space. Another paragraph for why and how. Start another paragraph with 'A spokesman for the demonstrators said' and carefully transcribe the whole quote. No room for errors. No time for retyping. A wrap-up paragraph. 'Ongoing conflict in the beautiful rainforest mars life for families and businesses alike in lovely Hicks Inlet blah blah.' I know the drill. It's Ed's byline. I've got to go to the Hunts and interview them about god-knows-what. Oh, what a short, slippery slope it is to the land of the cynical hack.

27

The Hunts live in one of those grand, glassy, glitzy houses on the north shore that I've seen from the water. Roadside, they're all carpark, blousey tropical shrubs, white gravel, wide expanses of wall with small windows to protect the inhabitants from the afternoon sun and the curious eyes of passersby. Give me a Queenslander with its wide verandahs any day.

Deep breath. Five steps up to the door. Musical chime for a doorbell. Sounds like Palm's.

Stanley Hunt opens the door. He's wearing a beige, short-sleeved, safari suit, the jacket unbuttoned, no shirt. A heavy gold chain nestles on the russet-grey hair curling over his chest. He grasps my elbow and kisses me on the cheek, vaporising me with alcohol, and steers me up several more wide timber steps into the lounge room. It's somewhere between gallantry and strong-arming. At least this time I'm prepared for it.

Hunt drives me onto a white, leather couch and backs onto an identical couch opposite me. A warm, salty breeze plays through the sea-facing windows. Hunt splays his arms along

the back of the couch and crosses his legs, one bare foot planted on the polished floorboards, the other swinging in the air. His feet are very clean and callous free. His nails shine with the benefit of a pedicure. My dusty sandals have left prints across the floor. Hunt coughs loudly and Bernie appears through a doorway in a white flowing gown, Grecian goddess style. She nods an acknowledgment to me but doesn't speak as she heads to the bar at the end of the long room, where she noisily makes two gin and tonics and decorates them with small paper umbrellas, rattling the ice bucket, slamming the fridge door shut. All the while Hunt is staring at me. I've walked into the middle of a barney. Bernie pads across the floor and slams the drinks on the glass coffee table with a thud. Droplets of liquid glisten on the tabletop around the glasses. Hunt gestures at the table and looks questioningly at his wife, who sullenly goes back to the bar and hunts in its cupboards, clinking crockery and banging doors. She returns with a little cut crystal dish of peanuts, puts it on the coffee table and does a half curtsy, taking care not to catch Hunt's eye. My bright 'Thank you Bernie' doesn't elicit a glance. Whatever had happened before I arrived must have been unpleasant. Before Bernie leaves the room she cleans away my footprints with a soft mop, eyes down, backing out of the room to erase her own footprints as she goes.

I don't want to be here any more than they want me here, but here I am. Where to start? I pull my notebook out of my bag and hold my pen poised over the blank page. Hunt slurps his drink, his moustache dipping in the liquid. He plonks the glass down hard on the table, adding to the circle of droplets around his glass. He stares at me, as if challenging me to do something about the mess, or to drink my gin, or perhaps he's just trying to unsettle me. I've got to keep my cool.

'May I begin by asking what brought you to Hicks Inlet, Mr Hunt?' I say with my posh north shore voice.

'Call me Stanley,' he says in a tone more suitable for a pick-up joint than an interview. He's switched on a fake smile. 'What brought me to this delightful place? The weather, of course,' he says, laughing too loudly, sucking in air through his buck teeth, spraying it out as alcohol fumes in my direction. 'The sunshine, the ocean, etcetera.'

'Some find the heat oppressive,' I say, thinking of Earl, and, I realise, being unnecessarily antagonistic.

'Some just don't know how to take advantage of a situation. There's not many places you can have a boat on the jetty in your front yard,' Hunt replies, gesturing towards the ocean. 'That lovely boat keeps the pigs from the door. Do let me show it to you.' He leans forward, as if to stand, showering me with another breath of alcohol.

'It's a wolf,' I say. 'Keeps the wolf from the door.' Hunt is making me nervous. He must have had a few. I want to get this over and get out of here. The last thing I want to do is look at his boat.

'Wolf, is it?' he says, taking another slurp. 'You came to talk about wild things?' He slams down the glass, adding to the now-pooling liquid on the tabletop.

'I came to talk about your, um, good works for women.' I want to say that it was Bernie's phrase, but mentioning Bernie doesn't seem like a wise move.

Hunt picks up a handful of nuts, and stares at my chest, saying nothing. He knows it's Bernie's phrase. He throws a peanut in the air and catches it in his mouth. Then another. The third falls to the floor. He leaves it there and tips the rest of the handful into his mouth and crunches loudly.

'How did you become involved in, um, that?' This is not going well.

'That?' Hunt asks. 'Meaning?' No hint of a smile now. Ice

in his eyes. Bernie's ghost in the room.

'Your generous donation to the hospital, for example.'

'Ah, that. Well, what do you know already?' Hunt slurps his drink and gestures towards mine. I take the smallest of sips. It's way too strong for me.

'Very little, I'm afraid, apart from what was said at the opening of the new wing. We at the *FNQ Mail* thought such an act of generosity warranted this interview. We thought the people of Hicks Inlet would be interested to know more about the benefactor.' I sound like such a wanker.

Hunt leans back into the couch, plays with his heavy signet ring, smoothes his moustache and crosses his legs. His manicured foot bounces up and down over the table.

'Well then, let's see. My good works for women.' His voice is cold and his tone sarcastic. 'It goes way back. In my youth I met a wonderful woman called Jezebel. I was in the police force then, a naive young man. I had to deal with terrible, terrible things. Women got into all sorts of problems I'd had no idea existed. But then I met Jezebel. She had ways of helping women, you know, of knowing who needed help and providing it for them, and I began to help her out.'

'I see. Can you tell me more?' I'm relieved that he's decided to talk about himself, but, given an opening, it's most people's favourite topic.

'Jezebel was a great woman. A woman of wit, wisdom and generosity towards those in need. A she-lion. She helped women who'd been raped, women who'd fallen by the wayside, women who, who, needed help.' Hunt burps, pats his stomach.

'She ran a refuge? A drop-in centre?'

'Something like that.' Hunt uncrosses his legs, leans forwards and takes another slurp of his drink.

'Would you like to tell me about your role, Mr Hunt?' He swings between telling me things I don't want to know and

telling me nothing.

Hunt stares at my chest again, and drinks some more. Eats another handful of peanuts. Plays with the signet ring. The sound of banging saucepans comes from the kitchen. Hunt looks over his shoulder.

'You provided protection, as a police officer?' I prompt.

'At first, but then I left the police and began working with Jezebel. I was able to do more, ah, good works, as you put it, outside the force.'

'You gave up your job and did voluntary work? That is generous.'

'I had business interests,' Hunt says harshly, sitting up, leaning so close that I can see he's got a toupée intermingled with his real hair. The fake hair has a polyester shine. I have to force myself to take my eyes off it. I'm as bad with the toupée as he is with my unimpressive chest. Go with the business interests. More straightforward than the good works for women. Not to mention newsworthy.

'Ah yes, business interests. I understand that you are involved with the development of the resort up on the Cedar.'

'I am playing a role in opening up,' Hunt replies, his tone suddenly less hostile, 'the beauty of the rainforest to those who cannot otherwise enjoy its pleasures.' He's word for word on one of Ed's resort brochures.

'Can you tell me more about your role? You have a background in property development? Road works?' Images of Hunt with Fawcett and the mayor up on the half-built road come to mind. Protesters blocking the bridge-building, getting hurt. Perhaps I will get a story out of this.

'Fishing. My role in the development consortium is to take potential investors fishing. Show them the sights. Impress them.' Hunt leans back on the couch again, arraying his arms along its back, splaying his legs. 'I've had millionaires from Singapore and Hong Kong out there on the reef, up the river,

dressed in suits.' He's on a roll now, telling stories about big fish that got away. Hunt does another one of those buck-toothed guffaws. 'Do come and see the boat. It's my pride and joy and saviour.' He stands this time, with a bit of a wobble. I want to get out of here.

'I'm sorry, but I really need to get going now, Mr Hunt.' I pick up my bag and the camera. Suddenly I don't care about Hunt and his cronies up on the half-built road. I'm going home. I don't belong here. There's not going to be any article, women's pages or anywhere else.

'Then I'll show you the boat on the way out.'

Hunt grabs my elbow again and steers me through the glass doors onto the deck. He's unsteady on his feet, clutching the rail on the deck with one hand and me with the other. Going down the steps I'm scared he'll fall if I make a sudden move. We totter across the garden path to the jetty, where he grabs the rails with both hands and lets out a great belch. I step away. The boat's called *My Girl*, the name painted in red with a saucy Tinkerbell decal beside it. After a few moments Hunt shakes himself, straightens up, and grins at me.

'Had a lovely racehorse by the same name,' he murmurs, following my gaze. 'Made me a fortune.'

'One of your business interests? It won a lot of races?' I ask, buying time while I figure out how to make a graceful exit.

'Racehorses don't have to win to make money. And I'm not going to talk about any of my business interests except for the consortium. So,' he coughs, straightens his back, '*My Girl* is a 32-foot Riviera Flybridge. Best recreational fishing boat you can get.' He seems lucid again, or perhaps just more comfortable, on safer ground. 'Mighty 165 horsepower diesel motor. Belongs to the consortium, of course.'

'I am interested in the consortium. The road building and so on. It's a big project,' I say, wondering if I should just make

a run for it. I don't want to get on that boat.

'I am interested in consorting too, ha ha,' Hunt snorts, that peculiar laugh through his teeth that now seems distinctly equine. He reaches out, grabs my hand and suddenly the humour and brassiness are gone. 'Come on board,' he insists. 'You can't tell the Stanley Hunt story without knowing the role of the boat.'

The camera strap slips down my shoulder onto Hunt's hand, making him let go. I mutter about the need to take photographs, and swing away to take a picture of the house. Bernie is on the deck waving. There's a man in the lounge room behind her. I snap randomly.

'Visitor for you, Stanley,' Bernie calls.

Hunt glares at his wife, clearly unhappy at seeing both her and the man in the lounge room. He rolls the signet ring around and around on his finger. He looks at me then at the house, and wipes sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. Bernie skips down the stairs and into the garden, as light on her feet as a girl. She's changed into shorts and a checked blouse, as if she'd put on the gown for the interview and she knows it's over.

'A visitor, Stanley,' Bernie repeats as she approaches, ignoring the alarm with which he'd responded to this information the first time. 'If you could say your farewells, I will show Miss Williams the garden.' She's authoritative, in charge. A shift of mood.

'You can show her the garden gate on her way out.' Hunt grimaces, then as quickly as the grimace had come it goes, replaced by what Hunt presumably considers a charming smile, his teeth protruding, his eyes cold. Politely, like a teenage boy under instruction, he holds his clammy hand out and thanks me for the interview. And then he stomps towards the house and hauls himself up the stairs and into the house. I watch him drag the man away from the window by the arm.

‘Sorry about Stanley,’ Bernie says, with a genuinely friendly smile. ‘He’s been drinking a lot lately. He’s not himself.’

‘Ah.’

‘Stanley and his boat! Want to see the fishing tackle? He must have every piece of fishing equipment that exists!’

Bernie is sparkily bright, too bright. As we walk back towards the house, she points out different plants in the garden. I take some snaps. A punching bag and a couple of swinging cane chairs hang beneath the deck. Behind them, there’s a door to the bricked-in area under the house. Bernie unlocks the door.

‘If you want to know the real Stanley you have to see this. Stanley’s pride and joy,’ she says with a girlish titter.

The dark, fish-smelling room is lined with rods, nets and tackle boxes. I take a couple of photographs, aware that there is probably not enough light, but there are 24 shots on the roll so I might as well use them.

‘Let me get you a cool drink before you go,’ Bernie offers, opening a door that is barely visible on a side wall. A shaft of harsh light shines out, creating an interesting lighting effect on the fishing tackle that might impress Alec. I shoot from several angles, then poke my head into the side room. Bernie is at a little refrigerator, with her back to me, pouring water into a glass full of ice. The room is white-tiled, lit with fluorescent tubes. There’s a hospital bed with stirrups hanging above it. Plastic buckets and basins on a shelf below a laundry basin. Neat stacks of red towels and alternating beige and white sheets in a glass-fronted cupboard. A laid-out row of surgical instruments on a metal tray that peculiarly brings to mind George’s chisels. Bernie turns and passes me the glass of icy water.

‘Our little surgery. Stanley likes to think of himself as a doctor. Got a white coat and all. Gets me to dress up in my

old nurse's uniform,' she adds with a sad little tinkle of a laugh. 'I'm lucky it still fits! But really, I shouldn't have ...'

'Sorry! I didn't mean to ...' Bloody hell! I feel like I'm 'having a bit of a perve' as Mrs Pike had put it. This must be some kind of sex-play place. I quickly step back into the tackle room.

Bernie switches off the light and pulls the door shut. Ropes and nets thud against the door as it closes. 'Let's keep this between you and me ... Stanley would never forgive me,' Bernie says falteringly. 'I mean, it's not for your article, obviously.'

'Of course not.'

But surely she showed me on purpose. Why? To create something between us, a confidence? Make me an ally, in what? Secrets of their sex life? These two are weird.

'I'll show you out the garden way,' Bernie says quietly, composed. I look back at the door as we leave the tackle room. Closed it blends into the wall. I wouldn't even have even guessed it was there if Bernie hadn't opened the door.

'It's a beautiful garden, Bernie. All your work?' I badly need to talk about something normal after that bombshell.

'Oh yes, even the mowing. Nothing ever stops growing. Too much rain. Too much sun.'

'Well, it is lovely. I must take some more pictures.' We're complicit now, in I know not what, except that we are not going to talk about it. I take several photographs of Bernie in the garden with the house in the background. She poses naturally, with a simple smile, undisturbed. The sea breeze blows her hair. A proud gardener with a lovely home. When I'm done Bernie leads me around the side of the house and up the garden path to the street.

'Thanks so much for your visit,' she says gently, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek. 'It will be interesting to see what you come up with.'

'Thank you for the invitation. It's my first interview. I hope I got it right.' I sound inane. I can't possibly have anything to write up. I have no idea what happened in there.

'Oh, I have every confidence in you. You'll work it out,' Bernie says with a sad half-smile. She turns back down the garden path.

~

Away from the sea breeze it's blisteringly hot and humid. The gin's making my head swim. Under the glare of the sun I walk slowly past the grand waterfront houses towards Hicks Inlet, heat prickling between my legs. The gardens are an exercise in restrained fecundity. Oversized and obscenely bright tropical flowers leap from the ground. Raucous bird calls fill the air. Creepers suck the lives out of trees. I peer in windows. On the way to Hunt's I'd assumed the big houses were inhabited by women like those at the hospital opening, women who passed the day baking pumpkin scones, making pineapple jam and drinking sherry. Now my mind's rampant with images of black leather and studs, high heels and negligees, whips and handcuffs. The interview was weird in more ways than I could have imagined. When I arrived they'd all but fought in front of me. Stanley Hunt told me stories about some strange woman called Jezebel whose activities were obscure at best. Bernie showed me something worthy of a centre spread in a newspaper very different to the *FNQ Mail*, complete with a bizarre doctors and nurses story. At best I can write an innocuous description of the house, the boat and the garden, when I could write something everyone in Hicks Inlet would want to read.

I take a detour to Josie's house on the way back to the office. Oh, if only she was here to talk to. She takes everything in her stride, brings even the most outlandish things down to size. I walk around the empty house. Lie on the bed. I'm a bit out of my tree. Josie, I need you. She'll be at the shop so I'll

have to go there, but I can't make myself get off the bed. I feel pinned down by the concentric circles on the ceiling rose, each circle entrapping the one inside it, all seemingly ready to spiral down on me.

Pink Floyd starts wafting up from beneath the house, from the little garden room where Chris sleeps.

We don't need no education.

We don't need no thought control.

Voices singing along. There always are. Sounds like my brother and his mates. Almost makes me homesick. Somehow it arrests the slow burning freakout building in my head, pulls me back to level, restores normality. If Chris has nothing to do he might take me up to Lawless. I get up, have a shower, wash my hair, turn the water hot then cold until I feel alert and capable. Comb my hair until all the knots are out, borrow Josie's moisturiser and perfume, put on a clean tank top and skirt. Shake myself down. Ready to face the world.

The door to Chris's little room is open. Chris, Perseus and Moonshadow are sitting on the bed, backs against the wall, a bong on the floor, their glazed eyes on me.

'Lou! Unexpected!' Chris says slowly, enunciating each syllable.

'Want a hit?' Perseus chimes in, more lively than Chris, lifting the bong and waving it at me.

'Just dropped in to get changed. Got to go back to work.'

'Doing your journalism thing?' Perseus is chatty as ever, saving the day.

'Yeah, doing it.' There's no way I can talk to these clowns about the Hunts. 'You're in tomorrow's paper, Pers. Up in a tree in a photo of a protest against the new bridge over the Cedar.'

'Woo-hoo! I saw the photographer!' Perseus's face lights up with a big grin. 'My fifteen seconds of fame coming up.'

'Yeah, well I've got to get back to work myself.'

Moonshadow grunts, standing up. 'Hell of a morning, thanks to you.' He glares at me with a thunderous look. Does he think my efficacy as a witch extends to his work?

'What did I do now?' I'm instant big sister with these guys, pugnacious, holding my ground.

'Had to dig up that bloody grave you looked at yesterday, eh. Dig it up!' Each of those three words said slowly, presumably to convey the difficulty of the task. 'Get the coffin out,' he adds, still slow talking. 'Palm gets the coffin taken away. Half an hour later, back it comes. Lighter. Much lighter. Put it back in. Fill in the grave. What the fuck was all that about?'

'What? How has it got anything to do with me?' I protest, knowing full well that Palm must have removed Rosie's body from the coffin. Earl said he'd get things straightened out, but I didn't expect anything so fast and effective.

'Shit follows you. That's all I'm saying,' Moonshadow growls.

'Hey! That's not fair.' I'm still the big sister. Got my arms folded across my chest. Bet my chin's jutting out.

'Yeah, not fair,' Perseus chimes in again. 'Like I said, how could it possibly be Lou's fault? You're getting paranoid man, I tell ya.'

'Yeah, well,' Moonshadow says doubtfully. 'Look, Lou, Palm told me not to tell anyone. Gave me a hundred bucks to keep quiet. So don't say nothing to no one, ok?'

'Yeah, no worries.' There's two fifties on Chris's bedside table, so I guess Palm's hundred has already been exchanged for something more interesting. It'd just complicate things if I asked for the hundred to keep me quiet.

'Got to get back to work. And thanks mate,' Moonshadow says to Chris, tapping his backpack. 'See you round.' I stand aside to let Moonshadow out the door and watch him stomp down the path.

'What's his problem? He still thinks I'm a witch?'

'He's still blaming you because Celeste took off. He's taking it hard,' Pers says in a calming tone. 'She's going back to finish school, eh. Says she wants to go to uni. Won't go back to live in the hills.'

'That's good, isn't it? School, uni?'

'Not so good for Moonshadow. Feels, I dunno, threatened, sad, lonely. But he'll be ok. Needs a bit of time, eh.' Perseus should become a lawyer. As for me, I've had enough strange stuff for one day. I change the topic, my new favourite escape route.

'Don't suppose you can run me up to Lawless, Chris? I've got to talk to Kelly again.'

'Could sail up, but not now, I'm a bit ...'

'Tomorrow?'

'We could go up and see if anyone wants some,' Perseus chips in, enthusiastic. He must have sucked up all of Chris's energy. Chris is staring at his belly button. I lean against the doorway and wait.

'There's a storm coming down from the north late tomorrow,' Chris eventually says.

'Woo-hoo! Running before the storm!' Pers jumps up then sits again, looking imploringly at Chris. 'Good practice for the great skipper, eh. Enhance your logbook no end!'

'Enhance? Fancy talk from a tree climber,' Chris says, play punching Perseus in the ribs, suddenly enlivened. 'We'd have to start early. Won't be able to stay there very long.'

'Perfect. Thanks heaps. Got to go.' Take what I can get and run.

Perseus gives me a little wave and Chris gives me a slow sleepy nod, picks up the bong and starts packing grass into it like an old man with a pipe.

28

Josie's out the front of her greengrocer shop, joking with the two boys I saw at the hospital.

'Hey! You two! Friends now?'

The boys turn when they hear my voice and look at me like they've never seen me before. They're eating bananas, stuffing them into their mouths as if they're starving. They hand the peels to Josie, say 'See ya' in unison, and walk away.

'You know Ellis and Rose?' Josie asks, kissing me on both cheeks.

'Met them at the hospital. Getting patched up. The black kid told me the other one was calling him names and stuff, racist shit. I thought they were enemies.'

'Thick as thieves, those two.'

'They're really called Ellis and Rose?'

'They call themselves after champion boxers,' Josie laughs. 'The little buggers con me into giving them bananas all the time. Reckon they need them to build their strength. Every time I give them some I swear it's the last time, and then they come along and talk me into it again.'

'One day they might give the shop free advertising on their

boxing shirts.' After this morning, nothing seems impossible, least of all two local lads becoming sports stars.

'Yeah, right. Thank me when they're making their victory speeches. Not likely. They'll forget me as fast as they forgot you,' Josie says, handing me a couple of tomatoes. 'There's cheese and fresh bread out back. Make us a sandwich? I'm starving.'

Through the little window in the back room I watch Josie serving customers. She always looks so classy in those linen pants she wears, and those shirts that show off her biceps. She's slicing wedges of pumpkin with her huge knife, so confident in what she's doing that she's looking at a customer and chatting.

'You always look so elegant,' I tell her when she comes out the back.

'Come off it. I'm a greengrocer! I wear the same pants and shirts every day, in different colours.'

'Where do you get them? They fit perfectly.'

'A cousin in Italy sends them to me. We're the same size.'

'Half your luck. I wish I had someone to buy my clothes. I suck at it.'

'I love shopping, but there's nowhere to buy anything decent in Hicks, and I've got no time anyway, what with the shop and Marco and everything. Chris is supposed to help but all he does is bring the produce in. He's a liability in the shop anyway, off his face half the time.'

'Oh, you're hard on Chris, Josie,' I tease. 'He helps you. Helps your dad. He's not so bad.'

'When he goes out to the farm Dad spends all his time just talking to him. Chris daydreams and scratches his balls and pretends to listen. My other brothers have worked their butts off since they were big enough to drive a tractor. Me too. Perhaps it's because he's so much younger. The baby of the family gets the easy ride, that's for sure.'

'Chris is sweet though. He's taking me up to Lawless tomorrow. On his yacht. I love him for it.'

'Pretending he's a skipper,' Josie grumbles. 'His only ambition. Pity he doesn't do something more, I don't know, structured about it. Get a job on a boat or something. He's just been bumming around since he finished school. Spends most of his time getting stoned with Percy and Maurice.'

'Percy and Maurice?'

'Whatever those layabout mates of his call themselves these days.'

'Perseus and Moonshadow?'

'Really? Grand notions they've got of themselves! They're as bad as Ellis and Rose.'

Josie puts water and coffee in a moka pot and turns on the little gas ring.

'They're just young. They'll turn out fine.' I'm still the big sister, defending them now.

'You're young too,' Josie says, blowing out the match.

'I'm twenty-one. They're only eighteen. When I was their age ...'

'When you were their age you'd been working for two years already,' Josie breaks in. 'I wish Chris was more like you. You're on your way to being a journalist. You could have stayed at home, married that nice Italian, had some babies. Like me, just doing what the family wants.' She sighs, long and weary. 'Which reminds me, it's Zia's birthday. Mum's doing suckling pig up at the farm tonight to celebrate. Everyone wants you to be there. You know, bit of a farewell dinner for you too.'

'I'd love to come.' The thought of a farewell dinner makes me sad. Can't wait to get out of Hicks Inlet, but I'm going to miss the Mazzolinis.

A customer walks into the shop. Josie sighs and puts down her sandwich. I finish mine and switch off the moka pot when

the coffee burbles up. Another customer comes in. I pour two cups and drink mine. Clean the pot. Another customer. Josie's got no time to talk. I cover her sandwich to keep the flies off it, and take her coffee on my way out. She gives me a smile of gratitude and shrugs.

'I'll shut at 5.30 sharp. Pick you up at your work.'

~

Charlene's got that malicious, gleeful look on her face again when I get back to the office.

'Ed left another write up for you on his desk. Everything's there, he said to say.' She picks up her handbag. No 'hello, how did the interview go?' I no longer care.

'Thanks.'

'Here's your plane ticket for Friday. And money for the taxi to the airport.'

'Thanks.' No 'it's been nice working with you, we're going to miss you'. Not from Charlene. I remember why I can't wait to go back to Sydney.

'I've got to pop out for a few minutes,' she says. 'Can you mind the shop? Roger will be back in half an hour.' She's already out the door before I have a chance to say yes.

The ticket's for a midday flight on Friday. Earl's going to get me home by the end of the working day. Nice of him. There's a manilla folder on top of the usual mess on Ed's desk. His photos of Hunt with the mayor and Fawcett remind me of my failure to get Hunt to talk about either of them, which reminds me of how drunk and lecherous Hunt was, which reminds me of Bernie and the creepy surgery playroom under the house. Ugh, what a disaster of an interview. That stupid 'good works for women' line. What was that about? I should have tried to find out what the Hunt, Fawcett, McCready connection is about. That's where the story is, somewhere in the tourist development there's got to be a good story. Despite claiming he's just about treating

investors in the rainforest development to fishing trips, Hunt's clearly more deeply involved. Intimidating protesters would be right up his alley. My first interview was an A-class balls-up. Ah, enough of the self-recriminations. Work, Lou, work. In work there's solace. First Ed's story, which will at least get printed, and then I'll try to write something from the interview. Earl won't be holding space for it, surely.

Ed's notes are from an interview with one of the city councillors. Despite myself, I admire his professionalism. The briefest of basic facts. The little quote marks around direct quotes. Perhaps he thought he was going to write it up himself instead of dumping it on me. According to the notes, the city councillor announced his intention to get the council to 'compel homosexuals to experience heterosexual sex'. Hicks Inlet is 'full of nymphomaniacs who could be encouraged to offer this service free of charge'. The experience would be a 'service to family values in the community'. The councillor insists he is 'not a poofter basher', just a normal man who represents the 'values of 99.9% of Australians'.

What a joke. I'm going to write up a page 3 story about a fringe crackpot when I could write about the kinky sex lives of some of Hicks Inlet's honoured benefactors. I've got to get that creepy room at the Hunts' house out of my head. I need to talk to someone. Mrs Pike would love it but I haven't got time to visit her. So would Noel. I've got the office to myself for another ten minutes. It's time to break Ed's ban on using his phone and put a long-distance call on his bill. A satisfying little bit of payback. I try Noel at work. To my surprise she answers the phone. It's such a relief to hear her voice.

'Noel? It's me.'

'Lou? At last. When are you back?'

'Should be home by five on Friday. Meet you in the pub at six?'

'Nah, come straight home. I want you all to myself for a bit.'

'Robbo still staying?'

'Nah, just that one night. Haven't seen him since. How's work?'

'Oh god, where do I start? I've got so much to tell you.'

'I've only got a minute. Tell me what you're doing right now.'

Not enough time to tell her about Rosie or Aileen. Or to try and explain the Hunts.

'OK. What I'm doing right now is writing up someone else's notes. About a city councillor who wants to compel homosexuals to experience heterosexual sex, as he puts it.'

'Oh, that's a beauty!' Noel cackles. 'What's he going to do? How's he going to find out who's gay and who isn't? Go peeking through bedroom windows? Then what? Lock the gays in a room with a woman until they've done the act? Or perhaps he'd have to demonstrate how it's done first. And presumably he'd have to watch, to make sure it really happens.'

'Noel, that's gross.' She's making me laugh. I can see Chris sitting in a room with a buxom babe, shrugging his shoulders, saying 'sorry, but nothing'.

'Of course it's gross, but it's not my idea! And what about the lesbians? They'd get a load of nasty men volunteering for sex with the lesbians and no women volunteering to do it with the gay men.' Noel's laughing her head off. 'The mind boggles. Perhaps he could create a ten-step program like in the AA? Recruit a little squad of morality cops to take turns to watch, evaluate, score. Oh, what a beauty, Lou. You've made my day.'

'You've got such a way of seeing through the shit, Noel. I've needed you.'

'Well, we can laugh about it, Lou, but you know, that sort

of shit's a green light for gay-bashers. Phil had two ribs broken the other night up in Darlinghurst. Couple of thugs who thought he should experience heterosexual sex, no doubt. That councillor shouldn't get the air time. And it's going to be under your name.'

'It's not going to be under my name.' Bloody Noel. Insight one minute, insult the next. 'I'm writing up someone else's notes. It's going to be under his name.'

'And that makes it ok, Lou? Really?'

I haven't missed that arch holier-than-thou Noel tone. Her yelling down at me from the high ground. She's right though. I'd just dismissed the councillor's talk as being extreme. Didn't even think about the subtext.

'You still there Lou?' she says.

'You're hard on me, Noel, you know that?'

'It's not you, Lou. It's journalism, the media. It's a dirty business to get mixed up in, you know, it's hard to stay decent in that game. But I love ya all the same. I've got to go. See you Friday.'

'Love you too Noel. See you Friday.'

And back to work, the shine of the journalism career tarnished by Noel's reality check.

~

Josie's waiting outside at 5.30. In the car I can't stop babbling about the Hunts. I tell her about Stanley and Bernie seeming to have had a fight, describe the ocean views, the white leather furniture and polished floors, and Hunt wanting to show me the big launch on the private jetty. I tell her about Bernie's sudden friendliness when Stanley left to meet another visitor, and finally about the strange surgery underneath the house.

'Freaked me out, being let into their sex life like that.'

'You do hear unexpected things about the Hunts,' Josie laughs, 'but I haven't heard that one.'

'Ooh, gossip! What do you hear?'

'Well, one of my friends got into trouble last year. You know, pregnant, but she didn't want to have it. Her husband would have known it wasn't his. He'd been out prawn fishing for months. And he's got a rotten temper. She was scared.'

'What's that got to do with the Hunts?'

'The doctors here won't do anything if you're past nine weeks. More advanced than that and you have to go down to Brisbane. Her husband was back home, and she had no excuse for going away. The last thing she wanted to do was tell him she was pregnant.'

I don't know what this has got to do with the Hunts, but Josie always slides off topic when she's telling stories. It's a long drive. We've got time.

'You really have to go to Brisbane? That's a thousand kilometres away.' When Celeste told me that I thought she was just ill-informed.

'That's Sydney. A world away. Up here, it's go to Brisbane or nothing. There was a doctor who used to do it until a couple of years ago. The Right to Life ran a campaign against him. Nasty business. They used to turn up some mornings and harass the women going into his clinic. Most of them were seeing the doctor for regular stuff like infections and cystitis. The Right to Life people, some of them were just teenagers, would stand at the door and hand out those horrible leaflets with pictures, accusing people of killing babies.'

Josie overtakes a slow ute, an old bloke wearing a hat.

'I saw them the other day, the Right to Life, in a photo, marching on a back road. Didn't make any sense doing that in the middle of nowhere.'

'Doesn't make any sense when it's outside a doctor's surgery either. Anyway, for a while the doctor kept doing

abortions if someone needed one, you know, for the preservation of the mother's life and sanity, that thing. Decent bloke, he was. Then one night someone threw a molotov cocktail at him when he was leaving the surgery. Chucked it out the window of a car and drove off. Missed him, but scared him half to death. He put his clinic on the market and moved to Tasmania. None of the other doctors up here are willing to step into his shoes, surprise, surprise.'

'I don't remember seeing anything about that in the back issues of the *FNQ Mail*.'

'No, it wasn't reported. A friend of mine worked part-time for him as a receptionist. She said the doctor didn't want the police involved and he didn't want it in the paper. He reckoned the Right to Lifers were doing it for publicity and it would just encourage them.'

'Huh. So your friend was past nine weeks?' I ask, trying to drag Josie back to the start of her story.

'She should have realised earlier,' Josie says, overtaking another hat driver, 'but you know how it is, you miss one period and then you wait for the next and it might not come on time, you wait a little longer, and before you know what's going on nine weeks are past.' She overtakes a little truck. 'So she went to the Emergency at the hospital to get a pregnancy test.'

'Funny place to get a pregnancy test.' I'm not going to get Josie back on the Hunts.

'Well, she didn't want her doctor to know, in case he told her husband. But the main reason was that there's a nurse in Emergency who's sympathetic. She'll make appointments at one of the clinics in Brisbane, help organise tickets and stuff like that.'

'Good for her.'

A flock of magpie geese swoop up out of the cane and over the road, tracing a line through the sky as meandering as

Josie's story.

'So my friend found out from the nurse that there's a bloke who's pretty much a doctor who does them, you know what I mean? Supposed to be very experienced. Did thousands down south.'

'Bloody hell!' The obvious hits me like a ton of bricks. 'You're going to tell me it's Stanley Hunt!' The dots join up. The little surgery, the hospital bed with the stirrups hanging above it, the bright light on the stand, the laundry trough and the buckets. Good works for women indeed. Jesus, I'm an idiot. I miss things that are staring me in the face. I'm never going to make it as an investigative journalist.

'My friend reckoned he was very professional.' Josie is leaning towards me, speaking quietly, intent on finishing her story. 'His wife, what's her name? Bernie? She used to be a nurse and she helped out. But it was all a bit cloak and dagger. My friend had to make an appointment and the payment with the nurse at the Emergency room. Bernie picked my friend up at one of the parks and put a blindfold on her, drove all around so she wouldn't know where she was. Then they stopped up on the northern beaches — as if my friend wouldn't know where she was — and Bernie took her down the side of the house, the blindfold still on, and into a room that smelt like fish. Took the blindfold off in the room you call a surgery and there was Hunt, white coat and all. My friend recognised him straight away. He's always getting his picture in the paper.'

'Jesus! Smell of fish is right, there's a tackle room right next door. Why the blindfold if they show their faces?'

'That's what I said. My friend reckoned Hunt wanted her to know who he was, and the blindfold thing was just to make her feel scared, to reinforce that she wasn't supposed to tell anyone.'

A red bloom is building in the clouds around the horizon

as the sun goes down. My mind is reeling.

‘Let me just double check this. You’re saying the Hunts do abortions, right? The Hunts who donate money to the hospital for a new women’s wing?’ Josie’s nodding like I’m a slow learner in grade two.

‘Gave my friend a light anaesthetic and everything. Bernie held her hand, gave her a cup of tea afterwards, chatted with her about gardening and stuff until she felt ok. Then she put the blindfold back on my friend and dropped her back at the park.’

‘Oh no, not the park where I found Rosie?’ Another jolt, a lightning rod down my backbone.

‘Yes, that park, Lou. Probably because it’s near the hospital. If something’s gone wrong it’s not too far to walk. And because most people aren’t likely to run into someone they know in that park.’

‘So do you think Rosie ...’ I want to push that thought away. ‘No. Are you sure? For one thing, Hunt’s not a doctor. He’d be bragging about it all over town, using the title. I thought that kind of thing belonged in the dark ages.’

‘Yeah, it should. But as Zio used to say, there’s just a trip wire between civilisation and barbarism.’

‘Zio? Which Zio?’ Right now I’m relieved Josie’s taking a diversion. My mind’s trying to recalibrate.

‘Great uncle Luigi. He died ages ago, after a long illness. When I was little I had to take my turn sitting with him, keeping him company. He used to talk about cane cutting back in the thirties, when he first arrived. The backbreaking work. The piece rates. Deadly snakes. Weil’s disease. Zio hooked up with some Italian anarchists and they did wildcat strikes and went around tipping over cane trucks and stuff. He told me this story so often I know it off by heart, the way most people know nursery rhymes.’ Josie laughs. ‘Old Zio the anarchist. There’s just a trip wire between civilisation and

barbarism, he used to say, shaking his head. And then he'd ask to me to slip some grappa in his coffee when no one was looking.'

'Civilisation and barbarism, huh?' I guess Rosie tripped over that wire. Landed on the bad side. We drive along in silence, the headlights casting a bright arc on the road, the last of the sunlight leaching out of the land and the sky.

'I wasn't going to tell you about this,' Josie says quietly, 'but it might be related to the Hunts somehow. Fawcett, the cop, paid me a visit in the shop this afternoon. Said I should tell my, and I quote, "muckraking friend to back off".'

'Fawcett? He said "muckraking"? Hunt called me a muckraker at the hospital opening.' My brain's firing out wiring diagrams. Hunt and Fawcett. Fawcett and me. Hunt and Rosie. Rosie and me. Hunt and the Emergency nurse. The nurse and me and Rosie. Fawcett and Palm, and Rosie's body being dug up because of me. 'Earl told me Fawcett was mixed up with bribery and corruption down in Brisbane,' is all I say to Josie. It's impossible to put the pandemonium in my mind into words.

'That's the bloke. I told him I didn't know who he was talking about and then he called you by name. Said to tell you it would be better for me and my family if you didn't go around stirring things up. I picked up my big pumpkin knife and had some fun waving it about. That got rid of him quick.' She laughs, wielding an imaginary knife.

'What does Fawcett think I'm stirring up?' I ask, but it can only be about Hunt. And about Rosie? 'How does he know I know you?'

'Saw you at the shop? Saw you with Chris? He's watching you?'

'Oh hell, this is scary.'

'Well, it is and it isn't. You should be a bit careful, but keep at it. You must be onto something important if it's drawn

Fawcett's attention.' Josie turns in the farm gate and navigates slowly around the bumps in the track. 'But you shouldn't worry. You're Mazzolini family now. We've got history with Fawcett.'

'What history?'

'When Fawcett first came up here he tried to get Uncle to pay him protection money.'

'Which uncle? Protection from what?'

'You know about Uncle and Chris's little sideline, don't you?'

'Sort of.' I didn't know that Josie knew, but of course she does. They're a tight family. Must remember to tell Noel I live with nice Italian dope dealers. She'll be impressed.

'Fawcett drove right into Uncle's farm. Acted real tough, hand on the gun in his holster and all, but, well, you've met Uncle.'

'Yeah. Pretty tough himself.' Such a big man, such enormous arms. 'What happened?'

'Uncle picked a metal fence post, slung it over his shoulder, and told Fawcett to fuck off. A couple of my cousins were there. One of them had a pitchfork and the other had a sledge hammer. Spot of luck. They must have looked real friendly.' She giggles. 'They reckon Fawcett ran back to his car and took off. Never came back. Didn't do his homework, the bumptious little prick. We don't need protection. My family's been around Hicks a long time. We're well-respected. Some people think we're probably mafia just because we're Italian. A lot of people owe us favours. And Uncle played football with the senior sergeant. They took turns winning the best and fairest. The cops aren't going to fuck with us.'

'Lucky I met the Mazzolinis!' I laugh and the release makes me realise how tense I'd become.

'We hear that Fawcett gets some of the other growers to pay. They know he'll dob them in if they don't pay up. He's a

nasty piece of work, that Fawcett, don't doubt that. But he'll stay clear of us and ours, and that includes you. That is for sure.'

Josie pulls up next to the other cars in front of the farmhouse. Josie's father and uncles, and Chris and his brothers, are sitting on the verandah watching the kids playing cricket. Eight burly men, well, seven burly men and Chris. It's reassuring. Marco runs up to meet us, full of excitement, and leaps into Josie's arms.

'You smell like you've been in Nonno's pig pen,' Josie teases. 'Bath time for you, my stinky little man. Come and give Nonna a hand Lou, unless you'd rather sit out here with the blokes.'

I get a big welcome and a round of hugs and kisses from all the women in the kitchen, and a glass of Campari and soda, and assigned to meatball rolling. I fit right in with this family, with their loud chatter and teasing and laughter. Time for a break. Tomorrow can take care of itself.

29

'Wake up! Lou! Come on! Time to move.' Chris is by my bed, whispering in my ear. It's still dark.

'It's too early.' A whimper of a protest.

'Come on, time to go. We're leaving in five minutes. Sailing to Lawless, remember?'

'OK. I need a shower.'

'No, we've got to go now. Five minutes and we're out of here.'

Skipper Chris is a whole different person to stoned Chris. I do as instructed.

Perseus nods good morning when I get to the van. He must have slept over again. He and Chris are probably a couple. Don't know how I missed that. Sometimes I'm such a sleepwalker. We drive through the dark, empty streets of Hicks Inlet, and park next to the few cars already at the marina. The palest lemon-pink hint of sunrise marks the horizon.

Perseus and I set slip lines while Chris starts the engine and takes off the sail cover, and we pull out of the mooring like old hands. I stand like a figurehead on an ancient boat,

hoping to bring myself luck, feeling the breeze on my face, feasting on the riot of purple, pink, red, orange, yellow blazing on the horizon, reflecting in the sea. Perseus is down below making tea and toast. Chris is calling to fishermen on their way in. This will be my last trip. I'm not looking forward to arriving at our destination. I've never been the bearer of such bad news.

After we raise the main sail, Perseus and I take up our usual positions either side of the cockpit to manage the genoa. It's going to be tacking all the way. We're soon past the northern beaches, past the Hunts' house, going towards the mouth of the Cedar. Chris gives me the tiller and makes us coffee and feeds us cakes left over from the feast. He's a good skipper. Looks after his crew. I want to keep going forever, escape to the sea, see nothing but water and wake, horizon and haze. I get why Chris loves it.

The wind drops away when we go round the headland into Lawler's Cove. Kelly's somewhere on that beach. What does she really know about Rosie? How am I going to approach this? No bloody idea is the answer, as usual.

'Lou, you and Perseus take down the main sail. Put two reefs in it as you go,' Chris says in that commanding tone I only ever hear on the boat.

'Reefs? Coral reefs? What does he mean?' I whisper to Perseus as we climb up on top of the cabin.

'Reefing the sail means we tie it down to make it smaller, eh. So it's safer in high winds. He's preparing for the storm,' Perseus whispers back, nodding towards Chris.

I'm preparing for a storm too and welcome the need to concentrate on the sail. Chris drops it slowly, stopping when we get to the row of eyelets used to make reefs. The canvas is hard and resistant. My hands ache as we straighten and fold and tie the sail down.

'Good work,' Chris says, a word of praise for the crew.

'When you're done, get the anchor Pers. Lou, make sure everything in the galley is stowed away and secured. I want everything shut up tight, ready to go.'

I want to protest about getting the housework until I see Perseus heaving heavy chain out of a locker on the bow. The nightmarish clunk of anchor chain being dragged out on deck reverberates through the cabin. A ripping sound shears through the galley as Pers tosses the anchor into the sea, then there's a roar from the engine. Ah, Chris is backing the boat away from the anchor, testing that he's got a firm hold. Wouldn't have been able to guess at any of this ten days ago. Now I'm a trainee sailor, and proud of it. It's an excellent diversion strategy. I still haven't figured out what I'm going to tell Kelly.

It occupies my mind while we paddle towards the shore in the little dinghy, Perseus and Chris balancing on its thick rubber sides while I sit between their feet hugging the backpack to keep it dry. In ones and twos people are emerging from the forest to watch us. When we're close enough to make out faces, Perseus starts calling out names.

'There's Johnno and Coxy. Kouta's up there.' He's waving, rocking the dinghy. 'Boomer. Bazza. Fozzy. Got a few people to visit.'

Natives watching newcomers arrive by sea, guarding their campsites tucked into the rainforest that lines the beach. The south end's marked by the dirt track I arrived on with Barney, and the north by Big Bill's ramshackle compound. Kelly's tent is by the creek in the middle of the beach. Did she know Rosie was pregnant? Know and not tell me? I trusted her completely. What about Big Bill? He definitely knows more than he was letting on. How am I going to get him to talk? Butterflies are breeding in my stomach. I don't know if it's the little dinghy or nervousness, but I'm relieved when we finally surf a little wave into the beach. Perseus and Chris each

swing a leg over the side and step out at the same time, a practised manoeuvre. Perseus holds his hand out to me and I manage a half-way respectable exit. We gingerly wade in the last few metres, pulling the little dinghy and studying the water for stingers. I point in the direction of Kelly's tent.

'Small beach,' Chris nods. 'Everyone knows everyone else. We'll find you. Haven't got long. An hour tops and we head back.' He and Perseus set off in the opposite direction.

~

Kelly's cutting a young woman's hair. She greets me with a big smile and a hug, and tells me she'll be finished soon. I wait on the soft sand in the shade of the palms, watching Perseus and Chris work their way up the line of tents, stopping to chat at each one. When Kelly's customer is done, she joins me on the sand, even more beautiful in the flesh than in my memory. What I'd do to stay here like this and not to have to tell her what happened to Rosie.

'You came back!'

'I found Rosie.'

'Oh, thank god! She's still here? She's ok?'

'She's dead, Kelly.' No point beating about the bush.

'What? You're sure?' The light goes out of Kelly's eyes, the blood drains from her face. I should have been gentler.

'She'd been pregnant, lost the fetus, and died of septic abortion.' I'm about to tell her about Hunt's little surgery when I stop myself. I'm not going to learn anything if I do all the talking. Got to keep my mouth shut.

'Septic abortion? What the fuck is that? Are you telling me Rosie had an abortion?'

'Septic abortion describes a miscarriage where there's infection involved. It could have been a miscarriage. But she could have had an abortion. I don't know.'

'Oh Jesus. That's so awful. Big Bill was sure she was ok. And after we went to the hospital last week I began to hope

you'd got it wrong, that it wasn't Rosie in the park.'

'So did I.'

'Oh Jesus and Mary. She was pregnant! That's what all that nausea was about. I should have realised. I should have asked. I could have helped. It's my fault. I didn't want to get involved.'

Kelly starts to cry. This is crap. I'm not sure what I'm doing any more.

'It's not your fault.' I've got my arm around her, feeling her shoulder blades heaving, watching the little waves bulge out of the sea, the white froth spilling as they roll into the beach.

'We'd better tell Big Bill,' Kelly says eventually, wiping her eyes. 'He was so sure she was fine.'

We dawdle through the shallow water along the beach to Bill's. He's sitting in front of his hut on a three-legged stool, sanding a branch of red wood to a point. He holds it up for us to admire.

'The boy wanted a new harpoon. Do you think this will do it?' he asks. The bright grin on his face disappears when he looks at Kelly. 'What's up?'

'Lou says Rosie's definitely dead. Septic abortion. An infection.'

Big Bill's face goes ashen, his eyes water up, his shoulders sink. He doesn't say a word, just sits sanding the harpoon in long sweeping strokes, watching the boy building a fort down in the wet sand. We sit at the table and wait for him to say something.

'You lot are mad sailing up here today,' Bill says, his voice cracked. 'There's a storm coming.'

He's just going to duck. Ignore it altogether.

'We know,' I say. 'Can't stay long. I had to tell you about Rosie.'

'Are you sure this time?' he eventually asks, sceptical.

'Yep. The bloke from the morgue identified her from the

photo. He was certain it was her.'

'Did you know Rosie was pregnant?' Kelly asks Bill. She's wringing her hands.

'Yes, I knew, Kelly, I knew.'

'So when she left, when you took her down to Hicks in your boat, what was that about?' Kelly is ever-so-gently accusative.

Big Bill puts his hands on Kelly's in an attempt to still them, looks me straight in the eye and points the harpoon at me.

'You're some sort of journalist, right?'

I nod. The less I say the better.

'You know about letting sleeping dogs lie, don't you?'

I nod again.

'But that's not your way, is it?'

'Rosie died,' I say quietly, trying to be assertive without being aggressive. 'I watched her die. I'm involved, personally. What if someone was responsible for her death, you know, caused it?'

Bill doesn't answer. He puts the harpoon down and slowly stands up, hand on creaking back. He fills the kettle from a tap at the bottom of a 44-gallon drum, lights the gas ring with a match and flicks the match into the forest, the flame going out as it flies through the air. He empties the teapot with a single throw, tea leaves and water swirling into the forest. Studied movements, ritual, while he figures out what he's going to say to me. Rinsing the teapot, putting sugar jar, spoons and cups on the table. Finally he lowers himself carefully onto the stool, leans towards me and speaks quietly.

'You know about protecting your sources? Journalist's code of ethics and all that?'

I nod, looking earnestly into Bill's watery eyes.

'If I tell you something, can you keep my name out of it?'

'Definitely,' I reply quickly, solemnly.

'You're a bit glib for me, girly,' Bill says sharply. 'Have you even thought about how you'll protect me? You'll have to be pretty bloody smart about it, because this is a small place and word travels. You'll have to be strong too, because people will try to find out.' He leans in closer. I can see the thin lines of grime deep inside the wrinkles on his forehead. 'Before I tell you about Rosie you have to tell me exactly how you are going to keep me out of it. And it better be good, because if anything happens to the boy I'll hold you personally responsible.'

'Why would anything happen to him?' I say, surprised, and the whistle on the kettle blows. Bill ratchets himself up again, disappears into the hut and returns with the teapot and a packet of biscuits. Then he leans down and speaks quietly again pointing the packet at me as if it was the harpoon.

'Because a certain party has threatened to tell the authorities about the boy if I don't keep my mouth shut. And if those authorities come and take him away and put him in a home his life will be ruined.'

He turns and looks at the boy, who is down near the water on his knees in the sand, coaxing water into the moat around the fort with his hands.

'Why would they put your son in a home?'

'Because he is not my son. His parents left him here and they haven't come back yet.'

'I don't get it. Can't a kid have a holiday away from his parents? They don't put kids in homes for that.'

'Ten years he's been with me,' Bill says slowly.

'Ah,' I say. 'They abandoned him.'

'At the time it didn't seem that way. He was a difficult little fella and they were at their wits' end. And he was fine when he was with me. The boy needed a bit more stability than they could give him.'

'He's seems a happy kid.'

'To tell truth, I'd be pretty unhappy if his parents turned up and took him away now. But I promised he'd be here when they were ready, and I couldn't forgive myself if he got put in a home on my watch.'

'But surely lots of people know he's here.'

Bill pours four cups of tea and passes one each to me and Kelly. She's scrunched in on herself, head in her hands.

'People assume he's my son. Like you did. Most people who know wouldn't do a thing to hurt the boy or me. But there's one bastard who knows he's not my boy, and he knows I don't send him to school or any of that. And he's told me in no uncertain terms that he'll report us to the authorities if I ...'

He picks up a cup of tea and the biscuits and sets off down to the water, limping a little as he goes. I rub Kelly's back. She doesn't seem to want to talk. Big Bill and the boy walk around the sand fort like engineers, shoulder to shoulder, tea cups in hand, gesturing at the walls, the moat, the direction of flow of the inlet from the sea. Bill didn't know Rosie was dead, that's clear, but he was involved. He's must have taken Rosie to the Hunts. Hunt must have threatened him about the boy. It'd be his style. But who would I talk to about the boy? Who do I know who would care? Earl wouldn't interfere in something like that. It's not relevant to Rosie's story. So why does Big Bill think it would it come up?

Stick with what I know, what I suspect. If Hunt did an abortion and then left Rosie in the park to die, would he be charged with manslaughter or something? Would I be called to give evidence in court and be bound to give my source? I would have to say Bill told me. Perhaps I am a bit glib. Until I came to Hicks Inlet journalism seemed straightforward. You watched, you interviewed, you wrote. Up here I've learnt that suspicious deaths are ignored and witnesses go south and

silence is a form of complicity. There's what the paper reports and there's what happens between the lines. Emergency rooms double as pregnancy advisory units. Local philanthropists have unusual sidelines. Undertakers hide dead bodies in the ground. I let Earl stop me from trying to find out more about the woman who was found dead in the sea. It was a relief to be able to put Ed's byline on the article about the anti-gay politician; it felt like it absolved me of responsibility, until Noel had a shot at me about it. Things I do and things I don't do have begun to have consequences. I've got this far investigating Rosie's death and now I have to promise to protect a boy from the authorities in return for information, a promise that could be very hard to keep. I could walk away now. I don't have to be a journalist. I could live on the beach with Kelly. Stay at Josie's and help on the farm. Become Chris's first mate and take tourists sailing. Go home to the western suburbs and marry that nice Italian. All those things now seem much easier than promising that I can protect Big Bill and the boy from I know not what.

'Come on Lou. Figure it out,' Kelly pleads, her voice breaking up. 'You've got to be able to protect them. Isn't there some other way you could have learnt whatever it is he's going to tell you?'

Big Bill's walking back up the beach, empty cups in his hand. The boy is making a new channel for the moat.

'He might just clam up when he gets back here if you don't think of something soon,' she persists. 'You've got to. We need to know what happened.'

And there it is, in the way Kelly says 'need' in that soft Irish accent so like Rosie's.

'I can protect you, Bill. I can protect you and the boy,' I say, as authoritatively as I can manage, when he sits down at the table. 'I can keep you out of this, at least.'

Bill picks up my empty cup with shaky hands.

'How?'

'Whatever you tell me, I'll say Rosie told me. Some people know she spoke to me, but no one else was there. No one knows what she did or didn't say. Whatever you tell me I can say Rosie told me. Will that work?' It will work if he says what I think he's going to say.

Bill slowly smiles and leans forward with his hand outstretched. I shake it. We've got a deal.

'That'll work,' he says. 'Thank you girlie.'

He pours more tea, then lowers himself onto his stool and starts to speak.

'Rosie was scared witless about being pregnant. At first she expected her bloke would do the right thing and look after her. But he didn't want to have a baby and she didn't want to get rid of it. Catholic church, you know. They put the fear of god into you. They argued night and day about it. Rosie didn't want to have a baby either, but she was stuck rigid between her fear and the fact of it. Then her bloke took off and Rosie came to stay with Kelly.'

'I didn't know! She didn't tell me. I should have guessed,' Kelly cuts in, and the tears well up again, and her head drops to the table and she wraps her arms around it.

'She didn't want you to know, Kelly. She was scared you'd judge her for it. She worried you'd think she deserved it after ditching that nice friend of yours.' He reaches out and tussles Kelly's hair. 'Rosie would hang around here, crying and drinking tea — drank a bloody lot of tea that girl — and one rainy day she told me what was up. She was more than three months gone. Reckoned her parents would kill her if she went home pregnant. Was terrified about having a baby by herself. Not what you'd call a coper, Rosie. So I told her I knew someone who could take care of it. I didn't want to influence her one way or t'other, but she was fast running out of choices. She thought about it, sitting here with her head in

her hands, like you now, Kelly, for a couple of hours. Then she decided she had no other option.'

'So you took her to Hunt?' Damn. I shouldn't have prompted.

'You know about Hunt? About what he does?' Bill asks slowly.

'Sort of.'

'I took her down in the little boat. Hunt was sitting there on his big launch drinking. I thought it would be a sort of consultation but Hunt wanted to do it straight away. I didn't like it. Didn't seem right. He was a bit drunk and he insisted. Right now or never, he said.' Bill scratches at the sand with the half-made harpoon. 'Rosie didn't care. She'd made a decision and she wanted to get it over and done with before she changed her mind. I felt so sorry for her. Terrible thing to have to do, but worse to have a child you don't want, worse for everyone. So Rosie went with Hunt. She didn't even take her bag.'

'You've got her bag? Is her passport in it?'

Bill disappears into his shack and returns with Rosie's bag. Fishes out the passport and gives it to me.

'Me and the boy went into town to get some supplies then went back to pick her up. We waited in the boat, waited and waited. In the end I got out of the boat and was walking up the jetty when Hunt's wife came running out and told me it had got a bit complicated and that Rosie would have to stay overnight. It struck me as odd, her staying overnight like she was in a hospital or something, but the wife was wearing a nurse's uniform, white shoes and the little watch dangling and all that. So I accepted that and left.' He scratches in the sand with the harpoon.

'You should have told me then,' Kelly raises her head and whispers.

'She swore me to secrecy, Kelly. I was honour-bound.'

'You said she went south!' She's got a dark glare in her eyes. Her hands are clenched in tight fists, her knuckles are white. I put my hands over hers.

'When I went back the next day there was Hunt in his boat again,' Bill goes on. 'Pissed as a newt even though it was well before lunch. Told me to fuck off. Told me Rosie had left by herself. Decided to find her own way home. It didn't sound like Rosie to me, but I couldn't think of anything to do.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' Kelly persists.

'I thought she'd gone off somewhere quiet to lick her wounds and she'd turn up here when she was good and ready.' There are tears in his rheumy eyes. 'Until today I still thought she'd show up.'

There's a whoop from the shoreline. Perseus is helping the boy with his channel for the moat, scooping it out deeply with his foot. Chris is stretched out sleeping on the sand near them, or perhaps he's studying the clouds, planning for sailing through the storm. I should give him more credit. Perseus gives me a wave. Time to go.

'So Hunt threatened you? About the boy?'

'No, not Hunt. A couple of year ago I'd suggested to a girl who was in trouble up here that she go to a particular nurse in the Emergency at the hospital who looks after girls in trouble. The nurse arranged for her to go to Hunt. I took the girl down to Hunt's in my boat. When I went back to pick her up he offered me money if I referred girls to him. Took me for a pimp! I told him to stick it up his ...'

'And then he threatened you about the boy?'

'Oh no. That's not Hunt's style. He leaves that sort of thing to Inspector Fawcett.'

'Fawcett!'

'You know about Fawcett?'

'Sort of.'

'Well, not long after that, Fawcett came up here. Every

other person along the beach was probably sitting on a big stash of that illegal stuff they smoke and he marches right past them, straight up to my hut. Warned me that if I ever told anyone about Hunt — apart from girls in trouble, that is — he'd turn the boy in to the authorities.'

'Bloody hell. Why does he do that for Hunt?'

'Come on, two plus two, girlie. Hunt pays Fawcett protection money and Fawcett was earning his crust. Does his homework. Does his footwork. He's dangerous, that Fawcett. You tread carefully where he's concerned.'

The boy charges up to the table, stops with a skid across the sand.

'Not a word, understand?' Big Bill glares at us, and Kelly and I nod. Who'd tell a kid a story like this?

'You've got to go. Storm's coming,' the boy says to me breathlessly. 'You've got to see my moat. Pers fixed it!' He drags Big Bill off his chair. Kelly slides her arm through mine and we follow them down to the fort.

'I don't know what to say,' Kelly whispers. 'This is all so fucked up.'

'It's better than it was, isn't it? At least we know what happened to Rosie. Fawcett and Hunt might go down.' I've got little confidence in that, but Earl might do something, seemed to be doing something. 'I'll give my boss the passport and ask him to make sure her family knows she's gone, but I won't tell him the rest.'

'Thanks,' Kelly says, holding my hand tight. 'Stay strong, Lou. Wish you were sticking around for a while.'

'Me too,' I say, but this time it's a lie. I want out of this hellhole. Scratch the surface of paradise and the shit oozes up.

30

By the time we get out to the yacht dark clouds are massing in the north and white caps are skittering across the ocean. My calm friendly sea is churning up.

'Strewth!' Perseus proclaims as he hauls himself up onto the boat. 'Going to be a big one.' He holds his hand out to me and I clamber up, ungainly as always.

'Lou, help me get this stowed,' Chris commands, already right behind me on the boat, pulling in the dinghy. 'Pers, engine on, mate. Bring up the coats and life jackets. Then you two bring in the anchor, as fast as you can.'

My hands chafe as I help Perseus pull in the rough, heavy anchor chain. The coat is hot and the life jacket's heavy. I'm going to be exhausted before we start. No time to think about Bill and Kelly, standing at the shore, waving, while the boy does cartwheels. We're still getting the chain neatly into its hold when Chris rounds the little headland and heads into the open sea. The wind is biting at us like a mad dog.

'Get in the cockpit and clip on,' Chris yells.

Perseus kicks the rest of the anchor chain into its locker, rough as guts, and we clamber down either side of the boat,

clinging to the guard rails. We slide into the cockpit at the same time, and I copy Pers as he clips his life jacket to a strap on the yacht. Chris is going straight out to sea with the engine on full blast, riding up waves and bouncing down them. We're all getting soaked. It's hell and pure exhilaration at the same time. When he knocks back the throttle and turns the boat, we can see Hicks Inlet in the far distance, still glistening in the sunshine. Now that the wind is behind us it seems much quieter.

'Main sail up, Pers!' Chris commands.

I want to protest about Perseus getting the job until I realise he has to go up to the mast. I stay put, gratefully. When the sail is up it's much shorter than usual. The reefs now make sense.

'Unfurl the genoa, half way. With this wind we should be able to run in before the storm really hits.'

'Just sit tight, Lou,' Chris tells me in a gentle voice, noticing me cowering against the cabin, my arm wrapped around the winch. 'We probably won't need to gybe. Wind's right behind us, exactly where we want it.'

We're further from the coast than usual, which means we're deeper, which means I'm nervous. The boat is bouncing over unbroken waves. My stomach lurches into my mouth and drops again. This is not good. Fast, but not good. The boat descends between two waves. There's a wall of water building in front, another behind, and beyond it monstrous mud-black clouds boil up, dulling the sea, shrouding the land. A few rays of sun catch the white caps, the rest are dark as slag. The boat rises to crest a wave and tilts towards the trench below. I tighten myself against the drop, but it doesn't help. I'm starting to retch. With my eyes clammed tight shut I try to imagine myself into a safe little hole in solid ground. Water hurls over the side, all over me. I'm soaked but at least the coat keeps the wind off.

'You ok, Lou?' Chris yells over the roar of the wind.

'No!'

'Take the tiller.' He stretches out his hand to me. It's the last thing I want to do in this wild sea. He stretches out his hand to pull me off the bench and I unclip, lurch in his direction and clip on again.

Manning the tiller takes my mind off my stomach, off the cold, off the wind. Chris hasn't let go yet, of me or the tiller, so I'm safe. He takes us straight up the rise of a wave. The moment when we're poised at the top goes on forever.

'Now, down at an angle,' Chris instructs and shows, turning the tiller, and we're surfing down the face of the wave. 'Then straighten up to ride up the next one.'

I do it! Up the wave, turn, down across its face. Bending my knees a little, the way surfers do, my body running with the wave, the boat running with me. Straighten up across the trough. Up the next wave, and I bend my body and the tiller and the boat into the curve down the face.

'Keep the wind in the sail!' Chris yells, his arm indicating the way I should turn. He's fooling constantly with the rope that holds the boom, and giving Perseus instructions for managing the genoa. We pass the flailing palms on the northern beaches, and then the town. The estuary is finally in sight.

'Go past the estuary!' Chris is pointing at the tiny bay further south, while he and Perseus are furling the genoa. 'Head in there. Need to get the sail down.' He drops into the saloon and I can just hear the engine start. Even that is diminished by the flapping of canvas, by the whistle and whoosh of the gathering storm.

'Turn into the wind,' Chris tells me when he comes back up into the cockpit, but I can't figure out how to do it. My brain's shutting down. I'm wet. I'm cold. Chris takes the tiller and turns the boat, confidently, impervious to the thumping flap

of the sail as we go, to the water spraying into the boat. Then he hands the tiller back to me. He thinks I can do it. Keep the boat sitting there, dead into the wind, while he and Perseus bravely climb on top of the boat, and struggle to bring down the main sail. I remember Chris trying to teach me how to feel the wind direction using my face, but all I trust is the wind arrow on top of the mast, keeping it inside the little V, keeping it as close to the dead zone as I can. Screw this up and the boom will send Chris and Perseus flying into the water.

Exhaustion starts to ebb into my bones, my joints, my muscles, my brain, as we motor into the estuary. It's rough here, but nothing like the sea. Chris is on the tiller, swinging us into the mooring as smoothly as on a clear day. Perseus has the ropes ready. I didn't even notice him doing it. My body complains when I drag myself up to the bow, ready to jump off and tie up. When I've done that I heave off the heavy coat and life jacket and go into packing up motion, taking instructions, carrying them out, relieved that Chris is still in charge, still calm.

The town's battening down as we drive in. Canvas shop awnings are pulled in, windows are shuttered. Rubbish hurtles along the gutters. We're the only people at the take-away shop, the only car parked in the street. The cook listens to Perseus chatter about the storm — the sea so rough, the waves so high — nodding, raising his eyebrows, flipping burgers and bacon, eggs and pineapple, and layering it up in toasted buns. We sit on the bench in the shop and devour them, not talking, swigging at Coke, and order three more to eat in the car on the way home.

A note on the kitchen table from Josie says she's at the farm, and reminds us that there is food in the fridge, and to keep the windows shut. The storm's worn us out. Chris pours three shots of Bundy rum and we clink and scull. He and

Perseus head off downstairs, beers in hand.

'Hey, Chris, thanks for today.'

'Thank you, Lou. Force 9 gale. Wouldn't have gone out in it if it wasn't for you. Good thing to have on my log.' He's got a great wide grin on his face. 'Stuffed now though.' And they're gone.

I'm stuffed too. Enough energy to stand under the shower while the salt runs off. To get in bed. To hear the song of the bush stone-curlew. To listen to the gods pelting golf balls at the tin roof, thwock, thwock. It's not yet dark, but by the time the rain settles into a heavy patter I can feel myself slipping away with the fairies.

~

'You really are in for it now. Earl's waiting. In his office. Where the hell were you yesterday?' Charlene's rippling with glee. She can't even settle to filing her nails. What's she going to do without me to terrorise in the mornings?

When I open his door, Earl does his familiar close the door and sit down mime. I'm not saying anything. I can't tell from his face if he's grouchy or not. Surely he remembers he told me to go Lawless. I pull Rosie's passport from my bag and pass it to him.

'This is her? Your girl from the park? One of your hippie friends found it buried in the sands of Lawler's Cove?' He's definitely not grouchy.

'Something like that.'

'At last she has an identity. Now, I have something to show you. Your photographs. From the Hunts.' He opens a manilla folder. 'Alec developed them for me so I could show Mrs Pike. She was quite disappointed with the house. I was quite disappointed with the pictures. Barely focused. Boring composition. I was hoping for a smiling Mr and Mrs Hunt at home pic I could put on the gossip pages, but no, just a scowling Mrs Hunt by herself in the garden. You won't make

a photographer.'

'I never said I wanted to be a photographer.' I'm feeling a bit deflated. I thought he'd be interested in Rosie's passport. Instead I'm getting shit about my photos.

'Fair enough,' Earl says with his flirty smile. I think he turns it on specially to unnerve me. 'However, you did manage a couple of photographs of great interest.'

I hold out my hands. Earl passes me a grainy photo of the little surgery at the Hunts. I don't remember getting that close with the camera.

'Alec enlarged this bit,' Earl goes on. 'What did you see?'

'It's like a little surgery, off the fishing tackle room under the house. Through a hidden door.'

'A little surgery is exactly what it looks like. Do you know what it's for?'

'I do now. Stanley Hunt is a backyard abortionist.' Might as well cut to the chase.

'Well, this is an interesting development.' Earl's leaning forward, his face is lit up with what looks like excitement, an expression I've never seen before. 'It's an outlandish claim to make about one of Hicks Inlet's pre-eminent gentlemen. He showed you this, told you that?'

'Bernie showed me. Accidentally on purpose. I got the impression that she and Stanley play doctors and nurses.'

'Sounds kinky.'

'That's what I thought at first.' I can't stop myself from giggling at the way Earl says kinky. 'But I asked around a bit. Women do go to the Hunts for abortions.'

'You've got evidence? You can name names? It's not a light claim to make, Lou.'

He is grouchy now. I shouldn't have giggled.

'No,' I stumble. Josie's story about her friend is hearsay. I don't even know her name. Earl won't accept that as evidence. 'I can't divulge ...'

'Oh, turning into a journalist, are we?' Now he's leaning back, rocking his chair, frowning. 'Perhaps you might begin by explaining why Hicks Inlet would harbour a backyard abortionist. It's not to be expected in this day and age.'

'Do you know anything about a doctor getting harassed by the Right to Life? Molotov cocktail thrown at him?'

'Of course I know.' Earl's frown deepens.

'I read back issues of the *FNQ Mail*. There's no report.' I'm trying not to sound accusative.

'He begged me not to put anything in the paper on the grounds that it would just give them publicity, and he didn't want the publicity himself. He was pretty shaken up, understandably.'

It's the closest I've ever heard Earl sound to defensive. He usually goes on the attack when he's on shaky ground.

'Right. And then that doctor left town, and any other doctors who might have provided that service here in Hicks were too scared to do it, in case they became targets. You're aware of that too?'

'Yes, I'm aware of the situation. Go on,' Earl says, taking off his glasses and reaching for the drawer.

'Women still get pregnant unintentionally. That doesn't stop.'

'Yes, yes, Lou. I don't need a lecture on women's rights,' he snaps. 'But what have you got, concretely, on Hunt taking up this role? How do women find him? He doesn't advertise in the *FNQ Mail*, and we're the only paper in town.'

'A nurse at the Emergency room sends women to him. This sort of thing, well, it seems women can find out where to go if they're desperate.'

'Your nurse at the Emergency room? The one who helped you with Rosie?' he says, pushing the cloth around and around on the thick lenses.

'Unconfirmed. But it would make sense, wouldn't it?'

'Unconfirmed? So you are going to bandy about an allegation about one of the hard-working nurses at the Emergency room? The one whose name you don't know? The one you can't find?' Earl leans forward, glasses in one hand, cleaning cloth in the other. He's got a fearsome look in his mottled eyes.

'No, I'm not saying it's her. I am not saying that. I'm not saying anything about any of the nurses. I'm not even mentioning the Emergency room.'

'Good. At least you learn quick. Stick with what you have evidence for.'

He puts the cloth away, puts his glasses back on and leans back. He waiting for me to summon up evidence. I let him wait while I sort out what I want to say.

'Alright then. I know that Rosie went to Hunt. I know that Rosie died of septic abortion. Very likely resulting from a botched abortion.'

'Very likely is speculation, Lou, not evidence. Answer this: How did Rosie find out about Hunt? Does he advertise up there on the hippie coast? Staple posters to the palm trees? Or did Rosie go to the not-to-be mentioned Emergency room first?'

'No, someone else told her about Hunt.'

'And that someone would be?' Earl scratches his head. 'Come on, Lou! This is like pulling teeth!'

'Actually,' I hesitate. 'The question should be: How do I know Rosie went to Hunt? It's the only question I can answer.'

'All right. How do you?'

'She told me.' I can feel the tentative look on my face. I wish it would go away. 'Rosie told me she went to Hunt's to get an abortion,' I say with more conviction.

'It has taken you a long time to come up with that important detail. More than a week!' Earl clasps his hands

behind his head and lets out a deep loud sigh of exasperation.

'In the park, before she died,' I venture, 'Rosie told me that Stanley Hunt had ... he'd ...,' I breathe slowly and begin again. I should have practised this before I came in. 'Rosie said she'd been to Stanley Hunt's for an abortion and he'd botched it and dumped her in the park.'

Earl stares at me for a long while, then leans forward and folds his hands on the table.

'And the reason you are giving for not mentioning this significant bit of information before?' he asks quietly. 'I'm asking in case you try telling anyone else this story.'

'I, ... it was traumatic, the whole thing, and the things she said have only come back to me in bits and pieces. In my, my ... trauma, I focused on the thing about Ned Kelly.' My voice and my eyebrows are rising, like children's do when they are uncertain if they've got the right answer. Earl is staring at me, silent. I hold my back straight, in the hope it stops me from squirming.

'Leave out the trauma bit,' he finally says, his voice just above a whisper. 'Just say she told you and stick to it. Try to sound a bit more convincing and that'll work.' Earl drums his fingers on the desk.

'More convincing to who?' Should it be who or whom? I never know. Hope Earl doesn't pick me up on it.

'It's time for you to go to the police and make a statement. Tell them you found the woman in the park, alerted the hospital and George came and collected her. Give Rosie's story about Hunt. Leave out Lawler's Cove and Ned Kelly altogether. They'll want to know why you took so long to go and talk to them, so say you thought everything had been taken care of by the hospital people, but now you realise you should hand in her passport.'

'I can't say where I got the passport. Can't you hand it in?'

'How on earth would I have got it? Say you found her

passport in the bottom of your bag and you want to hand it in.'

'In the bottom of my bag? How did it get there?'

'You could ... , let's see, you found it under the bushes and put it in your bag, then you completely forgot about it. You were very upset, and you were, um, moving house, and using a different handbag — women do that — and it slipped your mind. You were in denial. People actually say that. Be straightforward and calm and don't say anything you don't need to.'

'Damn! This is going to be hard. Now I don't even remember why I didn't go to the police before.'

'Perfect!' Earl sits back in his chair and grins. 'Ditzy. Go for ditzy. You can pull that off.'

'Thanks Earl.'

'By the way, here's the other good photo. Do you recognise this person?' He hands me the other, very grainy, photo. It's the visitor upstairs at Hunts, through the plate glass window.

'It's Inspector Fawcett, isn't it? I hear that he and Hunt are,' I'm hesitating again, I have to leave Big Bill out of this, 'are mates.'

'Something like that. When did he arrive at the Hunts' house?'

'Not long before I left, so, nearly midday I guess.'

'That would have been after Rosie's body was returned to the morgue. He must have gone to alert Hunt. Bernie probably knew what he was there for before she showed you the little surgery.'

'I heard about that! How did you get Palm to dig her up so fast?'

'I have one or two friends in this god-forsaken town, Lou.'

'How did Fawcett know?'

'How did you know? Don't answer that! You don't know anything about it, remember? But, of course, Hicks Inlet is a

small town. Word travels, blah, blah. Anyway, it's very good to have the photograph, to make the connection.'

'You want me to take that to the police station too? I thought I was supposed to be ditzy, not an effective investigative journalist.'

'Word has it that Fawcett's been called down to Brisbane. I think I'll hold onto this photo until I hear why. Just tell your little story about finding the woman in the park, and nothing more. Then go and have lunch with Mrs Pike. She has some news. Same pub, same table, one o'clock. And this afternoon write up your bit on the market. Charlene got some advertisements and Alec had a few good pics in his arsenal.'

'Okay.' None of this is what I expected when I walked in. Earl's been at work in the background. And Mrs Pike's involved. I get a vision of Earl and Mrs Pike as puppeteers, and I'm the marionette, taking all the shit from the public.

'Excellent work, Lou,' Earl says.

It's a big improvement on 'good girl'. I try not to grin on my way out but Charlene is studiously ignoring me anyway. I could have got away with a little dance.

~

Outside the wind is barrelling down the main street. Gusts threaten to knock me over. The palm trees wave like party poppers. The streets are almost empty. The tourists must be hiding out in their hotels. The town's still battened down.

At the police station I speak to the constable on the desk.

'I'm Lou Williams, journalist with the *FNQ Mail*.' Got my poshest voice going. 'I want to make a statement about a suspicious death.'

'Suspicious death, eh?' The constable gives me a nasty grin. 'You'd think us police might have noticed a suspicious death, that being our job and all.'

'Last week a young woman died in the park,' I start again. 'I was with her at the time. I found her passport and want to

turn it in.' I didn't expect to have this kind of trouble making a statement.

'Last week? Well, I was down south on training last week, so that might be why I didn't know. Constable Fish was on the desk last week, and now he's doing training this week. He didn't leave me notes about any suspicious deaths, Miss.'

'In a little town like Hicks Inlet there's so much police work that one cop doesn't have time to tell another that a woman was found dead in a park?'

I know George reported it. I can't believe they're still denying it. How has Fawcett kept it to himself?

'Well, there's been a lot of funding cuts lately. Reduces capacity for action. You'd have known about the cuts if the newspapers bothered to report it. Hard to get anything done. And the bloody training all the time as though we don't know what we're doing. Interview technique, that's what they made me do last week! We already know how to get answers to questions, but there's new rules and we've got to do training to learn them apparently.'

'What's the new rules? Innocent until proven guilty? Right to a lawyer before answering any questions? That kind of thing?' My stomach's sinking. I shouldn't be picking a fight with the cop.

'Exactly that kind of thing. We're supposed to act like we're on *Matlock Police* now. Polite questions across a desk, observers, recording, shit like that. Next month I have to do five days of bloody public relations training.'

'They think you need public relations training?' A western suburbs sneer has crept into my voice.

'Surprising, isn't it? Although they reckon it's not too bad, the PR course. John Cleese film clips. He's bloody hilarious. I'm hoping all us constables get to practise funny walking. And the lunches are good. And there'll be free drinks at the pubs, so all in all I shouldn't complain.'

The cop's playing me, trying to put me off. I don't know why and I don't care. I've had enough.

'I want to speak to the officer in charge.'

'In charge of what?' the cop says snarkily.

'Murder.' I glare at him.

The cop pushes his chair back in a hurry and disappears through a door. I shouldn't have said murder, but it was effective. The cop's back in a hurry, the snarky tone gone.

'The senior sergeant will see you now. Through that door.' He points. An elderly cop, tall and gaunt, opens the door.

'Come in, Miss Williams. Please take a seat.' The senior sergeant's voice is quiet and calm. He closes the door and sits behind his desk.

'You want to report a murder, Miss Williams?'

'No, sir, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I was having trouble getting past the ...' This is not going at all well. Not straightforward in any sense.

'Past the constable on the desk? I am sorry. The lads will be getting public relations training.' He gives me a smile that asks for sympathy.

'I want to hand in a passport for Rosie Gardner. She died in the park last week. I was there when she died.'

'Thank you, Miss Williams.' He takes the passport, studies Rosie's photo and flicks through the pages. 'Anything else?'

'Before Rosie died she told me she'd been to Stanley Hunt's house where he'd performed an abortion that had gone badly. He then left her at the park.' The cop is taking notes in shorthand.

'Are you happy to sign a statement to that effect?' He doesn't show a flicker of surprise.

'Yes.' Too straightforward. He hasn't asked me why I waited a week. Doesn't want details. He was expecting me. I watch him slide a piece of letterhead paper into the typewriter and start to type. He's quick, efficient. The

statement's four lines long. When he hands it to me it says exactly what I intended to say and nothing more. He passes me a pen, and I sign it.

'Thank you again, Miss Williams,' he says quietly, standing. He opens the door and follows me through it, and walks me past the constable's desk. 'Do take care out there. It's quite a storm,' he says with a kind smile, firmly shaking my hand.

31

Earl's not expecting me back until after lunch. I've got an hour to kill. The hot wind whips around my face, my legs. Puts me in mind of the wind the priests say blows up from the fires of hell so that you know which direction you are headed. Tree branches tumble along the streets. Sooty clouds roll through patches of blue in the sky. The nearer I get to the marina the fewer cars there are. White caps dance on the sea all the way out to the horizon. Waves that might pass for surf cascade along the edges of the usually serene bay. The glass bottom boats are bound tightly to each other as if togetherness might save them, but I can hear glass cracking and splintering all the same. The biggest launches near the sea end of the estuary are bashing against each other, branches and ragged red forest litter building up around them. Chris's boat at the far end of the marina is better placed for surviving the storm. Our ropes are holding well. Chris must trust them — he isn't there, anxiously watching. Must be up at the farm. The storm's probably causing havoc there too. The wind blows me back into town to take cover in the pub.

I settle at Mrs Pike's favourite table, leaving the chair with best view of the room empty. I know she likes it. The waitress saunters over.

'By yourself? Not many game to go out today.'

'Expecting someone.'

'Want a drink while you wait?'

'Can I have a pony?'

'You can't have a pony here. This is Queensland. You can have a small beer. Same volume, different name.'

'A small beer, then, please. Four X.'

'Can't get nothing but Four X in Queensland. Myself, I like a VB, but bloody hard to get.'

'Tooheys is mine.' I give her a smile, glad of someone to talk to, but she's already going. When she brings the beer, the chattiness is gone. Wonder if it's me, or my preference for Tooheys, or if someone told her whose table I'm at.

Mrs Pike makes a grand entrance in a pineapple yellow and black leopard print dress. Golden high heels. She gives me a big smile from the doorway and does a little twirl, showing off the diamanté gold clasp holding her bun together, kinking her knees and wiggling her bum as she goes. There's only me in the room to impress. I give her a clap and a wolf whistle and she gives me a little lion's claw wave and takes a bow. She sashays across the room, lowers her head and gives me a little peck on the cheek. Her scent's as strong as her outfit.

'Hello, my dear. And it will be goodbye for us too, sadly.' She settles into her chair and pats at her hair. 'If you won't insist on the beer, I think we deserve the bottle of Asti Spumante today, don't you agree?'

'Fancy drop, Mrs Pike, for fish and chips.'

'Oh, it's my treat. My way of saying thank you.'

'For what?'

'Ah, for so much! Let's order and then I'll tell you my

news. Oh! What a week it's been! Everything is coming together.' She gives an imperious wave to the waitress. When she saunters over Mrs Pike orders for us both.

'So!' Mrs Pike pulls out her Glomesh cigarette case and lighter and vaguely waves it in my direction before lighting up. No cigarette holder today. 'I believe you gave a statement to the senior sergeant about your woman in the park. A very useful little addition to our case.'

'Our case?' Barely an hour has passed since I gave that statement. This town is porous.

'I've been impelled to aid poor Mrs McCready, who remains tormented by the demise of her young niece, Aileen. As you know, the girl was in her care when she met her terrible end. Mrs McC feels responsible.'

It's like listening to a nineteenth-century novel.

'Mrs McC and I,' Mrs Pike goes on, 'met with your Mr Sinclair of the glass bottom boat. He confirmed the presence of the blue rope — your blue rope — around Aileen's waist when he found her trapped amongst the coral. There were more details, which I've pledged not to divulge, but I can assure you that it was not a natural death that befell the poor young thing.'

'How did you find out that Sinclair was back? When did you talk to him?'

'Oh, a friend in Sinclair's street was on stakeout for me, so I pounced on him the moment he returned. Let's see, it must have been Tuesday afternoon. Sinclair's a timid fellow. I had to, ah, encourage him to come and talk with Mrs McC.' She drags on the cigarette, blows smoke rings. There's a hint of a smile on her glossy red lips. 'Let me tell you, Mrs McC was emboldened by your information. It put a crack in the wall of silence that had descended over the death of poor Aileen.' She pauses. For effect? Worried about mixing that metaphor?

'She's Aileen's aunt. Surely she must have known more

than us about what happened to her.'

'Mrs McC, my poor, dear, grieving friend, hasn't spoken to her husband since that dreadful Saturday when Aileen was brought in from the sea. She's been in such a torpor, poor dear. Mr McC had told her that he'd dropped Aileen at the bus stop, and that she was going to visit friends in Rockton. But it was when I told Mrs McC about your blue rope that she began to think something fishy was going on. Mrs McC urged me on a mission to help her find out the truth.'

'Wouldn't mind knowing that myself.'

'It is nibbling on our bait, my dear. The trick is to reel it in.' She moistens her little finger on her tongue and runs it over each perfectly arched eyebrow. 'Where were we? Ah, yes. Someone in my theatre group told me she'd seen Mr McC take Aileen into Hunt's house on the afternoon of the day before she was found.'

'Hunt's house?' A cold shiver shoots down my back. 'Aileen was pregnant? She had a boyfriend? Isn't he trying to find out what happened to her too?'

'Not a boyfriend as such, my dear. McCready's a philanderer, always has been. Mrs McC has long turned a blind eye, but she'd suspected him of, you know, with the niece.' She fans herself with the serviette.

'Gross. McCready's fat and ugly and old. Why would a young woman go for him?'

'Country girl. Unaccustomed to the attention perhaps. A little pressure applied perhaps. One doesn't like to speculate. It fouls the mind.' She shakes a cigarette out of the case and lights it. 'Ah, here's the bubbly.' She fills our glasses, raises hers, and we clink.

'Next, ah, and here's our fish and chips. Too soon, but let's not wait. They're dreadful cold.' Mrs Pike picks up her knife and fork and starts eating. She's not going to tell me any more until she's finished. She'll be getting a kick out of

keeping me in suspense.

'Next,' Mrs Pike says, putting her knife and fork together neatly on the empty plate and wiping the corners of her mouth with her serviette. 'Next, Hunt's neighbour comes into the planning office and, one thing and another, tells me he heard a blazing row between Hunt and Bernie out in the garden the very same afternoon that Mr McC had taken Aileen there. Yelling and arguing. Disappearing under the house. Then back in the garden yelling and arguing. A right ruckus! It went on for a while, he told me. Then Bernie left in her car and didn't come back until late in the evening. Meanwhile, guess who turns up?'

'Fawcett?' He has to show up in this dirty drama sometime.

'You have learnt so much about our little town in such a short time, my dear.' She gives me a pat on the hand and fills our glasses.

'McCready was there too?'

'Oh no, he left Aileen with Hunt and went to his Friday afternoon bowls as usual.'

'Hang on a minute.' So many insignificant details. I'm getting confused. 'Just to be clear, you are saying that Aileen went to Hunt's for an abortion. Is that what you're saying?'

'We don't use the A word in polite society, dear,' she says very quietly, her bottom lip quivering.

'In the process of which Aileen dies, or nearly dies, and Hunt panics and Bernie wants to, I don't know, take her to the hospital or the park nearby, but they argue, and then it's too late. Bernie takes off. Disgusted. Disappointed. Distracted. Hunt overruled her and Aileen can't be saved. Bernie blames Hunt. Leaves him to solve the problem. Hunt calls Fawcett and they decide the best thing is to dump Aileen in the sea?'

'Could be, detective, could be. Later, at night, the

neighbour heard loud music blaring from Hunt's, early Rolling Stones he said, so he went into his garden to take a closer look. Hunt was pacing up and down the balcony, and Hunt's boat was going out to the sea, under the cover of darkness and I Can't Get No Satisfaction.'

'Fawcett in the boat? With Aileen's body?'

'The neighbour didn't see who was in the boat, to be clear. But Bernie had gone and Fawcett had come, which doesn't leave many candidates. Oh, my dear!' Mrs Pike dabs non-existent sweat from her brow with a serviette. 'Given Sinclair's description of the scene, one surmises that poor Aileen got the concrete boots treatment.'

'Bloody hell!'

'I also heard, from someone different — the planning office is such a wonderful place to work — that Fawcett went to talk to Mr McC at the bowling club late that afternoon.' She fills our glasses, shaking the last drops from the bottle.

'Fawcett went to ask McCready what to do? Or to get permission to do it, to dump Aileen in the sea?'

'One or the other, presumably. I can't imagine he went to help him work on his draw shot. It was a flying visit. Apparently he did a screeching wheelie out the front of the Hunts' house on his return.'

'I heard,' I venture, 'that Hunt, Fawcett and McCready met on the half-built road near the Cedar. That would have been ...' When did I first go up to the Cedar with Chris? Perseus had seen them, I remember him talking about them. 'It would have been the day after they found Aileen in the sea. The Sunday.'

'A conspiracy! Making a pact of silence no doubt. Excellent! Would your, what do you journalists call them, source? Would your source be prepared to make a statement?'

'I don't know. I can ask. Pass on a message anyway.' Where are these statements going? 'Have you made a statement?'

'Me?' Mrs Pike giggles and dusts down her chest. 'All I've got is gossip. And a friend or two. The senior sergeant, for example, is a friend of mine.'

'Where's he been all this time? Fishing?'

'Now, now. The senior sergeant was down south when Aileen was brought in. It wasn't reported to him. He only got back on the weekend. He had a backlog to attend to.'

'It's Thursday now! What about the report on Aileen? He must have seen it as soon as he got back. How could he ignore that?'

'The righteous mayor was campaigning against an investigation. Drawing on all the usual dirty tricks, no doubt. That slowed the senior sergeant down a little. Ah,' Mrs Pike does a mock yawn, her hand fluttering in front of her mouth, 'we all go way back, high school, primary school, kindergarten. You learn how to make your way, manoeuvre through the alliances and the hostilities, manage the strong points and the weak. Newcomers like Fawcett and Hunt haven't got a chance against that.' She plumps her hair. 'The senior sergeant was wading through the murk, poor dear. Fighting off foes. In need of a guide through the darkness.'

'You had to give him a nudge?'

'More of an elbow to the ribs, if truth be told.' Mrs Pike straightens her back and tosses her head proudly.

'What about Aileen's death certificate? Has that come up?'

'Poor Aileen's death certificate was lost in a black hole in the police station.'

'Fawcett hid it in a drain?'

'Septic tank is more his style,' she giggles. 'But good has triumphed over evil. The death certificate has been found. Cause of death is now known to all. Perforated uterus, ruptured artery, haemorrhage. Poor thing. The injuries from being thrown overboard happened after she was already dead.'

'Was Rosie's death certificate with it?'

'Your poor girl? Yes, her death certificate was there too. Apparently cause of death does not necessarily implicate Stanley Hunt, more's the pity.'

'And now Fawcett's gone to Brisbane.'

'That's the chain of events. The story so far. Stay tuned for the next knuckle-biting episode!' She lights another cigarette. 'It's expected that Fawcett will be transferred, toot sweet, to the far west. What happens with the horrible Hunt and the malevolent mayor remains to be seen.'

'A lot of people will be pleased to see Fawcett go.' Big Bill. The Mazzolinis. Even me.

'Mr Palm for one,' Mrs Pike says out of the blue. She's staring at me with those green eyes framed by her perfectly arched eyebrows. She's got another story for me. She's in her element. I've got a mystery I'd like solved while we're in the business.

'I know Fawcett leaned on Palm to bury Rosie,' I say, 'but why did Palm do what he wanted? It was pretty extreme.'

'Fawcett knew about Mr Palm's amorous predilections. God knows how. Mr Palm is the essence of discretion.'

'Amorous predilections?'

'He bats for the other side,' Mrs Pike's eyes twinkle, 'with a preference for coaching the teenagers.'

'Bats for the what?' I need a big swig of spumante to help me unravel that. 'Are you saying he's gay, Mrs Pike?'

'In a way that society particularly frowns upon. Fawcett would have got great delight from taunting poor Mr Palm, from threatening to tell the world. It would ruin Mr Palm's business, and destroy his life. I imagine Fawcett was quite the playground bully.'

'Poor Mr Palm. He was a real mess when I saw him. Didn't know up from down.'

'Like so many of us this last couple of weeks, dear. But the

sky is clearing. It's a pity you won't be here to see the fruits of your labour. We must away.' She drains her glass and stands. 'Work beckons.'

~

I actually feel a tear well up when Mrs Pike envelops me with her thudding great arms and her lavender scent and hugs me. At not seeing Mrs Pike again? That's a surprise. Sad to be leaving Josie and Marco, Chris and Perseus, and lovely Kelly, absolutely. Even Earl, perhaps. The sea, the sailing, definitely. The mountains, the sky, the drama of the storms, sure. I'll even miss the nocturnal wail of the bush stone-curlew. But tomorrow night I'll be drinking rough red while Noel eats up my stories and regales me with jokes and gossip. Robbo might even show up.

Water's steaming off the street, shimmering in the sunlight that's breaking through the cloud. I need flowers for Josie, or chocolates, and a toy for Marco. Only the newsagent is braving the storm and staying open. Chris chews up novels like there's no tomorrow. I go in and search through the few shelves of books in alphabetical order. Aeul's *Mammoth Hunters* for Perseus. Everyone back home's reading it. Lurking between the thick tomes by Clancy and Courtenay there's a copy of Cook's *Wake in Fright*. Chris will get a kick out of it. I'd never heard of it until Robbo took me to see the film. And here, under D, John dos Passos' *USA*. Robbo told me everyone should read that too, not that I ever have. And if I buy it for Chris I won't have to think about moving it to P, or search for gems hiding amongst the Kings, Ludlums, Micheners and Steels. Childrens' books are easier. For Marco *The Sign of the Seahorse*, although it's Chris and Pers who'd love Graeme Base's fantastic art most. They can read Marco's copy. Probably will. And Josie? She deserves something special. I pass on the chocolate bars and boxes of Roses when I pay at the till. They won't do. And there are no flowers in

sight.

Outside blue is winning in the sky. The air feels lighter, more breathable. Is that possible? A few more cars, more people on the street, but shops are still shut. I can wait. Sit a while on the post office steps where I sat that awful lonely Sunday when Noel wouldn't answer the phone. Less than two weeks ago. Back then I was stewing in misery for not getting enough information about the girl brought in from the sea, indulging in self-recrimination, dragging my self-esteem through the dirt like a sulky teenager. Now the mystery of Aileen's death is mostly solved, Rosie's too. Hunt might roll even if Fawcett and the mayor don't. Ed will get the article for sure. I don't care. My energy for that has abated like the storm. I don't want to go there. Not in this town. It's like a mangrove quagmire that sucks you in deep and keeps you captive so the mosquitoes can get a good feed. I'm going home. I've learnt some stuff, about myself, about other people, even about journalism. One way or another I made a difference.

Across Hicks Square, through the broken palms, I can see the chemist opening his shop. Perfume. Perfect. Josie loves perfume. I run across the park, jumping puddles, and the chemist gives me a surprised look when I bounce in. And there it is, in a locked display case: Arpège, Mum's favourite. Problem solved. Gift-wrapped please. And there goes another chunk of my pay. Just enough to get home from the airport and put my share in the groceries kitty. And I've got nothing for Noel. Damn. She can have a pineapple.

~

'Took your time!' Charlene looks up from filing her nails. 'Earl waited until he gave up.' She passes me an envelope, sealed, my name in Earl's scratchy handwriting. 'He wants to know what happened to your little bit on the market. Roger needs it. One hundred words Earl said. A picture tells a

thousand etcetera. I put the market hours and train times on top of the heap of proofing. Don't know why you can't do your own bloody research.' She goes back to her nails.

On 'my' desk, the meeting table in the middle of the office, there's a big stack of proofing and Charlene's note about the market. I put the envelope beside it and drag the chair out noisily, in the hope that it'll stop Ed's snoring.

'You're back!' Ed snarls, sitting up straight and wiping his hand over his nose. 'Thought you and Mrs Pike must have got washed away in the storm. Expected your bodies to get pulled in next.'

'Not funny Ed.' Wonder how he knew I was with Mrs Pike.

'I'm the Police Desk. Not the funnies page.' Ed scowls at me. Bloody lucky, I refrain from saying, if that's the best he can do for humour. He's shoving his shirt in his trousers, doing up the button over his beer gut. 'Got to go count how many boats are busted. Storm report. Might be a while. Don't touch my phone.'

'Right. Have fun.'

I'm not going to comment on the phone jibe, Ed. Not going to bite at all. One more day and I'm out of here. I wind a piece of paper into the typewriter and type the first thing that comes into my mind: Take a trip to Toolooloa's magical market. When the cheery conversation between Ed and Charlene comes to an end and the door bangs I open Earl's note.

Hunt being arrested tomorrow. Go as official reporter. In taxi. Be at Hunts at 6am.

Lips sealed, obviously.

Straight back here afterwards.

The senior sergeant is making a move. I should be excited, but it just feels like tying up loose ends. Perhaps I'm still tired from the sailing, the storm. I shred the paper into tiny pieces and put it in the bin. Back to the market.

The train and market times will use up most of my word count. It should go in a table. That'll leave me, what fifty words? A few sentences. I can't think of anything else to write. I need to see the layout. What is it going to be? A little bar column on page 10?

'Roger?' I knock tentatively on the door.

'Lou? What can I help you with?' he says, opening the door wide, his smile genial and voice gentle. He looks me in the eye as if he recognises me as a fellow human being. Unlike Ed and Charlene.

'The market. I can't think what to write. I need to see how it's going to look on the page.' I hold up my near blank sheet of paper.

'Perfect! Just what I had in mind.' He takes the piece of paper and settles at the typesetter, humming to himself.

On the layout table there's a half-page with market written on it in blue pencil. Scattered around it eight advertisements in unusual fonts and five photographs of the market. Chris, with his big smile, selling bananas from the truck. Nonna will be proud. The woman with the jewellery stall. The watermelon juice bar. The sarong stand. A pictorial record of my day at the market. The station platform with crowds of people loaded with goodies getting onto the train. No, that didn't happen to me.

Roger brings my paltry offering, typeset into a centred headline, and lays it in the middle of the half page. He arranges the advertisements in a border around the outside, and roughly lays the pics inside that, and then the headline. There's no space for text, but it works just fine as it is.

'Do you like that?' he asks with a twinkle in his eye. 'I do. Earl might think it's a bit cheeky of us to go without the words altogether, apart from your wonderful headline, and all those advertisements, but it's bright and cheerful this way, don't you think?'

'I do. So many advertisements and pics. Where did they come from?' Looks like my idea paid off. That's a surprise.

'Charlotte had a day out. She can be very effective when she's on the right thing. Very pleased with herself, with the whole idea, when she got back. Not to mention all the shopping. She was pleased with that too.'

What do you know? And not a word to me about any of it.

'We need a table with the market days and train timetable.'

'Easy done, Lou. After afternoon tea. I'll typeset it while you proofread. Would that be alright?'

'The advertisements look great Roger. Using new fonts?'

'Inspired by you. The classifieds look better with your choice of fonts.'

'I couldn't find the fonts you used. That's why I used these.'

'Well, serendipity then. Not a stranger to you, I imagine. You're a breath of fresh air in this establishment. I'm sorry you're not staying. Can I get you a cup of tea?'

~

Marco's already got the Jenga blocks set up on the kitchen table when I get home, and we play until he starts sulking about losing. I give him his present as consolation and he shoves it away. Perseus picks it up.

'*The Sign of the Seahorse!* A tale of greed and adventure in two acts, eh Marco. And set in Reeftown!' Perseus's exuberance is infectious. 'This is about our place Marco.' He picks Marco up and swings him in a circle, then sits on the floor with him, their backs to the wall. Turns out Pers is a master of rhyming, of tone, of voices. He brings the Groper, Finny and Pearl, and the Moray Eel alive. Marco is electrified, captivated by Perseus's reading, by the illustrations. Chris is already absorbed in *USA*. Josie's making a salad. I'm idly stirring the risotto, ladling in Nonna's sensational stock, half thinking about how tomorrow morning's going to pan out,

half listening to Perseus and trying to figure out which of the Graeme Bases's baddies best captures Hunt and Fawcett and the mayor.

*A savage-looking Swordfish stood a little to his right,
The kind of thug you wouldn't want to come across at night.*

His sidekicks were a pair of Sharks, with dubious IQs,

Who dressed in stovepipe trousers and wore pointy, two-tone shoes.

Sounds like my nasty murderous trio, but I'm not sure who is the Swordfish. By the time Perseus gets to Act II everyone's listening. Chris is on the floor too, Marco cuddled between him and Perseus. Even Josie is not working for once, just listening, sipping Nonno's rough red, every now and then raising her wrist to her nose for a whiff of Arpège. I'm going to miss this family.

32

Friday morning. My last day. Hunt's arrest. It's still dark when I leave the house. The taxi's waiting. We roll through now familiar streets, past the hospital and the blackfellas park and Mrs Swain's street. There's debris from the storm, branches and litter, on all the streets. I wait a couple of houses away from the Hunts' place for the cops. Perhaps they changed their minds.

Finally they show up. Two cars. No sirens. The senior sergeant recognises me and nods for me to follow. The constable in need of public relations training gives me a dirty look. With a sign from the senior sergeant two cops head towards the Hunts' garden gate. I follow the senior sergeant and two more cops up the front stairs. He rings the doorbell twice. Eventually Bernie opens it, hair tousled, but looking elegant in a silky dressing gown. We hear Hunt thumping down the stairs to the garden, see him running across it in his shorty pyjamas, throwing himself into his boat. As the cops take off across the lounge room and out the open doors onto the deck I hear Hunt's motorboat start. There's a helter-skelter dash of cops across the garden and lights from a police

boat heading in our direction. Hunt's boat swings away, spraying the two closest cops with water. He heads north, away from the police boat which continues shoreward. The cops are frantic, gathered at the jetty, and the poor senior sergeant is waving his arms about as if he's trying to direct them. It's going to take a while. I settle into a banana lounge on the deck to watch. The sun's coming up, casting the sea in gold.

'Coffee, Lou?' Bernie's dressed, hair combed, make-up on, coffee pot and cups on a tray, handbag hanging on her arm as if she's going out. She sets the tray on a little table and pulls up a banana lounge on the other side of it. She's even brought toast and jam. Her husband's being chased by the cops and she's making me breakfast.

We watch the police boat thundering towards Hunt's jetty. The senior sergeant gesticulates wildly at it, trying to get it to turn around and chase Hunt. Instead it pulls into the jetty, dousing the cops with water again, while Hunt speeds north. The cops all jump aboard, tipping the boat wildly from side to side. The senior sergeant is pointing at Bernie and seems to want one of the cops to get off the boat; none of them seem willing. Eventually one of them climbs off and stands forlornly on the deck, watching the police boat take off after Hunt, siren blaring, leaving an impressive fountain in its wake. The senior sergeant's standing imperiously in the middle of the boat, pointing an arm at Hunt's disappearing boat. Then they're out of sight, and the sea is quiet but for fishing boats chugging towards the inlet, each with their own cloud of swooping seagulls. It's picture perfect, paradise. Bernie pours coffee.

'It had to stop. Stanley had to be stopped,' she says quietly, looking out at the sea. 'He used to be good at it, you know. He's very experienced. So was the woman who taught him. He was the male voice for a long time before she let him do

any himself.'

'The male voice?' I look at Bernie, but her gaze is on the horizon. I settle back to listen.

'A male voice so the woman would think there was a doctor present,' she continues. 'They used to have the woman blindfolded, and Stanley would speak, telling the woman what they were going to do, how the anaesthetic would feel if they were using one. What the pain would be like if they weren't.'

'The woman who taught him was called Jezebel?' Hunt's strange story about doing good works for women with someone called Jezebel.

'Belle. Stanley called her Jezebel, to tease her. Belle knew Stanley when he was a cop. He used to collect her payments. Warn her if there was going to be a raid. Belle liked his voice, thought it was soothing, and asked him to work with her full time. It was better money than being in the force, and he was sick of that anyway.'

'Was Belle a doctor?' I'll prompt but no more. I concentrate on the sea, like Bernie.

'A nurse. She was more experienced than some of the doctors I worked with, and a thorough teacher. It was a couple of years before she let him do them by himself.'

'You were there too, all that time?'

'I only worked for Belle occasionally, if she was stuck and I had the day free. She would only have qualified nurses. I was a theatre sister, heart surgery mostly. I liked that work.' Bernie's still staring at the sea. 'Belle and Stanley made a good team. She was mature, authoritative. He was young, handsome, a real charmer. Women felt safe with them. They had a good name. Even doctors used to send them patients. They used to do more than forty a week.'

'They were ...? Abortion was illegal then?'

'Oh yes. They were hard times for women. That was

during the sixties. If you got pregnant and didn't want to be, for whatever reason — too many kids already, too young, or old, rape even — you were in real trouble back then. Unless you were rich. The women who could afford it went to discreet doctors in nice hospitals.'

'The swinging sixties? I had no idea.' Earl's right. I really don't know very much.

'You're too young to know. They don't teach you this in school. It wasn't just that it was illegal. It was all tied up with police corruption, payoffs, raids. Quite dangerous. Jezebel's business was fine for a few years, and they did even better when Stanley joined her, with his skills and his friends in the force. Then the police had a change in regime.'

'Change in regime?' The cop remaining on the jetty moves and sprawls out in the shade of a tree. He's not worried about Bernie going anywhere.

'The Catholics and the Masons used to take it in turns to be in charge of the police force. Someone new, I forget his name, came in and wanted to put an end to it. Raided a lot of backyarders. Even went after some doctors. Stanley and Belle each got four years. That's when I really got to know him. I used to visit him in prison. Hard place, prison. We got married when he got out.'

Bernie hasn't taken her eyes off the sea, as if she's using it as a fixing point, drawing strength to hold to her story until it's told. The police and Hunt are still out of sight. I watch the sea, like Bernie, waiting.

'Stanley hooked up with Bert Wainer and Peggy Bermann and that lot when he got out. They were pushing against police corruption, backyarders, the whole thing. It really was a wretched situation. Women in trouble were just pawns. Stanley wanted to get back at the police who set him up, so he joined Wainer's campaign. They got the Menhennitt ruling and the Wainer enquiry, the Kaye enquiry it was really, but

everyone remembers Wainer. Abortion became legal, more or less. Women could even get them on Medicare. The business dried up for Stanley though. He'd shot himself in the foot. Stanley always thought of himself as being as good as a doctor, better even, and he was better than many, but he wasn't qualified so there was no work for him.' Bernie is staring hard at the ocean, her voice is quiet, shaken.

'So you came up here?'

'Oh no. I'm talking about the seventies now. I had my job, a good job. Stanley was lost for a while. Didn't know what to do. He was hanging around with people he'd met in prison, selling hot televisions, stolen cars, things like that. He got involved in horse racing, playing the SP bookies, eventually had a couple of horses of his own. They weren't good years. I wanted him to get a proper job, but jail ruined him. All his friends were cops and crooks. Things just kept going downhill for us.'

'Oh.' She's unloading. Filling in background detail, providing rationales. The boats are still out of sight. The cop under the tree is asleep. I've got time.

'I gave him an ultimatum. Either I leave, or we both leave. Get away from his awful friends, from that low-life world. Eventually we sold up and came up here. I worked in the hospital and Stanley got involved with property developers. It was wide open. Lots of money around. A charmer always does well in that sort of business. Sometimes I think the developers aren't any better than the crims. They're less fun, that's for sure.' She half smiles, at the sea.

The two boats come into sight, one chasing the other. I've got to push Bernie's story along. I need to know what happened with Aileen and Rosie.

'So why did he go back to doing the abortions?'

'Demand. The doctors here stopped doing it. After nine weeks women have to go to Brisbane.'

'That I do know.'

'I was still at the hospital, part time. Women started coming in having tried to abort themselves. Some of them were in a terrible mess. It was awful.'

'So you decided to start offering abortions here? Using your contacts at the hospital to get patients referred?' I'm starting to understand how this works.

'I didn't want to. It was Stanley. He was proud of his skill. Wanted to offer his services. He thought he'd manage it just fine, even though it had been, what, fifteen, twenty years.'

'He'd lost his touch?'

'That wasn't really the problem. The women were always quite far gone. Three months, four sometimes. It gets more difficult. We couldn't always get hold of anaesthetic. Women would haemorrhage. Sometimes it was very frightening,' Bernie shudders. 'If it went wrong I'd put the woman in the car, drop her at the park near the hospital. Tell her to go to the Emergency and say she was miscarrying. That was what backyarders did back in Melbourne, and we just fell into doing the same thing here. Of course, the hospital knew what was going on, the same as they did back in Melbourne. They take over the problem cases. Everyone knows what's going on. No one talks about it.'

The boats are circling in the sea, edging closer to each other, closer to shore.

'Is that why Stanley gave money for the hospital wing?'

'A little bit of that. A lot of the mayor leaning on him to cough up. When abortion is illegal all the slime oozes up. Like Fawcett. He moved in on it, wanted payoffs from Stanley, paid the hospital nurse money to keep it all quiet. God knows who else was on his books. He's a parasite. Sucks from wherever he can get it.'

The police boat catches up with Hunt's boat. They've stopped him. The cop under the tree gets up and moves back

to the dock. Bernie swings her feet off the banana lounge, sits up straight and looks at me. We both know time's running out.

'Tell me what happened to Aileen,' I say, looking Bernie in the eye.

'She got the last of the anaesthetic. She was four months gone, but it seemed straightforward enough. Everything was going along as it should. Then Stanley must have ruptured an artery. Blood poured out, so fast. She might have been ok too if we'd got her straight to the hospital, but Stanley wouldn't let me take her. He wanted to check with her uncle first. The uncle, the mayor, you know, he didn't want anyone to know. The bastard, he should have taken the girl to Brisbane or somewhere, gone to a hospital, paid for a doctor. He didn't want his wife to know, but Aileen was showing. The wife would have known.'

'And then?' Come on Bernie, get it off your chest.

'Stanley went off to phone bloody Fawcett. I was doing everything I knew to stop the bleeding, but I couldn't ... The poor young thing. The life drained out of her so quickly. I couldn't take it. I screamed at Stanley and took off, drove to the hills.' Bernie clutches at her cheeks, drags her perfect nails down them. 'Such a gormless waste of space I am. The stupid little wife, doing what I'm told. Keeping the peace. I should have just called an ambulance. Insisted. Instead I let Stanley and Fawcett and the mayor make the decisions. Fawcett did the dirty work.'

'Tied her to a bag of concrete and threw her in the deep.' I whisper. It's too hard to say that out loud.

'Fawcett took the body out to sea on Friday night and Saturday morning Stanley kept a watch with his binoculars from first light.' Bernie wants me to know the details. 'He saw Jock Sinclair's boat sitting over the reef and the tourists behaving as though something was wrong. He waited,

getting angrier by the minute, for Sinclair to move. And then the police boat came and hauled Aileen's body up out of the water. Stanley phoned Fawcett in a rage. Demanded that he fix it. He wanted to drive down to the marina to see, but he wasn't in a fit state. So I drove him.'

'I was there, at the marina.'

'I saw you there,' Bernie says very quietly. 'You stood out, had this thing about you. You were asking the cops questions and looking like you weren't going to give up. You do this thing, stand straight, hold your shoulders back, stick your jaw out. Stanley didn't recognise you at the marina, so he asked Fawcett to check you out. That's how we knew about your article, about the young Aboriginal man.'

'Ah, it surprised me ...'

'Then you turned up at the hospital opening,' Bernie cuts in, speaking quickly. She's composed now, wants to get the story out. 'Stanley was a wreck by then, drinking all the time, paranoid, guilt-ridden. He saw you as a threat, I think, so he was acting tough. You put him in his place. You've got some fearlessness about you. I knew you would figure it out. That's why I invited you to come and do the interview. Stanley was angry about it, but I thought you might, I don't know, make him say, confess, something like that. While you were here, out with Stanley at the boat, Fawcett arrived and told me you had found Rosie dead in the park. I was so angry. I didn't know she'd died. Fawcett said, in his ferocious way, that I didn't need to know. That he'd had it all covered up and that the only problem was that you were unravelling it. That's why I showed you the surgery. You'd stumbled into the wretched mess and kept on going. I knew that you would put it all together, see it through.'

We can hear the boats getting closer and turn to watch. Hunt is hand-cuffed to the back of the police boat. Bernie is sitting bolt upright, still as one of George's totem poles. Time

is getting short.

‘What happened with Rosie?’

‘Stanley was a complete mess after Aileen, as I said. Drank and drank. Punched at that bag downstairs. We weren’t talking. It was hell. I couldn’t go to the police. Fawcett is the damned police, after all. And, it was wrong of me, but I just couldn’t be the one who put Stanley back in prison. Just couldn’t.’ She draws a deep breath, turns and looks at me. ‘Then, the middle of all that, at the worst of times, Rosie turned up.’

‘Why didn’t you send her away?’

‘I would have. Stanley couldn’t say no. It was going to go badly, I knew that from the first minute. There was no anaesthetic left. Stanley was a physical and mental wreck. Rosie was anxious, jumpy. She wouldn’t stay still on the table.’ Bernie’s talking even more quickly, as if she’s worried about running out of time too. ‘Stanley slapped her across the face and yelled at her to stay still. It worked. She froze, terrified. I held her hands, her trembling hands, and she looked at me like a roo caught in headlights. Then, when Stanley was nearly finished she sprang to life, telling Stanley to stop, saying she’d changed her mind. It was too late. And bloody Stanley just walked away, without making sure everything was out. I was furious. So I wrapped a sheet around her, got her out to the car, to take her to the hospital. But then I lost my nerve and dropped her at the park instead. The usual procedure. She would have been ok if she’d gone to the hospital. I showed her where it was. I told her to go. I thought she’d gone there. No more, I told Stanley. But it was too late. And now we’ll both go to prison, as we should.’

The police boat pulls into the jetty. Hunt’s boat pulls in behind it. Four cops are struggling to tie both boats to the jetty. The senior sergeant’s shaking his head. Hunt is on the jetty, limp as a rag doll, one cop holding each of his arms.

Bernie stares at the sea. Hunt's being marched up the garden path by the two cops. He doesn't even look at us. The senior sergeant's coming up the stairs to the deck.

'Mrs Hunt,' he says politely, holding out his hand as if he's asking Bernie to dance.

'Just let me wash these and lock up,' she replies meekly, rising elegantly from the banana lounge, handbag over her arm, and bending to give me a kiss on the cheek.

I let myself out, and very slowly pick my way through the debris of the storm towards town. When Bernie goes past in the cop car she gives me a small wave and a sad smile.

33

By the time I get back to town I'm drained, depleted, done in. I sit on the post office steps and watch the honest townfolk of Hicks Inlet making their way to work. Chris will be unloading vegetables from the truck. Josie will be setting up the shop. Up on the beach Kelly will be bathing in the stream. Big Bill will be teaching the kid how to fix the outboard motor, or carving a harpoon. Perseus will be in his treehouse, monitoring the destruction of the rainforest. It's just another day in paradise.

'You're early today! Want to put in a good showing before you go?' Charlene says when I come in. I just smile at her and make a mental note to eat one of her Mint Slice biscuits before I go.

Earl's waiting in his office. I close the door. Sit in my chair.

'Heard it's all over,' Earl says, leaning forward on his desk, a boyish look of excitement on his face.

'Police took them both in.'

'Did you get a chance to talk to Bernie?'

'Bernie told me everything. Well, told me heaps. It seemed like she was using me as a recorder.'

'You interviewed her. Good.'

'I barely said a word.'

'That's the way.' Earl smiles.

'She talked about Hunt's background, hers. What happened with Aileen and Rosie. She was very composed. Sat there with her handbag, ready to go, while the cops chased Hunt around the sea.'

'The assumption is that Bernie wanted to take Aileen to the hospital.'

'That's what she said.'

'Did she say that Hunt wouldn't let her?'

'Hunt wouldn't do anything without talking to Fawcett. Fawcett talked to McCready, according to Mrs Pike. In the meantime Aileen bled to death.'

'Poor Bernie. She won't get off lightly, good intentions notwithstanding. She's always seemed a decent person to me.' Earl leaned back in his chair.

'What about the mayor? He's culpable. Sounds like he and Fawcett cooked up the plan to get rid of Aileen's body. She was pregnant with his baby!'

'Think about it, Lou. Bernie will tell that story. Hunt might too. Why should they carry the can? But they will look like they are trying to shift the blame. Backyard abortionists don't get any respect. The mayor and Fawcett will protect themselves with a pact of silence.'

'Fucking Fawcett. Looming behind everything. Dumping Aileen in the sea. Covering up Rosie's death. What's going to happen to him?'

'Some unfortunate town way out west will be forced to suffer from that excrescence, no doubt.'

'Just like that. Off the hook. He threatened me! He visited Josie to tell her to tell me to back off.' I wonder if I would have taken that so lightly if I knew then what I know now.

'You didn't tell me that.'

'I could have been ... He might have come after me.'

'I imagine Josie Mazzolini would have advised him against. It was a smart thing you did, moving in with that family. You couldn't have found a safer place in all of Hicks. I thought it was clever of you, and very timely.'

Earl is leaning back, comfortable, the slightest of satisfied smiles on his face. I'm starting to feel a bit like he threw me in the deep end, let me flounder.

'How much did you know? That you didn't bother to tell me, I mean.' I sound sour. I don't know if that's what I intended, but there it is.

'I informed you about Fawcett.'

'All right, you did.' Although not that he might have a special interest in me, or why. 'You knew about the Hunts, right? You didn't give me that little detail before you sent me off on the interview.' I lean forward on the desk.

Earl rolls his chair back a little, rests his hands in his lap.

'What did I know? I thought I recognised Hunt's face, that horsey smile, the smarmy way he's got, from my days back on the *Truth* in Melbourne. He reminded me of a backyarder who was mixed up in the Wainer enquiry, but it was decades ago. I had a hunch, nothing more.'

'You could have shared your hunch with me.'

'You meet so many people in a lifetime of journalism. Faces get mixed up. I really wasn't sure. I didn't want to mislead you. His little abortion clinic was the subject of gossip. I couldn't knock on the door and ask to see it, could I? His donation for the new hospital wing was curious, worth a look.'

'Bernie said the mayor leaned on him to cough up.'

'There was reason to suspect. No hard evidence. But, and this is the important part, I wanted a fresh eye on it, on him. You wanted some investigative journalism. If I'd told you my suspicions, it would have coloured your perceptions.'

'Right.' I can see that it would have affected how I approached Hunt. I can't see how that would have been a bad thing. I had to figure everything out for myself. Stumbling around in the dark with the wolves out prowling.

'So what about Aileen's death? What didn't you tell me your hunch about that?'

'I honestly thought it was just another awful far north accidental death. In the days that followed, your persistence about the rope, along with Mrs Pike's little investigations, made me begin to think otherwise.'

'And Rosie? Did you suspect Hunt and Fawcett were involved then? You must have, if you thought my moving in with the Mazzolinis was timely.'

'Well, yes. But I didn't know about any of it until days later. I wasn't here, remember. And you didn't phone me. I had to drag it out of you.' Earl wearily rubs his forehead and leans forward, folding his hands on the desk.

'You bought the rape and murder in the blackfellas park story. Remember?'

'I listened to the story you told,' Earl raises his hands as if I'm pointing a gun at him, 'and I sent you to George. Or, if you like, I shared my hunch with you.'

I'll grant him that.

'You got the rest from George, then Palm. I let you unravel it,' he goes on, 'and I nudged it along where I could. You wanted investigative journalism experience. And here we are.' That little self-satisfied smile is back on his face.

Everything worked out just fine seems a bit glib, Earl.

'Surely two women dying as a result of backyard abortions in 1991, with concrete boots and cover-ups courtesy of corrupt cops, is not a story for a rookie. I could have screwed it up. Failed to pick up the clues. Not asked the right questions. Said too much. Made Hunt run. Or worse, Fawcett might have decided to put me in concrete boots.'

'You didn't. They didn't.'

A heavy silence of something unsaid is hanging in the room.

'I still don't get it. You're saying you knew I'd stumbled into something serious, dangerous even. I can see why you wouldn't give it to Ed, but why didn't you investigate Aileen and Rosie's deaths yourself?'

Earl leans back in his chair and rocks a little. I lean back in my chair, fold my arms across my chest, and stare into his eyes. After an age he stops rocking and leans forward.

'You really have come along with the interviewing skills, Lou. That hard question goes to the heart of the matter.' He lets out one of those deep sighs. 'I hadn't really thought it through until you forced me to. I could beg off with lack of mobility, yada yada, but there is a deeper reason. You are not going to like it. I certainly don't,' he says, folding his hands on the desk.

'Shoot.' I keep my arms crossed.

'Do you think I would have got anywhere up on the beach with the hippies? You got that territory as a privilege of youth.'

That's not why either, Earl. I can tell by the look on your face. Tentative. Trying it out. I wait. Mouth closed. Arms crossed.

'You have no stakes here. You come, you go,' he says, ever so quietly. 'My good wife and I live in this one-horse town. Hunt and Fawcett both hobnob with many of its influential people. They would have been privy to some of their deepest, darkest secrets. The mayor is just one example. I would have to have gone around town asking uncomfortable questions, stirring up that cesspool. As it is, my name is not on this. If it was, I could lose most of my advertising. It would kill the paper.'

'Earl!' What a self serving piece of shit. Earl raises his hand

in a stop sign and cuts me off before I can say it.

'It might not be much of a paper to you, but at least I'm still in the game. You know, Lou, in their own way an editor, a newspaper owner, is just as compromised as a police roundsman. But I can live with that. I've had my time.' Earl pauses, grabs the Walkley Award as if it is a talisman, leans back in his chair and rocks. No cajoling, no teasing, no life in him now. Just a damaged old man clinging to a proud past and a small town rag. 'There's a lot I can't do anymore, Lou,' he says quietly, 'but I can still produce a newspaper.'

Take your figure off the trigger Lou. Think this through. Earl just as good as said he's not going to print any article I write about this.

'So you don't want me to write it up for the *FNQ Mail* then?' I manage something like a smile.

'Ed will get a report from the police. I'll print that.'

'A full circle. We end up where we began.' I do better with my smile this time.

'The kind of article you will write won't be the sort of thing our little paper runs,' Earl says, as if we're back on an even keel. 'Your editor in Sydney will be happy to have a longer, analytical piece. This story won't be a news item in the big smoke, but you will be able to use it as a vignette, a springboard.'

I can't think of anything to say. Elation is not coming my way. I feel the way Bernie looked when she was staring at the sea.

'No notes, I suppose?' Earl says, as if he's encouraging me. 'It probably won't matter. Good interviews sear into memory.'

'He actually said he wants me to write an article? My boss?' It's starting to sink in.

'I've been keeping him up to date. He will want it when it's done. You should feel proud, Lou,' Earl says gently. 'Write up

notes, everything you can remember. Turn it into an article. Don't rush it, but don't be slow either. Send me your draft. By fax. I'll give you thorough feedback, help you work it up. When we're done he'll want to publish it.'

I nod slowly. I feel like I've been on a tour through the sewer.

'Investigative journalism isn't nice, Lou, but that feeling you've got is probably exhaustion. I see it on you, I recognise it,' Earl says. 'Once you're back in your own house, after a hot bath and a bottle of wine, you'll start to realise how much you've achieved in a short space of time. Succeed in the challenge of writing it up and getting it published and you'll be on top of the world.'

He gives me that smile again, the one that must have been a winner with women in his younger days. Against my will it drags me up, and makes me mean it when I smile too. The storm has passed.

'Got you a farewell present,' Earl says cheerfully, handing me a parcel. 'Alec took the pic. I recorded the song.'

It's a framed photograph of a bush stone-curlew and a cassette tape.

'Really? The song of the bush stone-curlew? That's perfect.' Robbo and Noel will love it.

'One comes into our house in the evenings. My wife sings with it, calls it in, but it's just the bird on the tape.'

Now I feel like I'm going to cry. It's ridiculous.

'Thanks Earl. For everything.'

'Thank you for everything, Lou. And send me your draft soon. A wizened old journo like me needs a protégé.'

When I walk out of Earl's office Ed is at his desk reading *Playboy*, his hand on his crotch. Charlene is at the open fridge, licking the chocolate off a Mint Slice biscuit. I swipe one out of the pack and knock on the door of the knacker's yard to say goodbye to Roger on my way out.

~

Hicks Square is packed with the usual tourist crowds. When I get near Josie's shop I run into Ellis and Rose, eating bananas.

'You two! Again! Want to learn how to do a proper left jab?'

The boys grin at me like I'm the local idiot, and chuck their banana peels in the drain.

'Girls don't know how to do a left jab,' the white kid says. It's a dare.

'There's no end to what girls can do. Are you both right handed?'

The boys nod. I make them stand in a line beside me, across the footpath.

'OK, here we go. Right foot back, left foot forward.'

The boys assume the position.

'You need spring in your knees. Spring.' I demonstrate. 'Yeah, that's it. You need to be able to feel it. Your weight should be on your right leg. Now, hips square, facing the front.'

I break my pose and stand in front of the boys to check how they're doing. I square up their hips, so they've got it right, then I get back in the line beside them.

'Drop your shoulders low and bring your fists up in front of your face. You want fists clenched tight, right at the top of your cheekbones.'

'Nah, that's too high,' Ellis, or Rose, says. I forget who's who.

'It feels too high, but it's right. Protect your face. It should feel like you're peeking over your fists with your eyes. Hold your forearms close. Protect your body.' I get out of the line and check their stance again. Four eyes peeking at me over fists. They catch on quick. I get back in the line.

'Here we go. Left arm shoots forward with a slight twist.

Your left heel rises, that's where you get the force. Your right leg keeps you stable. Jab, then pull your arm back straight away to the protective position.' I jab and pull back. Jab and pull back. 'Imagine the face of your enemy, I mean your opponent, at the end of your fist.' I'm not having any trouble with that part. So many faces I'd like to smash in.

We practice left jabs in our line and then I stand in front of them again to check their motion. Straighten backs and hips. Push up their fists. Tighten their arms against their bodies. They've got it. Born to it.

'Hey,' says Ellis or Rose. They're both left jabbing into the air. 'This is cool. Where did you learn that?'

'A blackfella taught me,' I laugh, thinking of Robbo collapsing in a giggling heap when he was trying to teach me how to do it. Hugging me when I finally got it right. I can't wait to see him again.

Josie's standing out in front of the shop clapping and laughing. I say goodbye to the boys and they jab their way up the street.

'Time for a quick coffee? Chris is coming to take you to the airport.'

For once the shop is quiet. While Josie prepares the coffee I nibble Nonna's almond biscuits. Going to miss these too.

'So, what happened with the Hunts?' Josie asks.

'Both arrested.'

'That's good. I guess,' Josie says. 'But where are women in trouble going to go now? Can you get the law changed too?'

In an instant Josie's got it sized it up and dissected with two clean slices. Sharp and true, as usual. I've got no answer. Those tears that have been threatening for the last hour edge up.

'All the same, you did good, Lou. Uncovered some dirt. Brought a bit of truth to the surface. That's a good thing.' She pours a slug of grappa into my coffee and gives me a hug.

She smells of Arpégé, just like my mum. We lean against the sink with our arms around each other's waists and sip our bitter coffee.

~

At the airport Chris gets a box of pineapples out of the panel van and puts them on the trolley with my suitcase.

'Pers said to wish you well,' he says.

'Him too, from me.'

'Have you got something to read on the plane?'

'Just Anna K.'

'Still reading that? Anna throws herself under a train, you know.'

'Really? It gets worse? No happy ending?'

'Levin sorts himself out, but it just goes downhill for Anna. Life sucked for women back then.'

'Still does, Chris, a lot of the time.'

'Going to miss you, Lou,' he says, fixing me with his wrinkle-eyed smile.

We do the Italian farewell, kiss kiss, big hug.

'Going to miss you too, Chris. And sailing. Thanks for that, for everything. Couldn't have managed without you.'

Acknowledgments

Key Sources

About the Author

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the developers of Scrivener for their excellent writing software.

Thanks to the writers of the following songs which have been quoted from:

INXS, 'Kick' (chapter 12); Rodriguez, 'I Wonder' (chapter 16); Gram Parsons songs: 'Love Hurts' by Boudleaux Bryant, 'Return of the Grievous Angel' by Gram Parsons and Tom Brown, and 'Thousand Dollar Wedding' by Gram Parsons (chapter 22); and Pink Floyd, 'Another Brick in the Wall' (chapter 27).

And thanks to Graeme Base, for the quote from *The Sign of the Seahorse* (chapter 31).

Key sources

Interview with Bertram Wainer by the author and Toni Stebbing, 1985. Excerpts printed in *Women and Revolution* no. 30, Winter 1985-86.

Newspaper archives in the State Library of

Victoria, including *The Age*, *The Truth*, *The Courier Mail*, and others.

Key books and theses:

Peggy Berman with Kevin Childs, *Why Isn't She Dead!* Gold Star Publications 1972.

Robin Gregory, 'Corrupt Cops, Crooked Docs, Pervaricating Pollies and "Mad Radicals": A History of Abortion Law Reform in Victoria 1959-1974, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Global Studies, Social Science and Planning, RMIT University 2005.

Bertram Wainer, *It Isn't Nice*, Alpha Books 1972.

Film:

'Abortion, Corruption and Cops: The Bertram Wainer Story', Film Australia Interest Program in association with John Moore Productions, Lindfield 2005.

Official Reports:

Fitzgerald Report, Report of a Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and

Associated Police Misconduct, Brisbane, Australia
1989.

Kaye Inquiry, Report of the Board of Inquiry
into Allegations of Corruption in the Police Force in
Connection with Illegal Abortion Practices in the
State of Victoria [Australia], Parliamentary Papers,
1971-72, vol 3.

About the author

I grew up on a farm near Colac in Victoria,
Australia, then lived in Melbourne and Sydney,
and worked as waitress and cook, telephone
linesman, book editor and political organiser. In
2001 I moved to England and taught legal research
skills at Oxford University until 2015. Now I live in
Hackney, London.

Thank you for reading my book.