The Elastic House

By

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Abstract

On a hot February afternoon, on an almost deserted beach on the southeast coast of Australia, a baby girl is born.

Witnesses to her birth are the large, extended family that surrounds her: sisters and brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles and her father, as well as a vacant block of land that hums.

It is 1961 and Rose has entered the world in a hurry.

This place, the sea, the bush and the quarter acre block up on the hill are special to her. For here, in the soon-to-be-built Elastic House, the memories of her coming life, along with those of her family's shall be kept.

Rose has been born with a gift of hearing the details of her surroundings, the whispers of others. She listens to their pain and joy, and becomes a keeper of stories. Together with the Elastic House she stores these memories until it is time they are forgotten.

The writing of *The Elastic House*

(Exegesis)

When I applied to do the Masters course at UTS, I did so with a feature length screenplay in mind. My background is in film, where I work as a camera operator and teacher.

The structure of the course has changed since I began in the middle of 2002, and they are now looking at screenplays, in the form of adaptations, in the writing workshops. But when I started, the MA Research Seminars concentrated on novels, and I found myself in a class where every student was writing fiction.

Not feeling comfortable workshopping sections of a screenplay to a room full of novelists, I began to write a few short stories about the memories I had of a house my extended family had for forty years. We had only recently sold the house and I was processing the loss of it, the land, the sea and of course the actual house.

The first story I wrote was from my point of view, as an adult. It was about walking into the house and being hit by a memory of me as a four-year-old. I wrote the memory and then, at the end of the piece, I mentioned that I feel a child's hand in mine, and look down to see my two-year-old daughter next to me. She struggles with her own ghosts, I wrote, so I must come back from my childhood, to assist her with hers.

It was this short story that gave me the idea for the novel, that the house, which was only ever used by family members, was a place where memories were stored. I found through writing my memories of each summer visit to the house, I was seeing myself, and my mother, cousins, siblings, etc as characters in different

parts of history. I liked the idea that at each visit another year had gone by in our 'normal' city lives, but our return to this unchanged house of old furniture and sagging beds, saw nothing change. These beds we had slept in since we were born, and would sleep in, one time or another, as a toddler, a teenager, a young adult, and a parent. One day tucking our own children into a bed we remember being tucked into ourselves.

Kate Atkinson's novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, was a great influence on me, and it was the structure of her book that made me want to try and write my memories and the stories I had learned of my family into a novel. I loved the way Atkinson managed to write in the first person, present tense from her character Ruby's conception, to her as a forty year old woman, as well as present the history of Ruby's mother and grandmother and their stories, in third person, past tense. The reader not only follows the main narrative of Ruby's life growing up, but also is given the opportunity of slipping back in time to the follow the narratives of Ruby's mother and grandmother.

One of the things I found interesting in Atkinson's novel was the way the author deals with time. For example, we are introduced to Ruby's mother Bunty, on the first page of the novel having sex with Ruby's father, as Ruby is conceived. Later, in one of the many footnotes that reveal the past narratives, we meet Bunty again, this time as a child herself, with her own mother, Nell, who is as old as Bunty is at the beginning of the novel. I found slipping back and forth in time, and visiting Bunty as a young woman, before marriage and children have turned her bitter, an interesting device that helped me read more into her character as Ruby's mother.

In *The Elastic House,* I wanted to start with Rose being born on the beach near the vacant block that soon would have the house on it. At first I began, as Atkinson does, in the first person. But to capture the voice of a child (or a foetus in this case)

was very difficult, and I found it hard to try and make the implausible convincing. I re-read a number of books whose authors had managed to mix that childlike innocence and wonder with an adult perspective, so that adult readers were able to connect with the character, among them *To Kill a Mocking Bird, Alias Grace* and *The Catcher in the Rye.* I noticed most were written by a character's adult perspective, stepping back into their child character, so seeing the world through both adult and child's eyes. *The Catcher in the Rye* doesn't do this, although Holden is a teenager, not a baby in his mother's womb.

I wanted my novel to be first person and present tense; that is, I wanted the action to appear to be happening at that moment. Much of the later sections of the novel (which are not being submitted for examination) are about Rose looking back on her childhood, and how the events of that time influenced her as an adult. So it was important for me to keep the first section, which is Rose's childhood, as present tense. For it wasn't yet meant to be a reflection on the past from some future position. That happens when Rose is an adult. So, whilst these novels were useful to read in terms of voice, none of them were written from a child's point of view at such a young age. Most have the benefit of hindsight and an adult perspective to help with that delivery.

Once again it was Atkinson's book that I found helpful in looking at voice. Her skill, I believe, was establishing a voice that was humorous from the very first line of the novel, 'I exist! I am conceived to the chimes of midnight on the clock on the mantelpiece in the room across the hall.' [1] This sets up an immediate playful tone that draws the reader in with the intriguing idea that an individual can be aware of their conception. It is the use of present tense in Ruby's story that helps give the idea that we, the reader, are experiencing the story at the same time as she, that is, without hindsight. Even Holden tells us his story from a future perspective.

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[1] Atkinson 1995 p 9

Initially I tried to imitate this humorous voice, tried to find a laconic Australian voice to place my story in. But it proved to be very difficult. Even though Ruby, in Atkinson's book, suffers terribly from a childhood incident that she doesn't remember until she is an adult, her suffering is delivered to us with such humour and delight that we don't get bogged down in it. I found that a very difficult thing to imitate. And as a first time writer, I realised I had possibly taken on too much trying to achieve this.

My supervisor suggested that I begin the novel in third person, and then return to Rose's first person perspective when she is a little older (which I decided to be nine years old). This made a huge difference to how the novel began, as I was able to put the necessary adult perspective on a scene through the eyes of Rose. I didn't want the entire novel to be third person, however, as this was Rose's story. When I slip back into Rose's past and tell the stories of her mother and grandmother, I do so in third person, past tense, and this appears in Part Two of what is now a four part novel. This style is set up in Part One on pages 32 – 51, when Leale begins to tell Rose some of the stories of the family, as they are packing to head south the coast house.

Concerned that my structure was going to be too much like Atkinson's, I began to look at other novels that dealt with a similar family theme following three generations of the one family from the past and present. Among them was Zadie Smith's *White Teeth.* Again, I tried to implement the structure of that novel onto my own. Smith's book gave me the idea of headings that pinpointed a time in history and a place. So that, in my book, one heading was *Bondi 1990*, where Rose is 27 years old and an event occurs, one that leads on from a previous section of her story. Then another heading would read *Bondi 1933*, where Rose's grandfather is teaching his children (i.e. Rose's mother and aunts and uncles) how to swim.

Carol Shields' work *The Stone Diaries* follows a woman from her birth to old age in a nursing home and death. It is written in third person, past tense, but its format was something I was initially influenced by. Again with the use of headings such as *Birth, 1963,* or *Love, 1984,* or *Loss, 1993,* etc.

However, submitting a large section of my novel in this structure for my Novel Writing class, showed me that it wasn't working. The teacher thought it was too confusing for the reader to jump back and forth in time, following so many characters. As I went into supervision, my first supervisor suggested putting all of the 'past' stories together as well as all of Rose's stories together, chronologically, so I could see what was missing or needed expanding. It was during this task that I worked out my eventual structure, as I realised the 'past' stories worked much better together. I also found the story that now forms Part One of *The Elastic House,* which I have submitted here. Having done that, I was then able to look at the trajectory of Rose's story and see what was superfluous and what needed looking at. Once again, doing this made me realise the novel needed to be in parts.

Part One is Rose's childhood. Part Two contains most the stories from the past, indicated at the end of Part One that they are told to Rose by her mother, Leale. Part Three is Rose as a young adult, trying to be independent of her family, but still drawn back each summer to the family's coast house and her past. And Part Four is Rose as a mother, who takes her own children back to the house where she has left so much of her own childhood. It is in this last part that the idea of the coast house as a metaphor for large families becomes clear, and where it is apparent that Rose won't be free of her past, and the hold her family has on her, until the coast house is gone.

Jeffrey Eugenides' novel, *Middlesex*, was a book I chose to read only after I completed my own novel. For I knew that it was a story that followed three generations of a family from the 1920s to the present day, just as mine is. I was

worried I would be too influenced by its structure, as I had by the other novels of a similar theme of family and generations. It turns out I have done exactly as Eugenides has done, and divided my novel into four parts.

The beauty of a four-part structure is that the writer can jump large sections of narrative time without fear they will lose their reader. By giving a novel sections such as Book Two, or Part Two, or, as Atkinson does, in Chapters and Footnotes 1 and Footnote 11 etc, the writer can indicate to the reader that this new section doesn't necessarily follow immediately from the other. That it can be a past or future event. Using this structure for my novel allowed me to jump from Rose's formative childhood, back to the past of Rose's parents' lives, then to revisit Rose as a young adult. It meant I could cut out large sections of narrative time that were doing little for the story.

The hardest part of writing this novel has been to step back from its origins. I decided to try and find something in Rose that was unique and went some way in explaining why she gets bogged down by the memories of her family. As I had been interviewing my aunts and uncles and my mother about their lives, before I was born, I realised I was keeping their stories. Although a keeper of stories wasn't going to be enough, I needed to find some other trait that made Rose take on other people's memories.

Around this time I read Mark Haddon's novel, *The Curious Incident Of the Dog in the Night-Time,* about a fifteen year old boy with Asperger's Syndrome, which is a form of autism where the child can't empathise with anyone. This made me think of the opposite, of an overly sensitive child, one who had a heightened sense of empathy, who hears and feels everything around her. I did some research, just to make sure that by going down this track with Rose, I wasn't also writing about autism, and in my study I found the symptoms of oversensitive hearing. So I

borrowed that symptom only, and decided not to make Rose autistic, just sensitive. By adding the hearing ability to Rose's already overly sensitive nature, I hoped it would give her character a reason to be the one child in this large extended family who takes it all in. I wanted Rose to hear and feel everything around her, and that it was her belief that this 'gift' was given to her so that she would collect her family's stories, but not just stories, also pain. I wanted Rose to keep people's pain and sorrow inside her as a testament to that moment, so that it was never lost. Added to this is Rose's refusal to speak till she is older. As she hears and sees so much, takes in so much, speaking out loud isn't something she wants to do, as to her mind, the world is noisy enough as it is.

Having Rose with this so called, 'gift', gave the four parts of my novel more focus as well. For each scenario is always linked back to the idea of a child who hears and sees too much, who takes everything in and feels the pain of others sometimes more than they do themselves. Even in Part Two, which has the stories of the past generations, there are references to indicate that this over-sensitivity is genetic. That Rose's grandfather and two of her uncles are also afflicted by it. They cope far worse than Rose however, and this was important to set this up in Part Two, for as we leave Rose in Part One, we know her 'gift' has almost killed her. So by seeing the effect it had on her uncles and grandfather, the reader will be intrigued to see how Rose copes as an adult. This helped me write Part Three and Four, which is leading up to Rose finding a way of dealing with this burden, without hibernating from the world.

The novel finishes with the house being sold, demolished and replaced by something new, large and incongruous to the surroundings. The sale and demolition of the house is the beginning of Rose's freedom. The stories stored inside the house have sunk into the clay soil of the land surrounding the beach. The stories stored inside Rose are purged in a paining frenzy, as Rose finds another place to store the memories of her family, and so freeing herself from the past.

I found I couldn't write a novel about a family's connection to a place, the land and sea and sand around the house, and the stories of that family, without acknowledging Indigenous Australia. My uncle told me the story of the black bareback riders, which I have put at the beginning of Part One. It was this story that made me think of what had been in that area, on the NSW south coast, before it was a dairy farm and before we built our house there. Another influence was a seminar I went to a few years ago at UTS, on Fictionalising History. It made me think that another layer had to be added to my book. Kate Grenville was at that seminar and she was working on her novel, which has just been released. She commented, then, that most white writers, painters and artists were finding they could no longer ignore their role in Australia's past. And I felt very strongly that I needed to address that idea in my novel.

It is secondary to the main narrative of Rose and her family's stories, but her connection to the house, the land, and the memories that are stored there, reference, perhaps as a subtext, the idea of songlines. And whilst Part One only touches on this, with the bareback riders and the young Aboriginal surfer who mentions his mother and brother have only recently found each other, the other parts of the novel have more references to Indigenous Australia and our past.

Rose's adult friend, Toby (who is in Part Three and Four) is an Aboriginal young man she meets at art school. It is through their friendship that I have been able to explore the themes of Australia's past history, the black and white connection to land, and of course, the sea, and to touch on reconciliation at the closing of the novel.

I am very aware that these are delicate issues, and am writing from a white person's perspective, not a black person's, but as I said, it seemed impossible to me to write this story, about a family's connection to a special place, without

acknowledging what came before. And I feel that the book as a whole, although probably not evident in Part One, does this justice.

Susan Thwaites
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Part One

Prologue

In this life she is about to live, Rose requires the sea to be happy. Without it she will be parched and scaly with sadness.

~

It is a hot February afternoon in 1961. On the south coast of New South Wales, a large extended family has gathered together on their newly purchased block, up on the hill overlooking Emery beach. Emery was a farmer who recently sold his dairy to the local council of Moruya. The land that was once his surrounds a gentle beach and overlooks the Pacific Ocean. The council has subdivided the new suburb of Emery into quarter acre blocks, perfect for the recent boom in holiday houses and weekend shacks.

The Bickley siblings and their families are the first buyers in the area. They stand together surrounded by bush and cleared scrub, by the sea and sand. The men shout 'Cooee' loudly and hear nothing come back, for the moment imagining themselves as rugged explorers rather than city professionals. Some of Emery's cows still graze up on the cliff top, but on the Bickleys' block the grass has grown long and yellow and the prickly scrub is thick. The only shade comes from a few tall ghost gums that surround a rusted water tank, long out of use.

Leale Riley (nee Bickley), heavily pregnant with her eighth child, watches a wave come to rest on the deserted beach below her. It glides over the sand as if as drained from the effort as she is from carry the child inside her. Most of Leale's brothers and sisters are with her today. Having pooled a small inheritance from their father to buy the land, they plan to build a holiday house to fit them all. Leale's in-laws stand in a small group of their own, nervously watching their spouses become someone else. It is as if after so many years

apart – scattered as they are throughout Australia and overseas – the Bickley family has returned to themselves as children, talking in a banter and language that is too fast and unknown for anyone who didn't grow up with them. Their own children run around the bushes and through the shrubs, excited by the space and wildness of the place, thrilled at being allowed to make as much noise as they want.

Leale follows the others down the clay dirt track to the beach, holding on to her husband Frank's arm so as not to fall. She feels the sand under her feet as the little ones run to the water's edge and chase the ends of waves. Although the beach is empty, the family stays clumped together in the northern end, near their bit of dirt, as if suddenly the expanse of bush and sea and sky has unsettled their city perspective.

'Did you hear that?' asks Kit, Leale's little sister, pudding-faced and plump with her third child inside her.

'What?' asks Si, the oldest brother and patriarch, black-eyed and tall.

'Listen…' says Kit.

All Leale hears is the sea breathing its waves onto the shore, in and out. The breeze blows her soft brown curls as she closes her eyes to concentrate on the sound, storing it up to take with her back to Sydney. Her belly ripples with unease as the child inside her turns towards the sound. Hoofs along the sand, cantering horses with black bareback riders appear from the cove at the end of beach. The Bickleys, dressed in their travelling outfits, stand startled and nervous on their new beach and watch as the riders continue along the sand.

The riders pass the little crowd of whitefellas and plunge into the surf. Horses and riders float over white foaming waves and clumps of seaweed, till the horses are swimming and the riders have dived off.

For some of the adults it is their first encounter with Aborigines. To Leale and Frank, who have lived and worked as nurse and doctor in a small country town, the sight is more familiar. The children are in awe of the majestic horses and bareback riders, who are hooting with joy out the back of the waves. They run closer to the water, wanting to be with them, to join them and swim out to sea. But when their shoes touch the ocean they fear reprisals from their mothers and stop, leaning out in a longing to get closer. They watch the riders swim in the waves, see the horses keep their heads above the water, noses flaring, eyes wide. Moments later the horses emerge from the sea, patchworks of brown and white, wet and glistening. The dark riders follow them, silhouettes against the blue horizon. They don't look at the adults or the children, and walk their horses slowly back up the beach around the cove, disappearing into the mist of the sea.

Sorrow seeps from Leale and stains the waters around her unborn child. Her thoughts sink down to her new daughter as she tries to explain to herself what she is feeling. But that language does not yet exist. All Leale knows is that by the time her own family's meeting place is built out of fibro up on that hill, those riders won't come here any more.

A hum like a prayer or a whale's song comes from the end of the cove. It travels along the sand, in and out of the sea, around the rocks and washes over the baby girl inside Leale so that the child can hear beyond this moment, can feel her surroundings. From the deep music that has long been soaked in this area, the child has been left a message. Nothing can take away the spirit of a place, the meaning it has to a person, for a people.

It moves her, this message. It moves her so that she wills herself to be born. Here and now on the beach she chooses to begin her outside life, desperate to become part of this place that already holds so much spirit, so much music. Even inside her mother's womb she

can feel it; knows what this place has meant to others and what it will one day mean to her. Leale feels a fierce tug inside her, her stomach tightening like a thick belt around her womb. She stands alert and still, waiting to see if there is another. When there is, a few seconds later, she calls out to Frank. He turns and sees that surprised and terrified look a woman gets when her contractions have begun, and guesses immediately that Leale is in labour. He wonders if there is time to get to a hospital.

There isn't.

Luckily Frank is a doctor and Leale a nurse, for the baby has taken over. Quickly accepting that all her control has gone, Leale drops instinctively on all fours. Sand and children are flung out of the way as moans of childbirth mix with the musical hum still in the air. Kit wraps both arms around her swollen belly, fearful of an epidemic. A brother puts his coat down for Leale to lie on, worried the sand and seaweed might contaminate something. It all happens so fast no one knows where to look, what to do, except Frank, who has done it dozens of times before, although never his wife's. Switched into doctor mode now, he is trying to assess what stage Leale is at.

She is crawling around on the sand, moaning a deep, guttural groan, like a family dog unsure of a newcomer, tearing her large underpants off as she feels the baby about to break through them. Frank is also on his hands and knees, following her, trying to get a look, to see if they have time to move her off the beach. His black hair, like a helmet on his head, doesn't protect him from the flying sand kicked up by his wife, so that soon the black is covered in specks of white. He calls to Leale, 'Just stop, for a bit, so I can... Leale, just...for God's sake, woman!' But Leale is off in an unreachable place, focused on one thing.

The adults form a circle around her, a sort of pen to keep her in, as Leale continues her circular crawl, throwing clumps of seaweed out of her path, angry, exhausted and overwhelmed. She hears the gentle sound of the waves coming up on the shore close by and sets herself a rhythm to match it, forcing control over her body. She breathes in the salt and calms herself down, tells the baby to slow down. But her daughter feels the pull of the sea, the sand, and this place. If she waits any longer she might not be born here and she will not miss out on that.

The younger children are amused that their Auntie Leale is playing a game on the sand, they have never seen her be a pig before, snorting and snarling and crawling around on all fours. They join in, on the outer of the circle, as every time they break through the crowd of legs they get shifted, gently kicked, or picked up and moved away. The older children, who know a baby has been inside Leale's fat tummy, figure out what is happening and stare wide-eyed, like those swimming horses a few minutes ago.

'What's that?' one of them asks, catching a glimpse of something coming out of Leale's rear end.

There is no time to explain. When Frank sees the crowning head, he knows there is no time for anything but birth. New life, right here on the beach, just under their new quarter-acre block. Leale slows down her pacing enough to push before Frank has the suggestion in his mind, for really, she has more experience than he has. And as this is the eighth child to come through this door, the hinges are well and truly oiled. Two pushes are all it takes and the baby is born.

Frank catches the child before she slips onto the sand and sees that his daughter is still inside her amniotic sac. He has read of this phenomenon, but never experienced it, and for a moment he holds the sac and looks through the watery walls at this perfect child, still

floating inside. He knows he must break the sac, but the image of it, this textbook case before him takes his logic away. He would like to photograph it, measure it, take samples, see how long the baby could survive out of the womb if it is still in its sac, still attached to the placenta. But then he remembers it is his daughter in his hands, so he gently breaks the walls of the pouch and water drains through his fingers onto the sand, freeing his daughter to breathe. Frank checks her for signs of survival out of the womb, as the child takes in her first salty breath. She opens her eyes and looks up at her father and watches him, and Frank wonders if that is a smile he sees on her face.

Leale turns over, sits back, knees up, legs apart, still wondering how on earth that happened so quickly.

'Look! There's another one coming,' says Paul, their eldest child.

They all look down at Leale in horror.

'No,' laughs Frank, 'that's just the placenta.'

'What's a pal-centa?' asks a nephew, pale and woozy.

'A *placenta,* dear,' says Leale's other sister, May. 'It's the baby's lunch box,' she adds, trying to make the past twenty minutes of the child's rushed birth more bedtime story-ish for the children.

The nearest hospital is an hour's drive inland from the beach. Frank had his surgical bag in the boot of his car, so the baby has been separated from her 'lunch box', and placed in the esky on the back seat, as he drives them to the hospital. His seven other children are back at the beach, being traded like cards amongst his in-laws.

The baby is washed, prodded and weighed. When all the notes are taken she is carried into the maternity ward where Leale is sitting up having a cup of tea, telling her

story to a room full of women, all laughing and congratulating her. They peer down at the new baby, to see if impatience is written on her face. She is five weeks early, nevertheless weighing in at eight pounds and three ounces, no cause for worry.

'My fifth was thirteen pounds!' says Leale to the crowd of impressed and horrified mothers, 'So I think this one's done me a favor coming early.'

Wrapped in a borrowed pink nursery blanket, the baby is handed over to Leale who places her on her soft stomach, still bloated with space, as if it too wasn't expecting to be left so soon. Together they settle down as the others quietly leave – smiles on most of their faces at such a lovely story, such a fine beginning for the new child. Some wonder if there will be any more. Others worry for the mother's health. And others still wipe forced grins away as soon as their backs are turned. It's just not right that many children, they think. Bloody Catholics!

As they leave Leale smiles wearily at her daughter. 'Well... I guess we'd better give you a name.' Frank isn't here to suggest one. After seeing them settled he returned to Sydney and work. It was agreed that the nine-hour journey home would be too long for Leale, so she will spend her recovery period in the country hospital.

Tired of saintly names for her children, Leale asks the attending nurse hers.

'Mary,' she says, just off a month's night duty and too grumpy for pleasantries. Leale nods politely and watches Mary put daisies in a vase by the bedside. 'Your husband said to give ya these,' she adds gruffly.

Leale laughs out loud. 'You know, I just realised that the only time I get flowers from my husband is when I'm in hospital having another baby!'

Mary turns to her, the wrinkle of skin between her eyes deepens, 'Well that's better 'an not gettin any at all now isn't it, Mrs Riley?'

'I suppose so,' Leale says, unconvinced.

She looks across the room at another woman's bedside table. Sticking out from behind the pale blue curtain is a single flower. It is a tiny, homegrown yellow garden rose. Immediately twelve long-stemmed, store-bought red roses push their way into Leale's imagination, so vividly she can smell them. She closes her eyes and allows herself to breathe in the sweetness of the indulgence, surprised that there might be such a need in her.

And so the baby becomes Rose.

Ten days later Rose is taken to her family's home back in Sydney. It is a large, crowded house filled with her sisters and brothers, brown-skinned and barefooted in the summer, wearing shorts and skirts, dresses and overalls. They poke and smile at her, kiss her with wet, warm lips, saying hello. Rose's senses are alert to the strangeness of the place. Images, smells and sounds seep into her as she attempts to place them, to learn from them, to remember them. There is more noise than she expected. No one seems to say, 'Keep it down, the baby's asleep'.

She is in the arms of her eldest sister, Joan, who takes the new baby with ease and experience, wandering through the house like an eight-year-old mother. Rose hears the house come alive as she enters each room.

Thud, thud, thud down the hall.

Bang, bang, a ball against a wall.

Two balls.

A third for cricket practice.

Whack. 'Your out.'

'Oh, bullcrap,' an older brother swears.

'UmAhhh, I'm dobbin,' a little sister threatens.

High pitched squeals as a brother pulls a sister's ponytail.

Ping, plop, a toddler uses a potty.

Next to a bucket of soaking nappies. Swish.

Splash, children share a bath.

In the bath, eleven-month-old Martha sits at one end of the tepid water, next to her brother, Luke, who is almost three. Both of them the babies of the household, as Ann, the next in line, is already five. As soon as Martha sees the new baby she starts to scream. There is a large pile of dirty washing spilling over the sides of a cane basket, as if trying to escape a wash, just like Luke. Kathryn, the next oldest sister at seven, is trying to keep him in.

'Look, Luke, here's the baby, she's come to see you have a bath. You can't get out yet with all that mud on your knees, can you? Oh shush-up, Martha, what's the matter with you?'

Luke gives a quick glance at the baby in his big sister's arms, but she is nothing more than a pile of clothes like every other baby he has seen, probably smelling of puke and poo. He wants to be off with his big brothers, Mark and Paul, who at six and nine no longer have to be washed by their sisters.

'Rack off, I wanna get out,' he shouts and starts to holler.

'Here, you take her, I'll have a go,' says Joan, passing Rose to Kathryn. Joan kneels down, one foot in the bath, the other on the side and scrubs the back of Luke's neck, the insides of his ears and the knobs of his knees, till they are red with friction.

'Now you can get out,' she says, all the while humming like a bird, off in some distant place to make this racket of squawking children, her little sister and brother, disappear.

Somewhere else in the house are Frank and Leale, reunited after ten days apart, probably upstairs in bed, the door shut, lying next to each other having a cuddle, letting the older girls take over for the next half hour.

Rose is being introduced not only to the other children, but to each room of the house as well, to its furniture, the toys and chairs, beds and pans. She hears more than the noise of her family, she hears the sighs and laughter of the house, as if it too was alive and needed considering.

In this throng of sisters and brothers Rose knows she will never be alone. After the silence of the hospital, with sad Leale who missed her husband and other children, this noise is like a lullaby, something soothing and familiar. Her eyes are heavy with taking it all in, the images of her new life, the sounds and smells of her family. She closes her eyes rocked to sleep by her big sister, knowing that when she wakes up, it will all still be here.

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It is another year before the plans are approved for the house at Emery Beach, as initially the family wanted to build two dwellings, side by side, but the local council wouldn't allow it. Then there is another eighteen months to raise the funds needed to get the project started. So it isn't until the summer of 1964 that the house begins to take shape, with wooden beams and stand-by sheets of yellow fibro. It has been adapted from a 1961 *Women's Weekly Architectural Design* for a holiday house. The men have changed it to suit the needs of their burgeoning family.

A handful of other houses are being built up on the hill, small fishing shacks and pastel fibro holiday homes. On the cliff where cows once grazed are small grey huts and tents from the new camping ground. A wealthy family in Canberra has bought the entire headland with the old Emery farmhouse on it, and plan to use it for weekends and summers. The dirt road out the front of the block has been widened and smoothed since they were last here. The backyard goes all the way to a small incline down to the sand, so no roads have to be crossed to reach the beach.

A large, canvas tent has been erected on the block. The men, along with a local builder, have been here for three weeks, working on the house. Some of the women and their children have come down for a week, to check on their men, the house and spend time on the beach. The older children and their fathers sleep out under the stars near the campfire, the babies and mothers in the tent. It is their third night in residence and the family is having another barbecue.

There are children everywhere. Some are standing with sausage sandwiches in their hands, guarding cups of cordial beside their feet. Others are sitting cross-legged on the lawn in little circles determined by age and gender, dreamily eating, almost too weary to swallow. Most of them are still in their swimming costumes, the faded fabric worn from sunlight and salt water. They are watching a family down on the beach play a game of cricket. A mother and father with three children, a reasonable sized family from the new camping ground.

Rose, almost three years old, is looking at the sea and listening to her surroundings. The operatic whine of hungry mosquitoes feasting on the children's skin, the mounting crescendo of cicadas rising like the swell of a wave, the overfilled chewing mouths of brothers and cousins, who suck and gnaw at the gristle, bone and meat of their chops. A

plop of tomato sauce that falls on a bare thigh behind her, the lick of a finger scooping it up. The fruity nose snort of a toddler with a summer cold. A fart and sniggers of laughter, followed by the sound of a cupped hand under an armpit.

'Woho! How's that!' another of Rose's brothers shouts five feet away, still looking at the cricket game

'Are you gunna finish that?' a child asks desperately.

'Yeah! Rack off.'

'Does anyone want more meat before I sit down?' shouts an uncle, the rush of feet past Rose on the grass, the sound of it big in her ears, scratching away at her eardrums so she flinches without knowing it.

Sitting on folded canvas chairs, or against upturned boxes and eskies, the adults settle down to their dinner. On a rug are picnic plates and plastic cups, bottles of beer and a flagon of claret. Two plastic platters are stacked with steak, sausages and chops, a pile of white bread, and butter in a Tupperware dish smeared with the grease of meat and tomato sauce. There are bowls of beetroot and potato salad, tin openers, matches, clean and dirty cutlery, tea towels, two baby bottles half empty of formula, and a crumpled, crusty bib. By the edge of the rug is a lit mosquito coil.

The sea, its waves bigger than normal, smashes down on the shore. The cricket bat whacks against the ball. The family playing hoots and yells. Rose kneels on the ground, her back straight, legs folded underneath her to give her extra height, so she can see more of the sea and less of the grass that has grown too long on the hill. Her shoulders are bare, she wears only her bikini bottoms and the faded zinc cream her mother put on her nose that morning. If her hair was straight it would reach down to her waist, but tangled and wiry it sits on her shoulders and jiggles when she moves her head. The top layer has been sun

bleached blond and it mingles with her usual dark brown hair. Her eyes wide and black continue to look at the sea, her ears humming with the noise around her.

Her sense of smell is heightened with the coming night. Sausage fat and butter, the dried, salty driftwood tangled in seaweed that slowly burns in a makeshift barbecue of stones and rocks on the grass. The gum trees exhale after the heat of the day. Somewhere there is the sickly sweet smell of dead ants. The breeze picks up and other people's sausages drift over from the camping ground. Rose can smell cigarette smoke, pipe tobacco and the inside of tents, musty with mould. There is a whiff of a child's burp after an ice cream, sweet like vanilla essence.

Surrounding everything is the smell of the sea, wet and pure.

The children rip leaves off the trees and feed them to the fire. The smoke swells and settles like city smog over the adults, so thick it burns their eyes, already stinging with sunburn and saltwater.

'You kids leave that bloody fire alone,' roars an uncle, sending the culprits into the vacant block next door, giggling and hiding behind large spiky ferns and the trunks of trees.

The cricket ball hits one of players on the beach. The child is on the ground in tears, his family surrounding him. The cries drift up to Rose and she wonders why it sounds familiar.

The adults hear it too.

'Remind you of anything, darl?' asks Frank, opening another bottle of home brewed beer. The smell of yeast escapes the bottle and becomes another scent for Rose to store. The beer turns flat almost immediately, but it doesn't stop the men drinking it.

'Oh don't start that,' says Leale, leaning against the back of an esky, trying to get comfortable. Trying not to go back to that first day here. She wants to be sitting like her

daughter, Rose, on the grass, left alone to hear the sound of the sea on the shore. For a moment she closes her eyes and listens to the sound, but all she hears is the hoofs along the sand.

'I reckon it was those Aborigines that set her off,' someone says and Leale opens her eyes to see if they have returned. But the beach below them is empty now. The cricket family has gone home to put frozen peas on the wound.

'No, it was just the little one,' says Si, cutting up his second piece of steak. 'Look at her over there. Can't drag her eyes away from the sea.' Si's hair is dark and curly like Rose's, his beer-filled belly grows larger each year, in competition with Frank's. 'She just couldn't wait to get here,' he adds, waving the knife in his hand, pointing out the orange and purple sky from the setting sun, the mauve sea and the family together by the fire.

Rose sits near the edge of the block, alone now as the others have run off to play. Since her rushed birth on the beach Leale and Frank have watched her for signs of trouble. Medically speaking, the chances of one of their, now nine, children having something wrong with them is high. And it seems logical that the one born on a small deserted beach out of hospital and without the necessary equipment and facilities to see it done correctly, is the one to watch.

Although she is almost three years old, Rose has not yet spoken a word. She understands everything that is said, she isn't deaf and they have heard her hum, so she is capable of it, she just chooses not to speak. Both of Leale's sisters assure her that it is just the numbers, that Rose is the eighth child of nine children and there is little reason for her to speak. All of her needs are met, food, clothing, children surrounding her and her following them around, doing what they do, learning what they offer up.

Leale is reassured when she sees Rose doing 'normal' things, like attempting to play a game of elastics with her big sisters, back in their house in Sydney, or being a fielder for a family cricket game out on the street. She is even willing to risk a fall on the marbles the children play in the small hall on the way to the back step in Balmain, if Rose is amongst them, joining in. It also encourages Leale when she watches her daughter laugh. When Rose finds something funny it seems to take a while for the sound to catch up with her body, for she will open her mouth wide and silent, her eyes squinting in delight, her head tilted back, both hands on her tummy, ready. A moment later the laughter erupts and soon grows to full blown hysterics, so contagious it will set off a wave of giggles in everyone around her, adults and children alike.

But other times Rose's expression seems beyond her years, and Leale and Frank cannot understand how a child not yet three could be thinking anything that would warrant such a look of dread.

Without knowing it, Si has worked part of the mystery out. He is right about his niece's urgent need to be born on the beach that day, it does have a lot to do with the ocean. For Rose has already worked out that it is only the sea that doesn't need looking after and therefore only the sea that can look after her.

Rose was born with both a gift and a burden. She has a heightened sense of hearing and an ability to capture images and smells and store them inside her. Her unusual capacity for empathy means that Rose feels compelled to take on other people's pain as if it were her own. If she witnesses her baby sister roughly shoved out of the way by an older child, she will experience a crushing sensation inside her, and has no way of helping her little sister except to feel her pain. And not just feel it for that instant, but feel it forever, storing it inside her as some sort of testimony to that moment of grief, of injustice and loss.

The worst of it is that it isn't just humans Rose feels for. She will stand on a garden bench trying to help hang out the washing, trying to take a pair of school shorts and look at the pegs before her, deciding which two need to stay together and which can bear to be separated. But she can't yet reach the line, even standing on a bench, and soon whatever older sister it is that has let her help is shooing her away. Rose tries not to look at the casual way her sister divides and moves pegs around, dropping them on the ground, not even retrieving them. Leaving them to rot and get trodden on. She has to stop herself from looking or she will feel the ache of it.

Rose has no idea that others do not experience life this way as well, that they can't hear the front door whimper when someone knocks on it too hard. That they can't feel the rejection the last bit of milk in the bottle feels for being left on the kitchen table to turn sour, and then poured down the sink in disgrace. How lonely the dolls get when you don't play with them, how confused a wooden block is if it's mixed in with the plastic farm animals. The sense of loss from all those single socks, and how desperately Rose tries to sort them into pairs when Leale dumps the pile in front of the children on a raining afternoon.

The list of objects that Rose feels for is endless, but the biggest of them all, and the one she is sure everyone feels, is the land on which the family's coast house is being built. The way it speaks to her, even four hundred miles away, calling out. The winter winds blowing off the ocean, no one there to warm it up.

The evening light is slipping away and Rose feels the cold from the ground drifting up. She can hear the adults moving behind her, the children being told to get out of their swimmers and into something warm. Kerosene lamps are lit, the smell strong enough to steal the salt from the air.

'Rose. Get a move on and into bed,' shouts Leale, her thoughts and worries for her eighth child gone with the needs of the rest of her children and the coming night of camping.

Rose would like to wait until it is completely dark before she moves, until she can no longer see the sea. For whenever there is the ocean to look at she is calm, is distant for a while from hearing every breath and sigh of her surroundings. The world seems noisy enough that she has no desire yet to add to it by speaking. If she could, Rose would sleep where she is, closer to the sea, but she doesn't want to make Leale angry, so she stands up and moves back to her family, to the light of the lamps.

Inside the tent it is warm with the fusty smell of children changing their clothes. Balancing on one leg they attempt to put the other inside tracksuit pants, trying not to stand on toddlers already in sleeping bags on the ground. Arms are stretched through sloppy joes and inside-out sleeves, whilst stepping over bassinets to get blankets and torches. The mood in the tent is excited, the children giggle and yawn at the same time. Rose pulls her pyjama bottoms over her swimmers, does the buttons up unevenly on her top. Sleep not far away, she heads over to the corner of the tent where her allocated space is marked by her pillow. Hidden inside the pillowcase is her special piece of rag, sucked each night and soaked in her saliva, containing the scent she singles out to sleep with. Outside the waves surrender themselves onto the sand. Despite the noise around her, the children and uncles, the mothers and babies, Rose will concentrate on the ocean and fall asleep to its sound.

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It isn't until Rose is almost five years old that Frank hears her say an entire sentence. Leale has assured him that Rose is talking at home now, quite often, but as Frank is out on calls

or late home from the surgery, he has heard very little. It isn't until they are down at the coast house over summer that it happens.

Stage one of the house is complete. It is 1966. Two long dormitories full of bunk beds take up either side of the house. Overlooking the beach is a big front room leading onto a balcony the width of the house. In this room is the living area, with three dining room tables surrounded by a mismatched collection of over twenty chairs, a large kitchen bench is at one end of the room, and a vinyl lounge suite at the other. There are two small bedrooms off the front room, and on each corner of the house a girls' and boys' bathroom connects the dormitories to the living area. With these three pavilions the house is the shape of the letter U, with plans for the big space in the middle to one day be a playroom, when the money can be found. At the moment the void is covered with a corrugated iron roof and has a floor of mud. The men often sleep out there over summer, when the house is full. From the beach the house, with its yellow fibro walls and flat tin roof, its wide balcony covered in colourful towels and wet costumes, looks like a scout hall, filled with children coming and going. The other holiday houses in the area look like dollhouses in comparison.

Frank has taken Rose down for a swim. It is early January and the long summer is before them. The waves are small and safe and Frank is holding Rose in his arms as she pushes her head under the water to see what is below. Underneath, with her eyes open, Rose looks at the small sand-mountains going out to sea. Patterns from the sun form wobbly lines on the bottom of the ocean, connected like a patchwork, like an ongoing game of naughts and crosses yet to be filled in, they continue on and over each mountain of sand. Small clumps of seaweed float just beneath the surface of the water, so graceful they look like ballerinas pointing their leaves and pods outwards. Rose wants to stay down there longer to see if the seaweed moves, because it looks as if they have just stopped as her head

came under the water. Like they are pretending not to be real and are holding their breath to keep still. She is sure that if she watches long enough they will start laughing, a big smile will come on to their seaweed faces as they had been caught out, and she can watch them come back to life.

'Is the seaweed alive?' she asks Frank as he pulls her back up out of the water, worried she might have stopped breathing.

He is so surprised to hear the question he can't think for a moment whether it is or isn't. He wipes the hair out of her eyes and looks at her.

'Dad?' Rose asks again, using the word for the first time out loud, although her inside thoughts have been saying it for years.

'Um, yes, it is,' Frank finally says, staring at his black-eyed daughter in astonishment. 'It's a plant, but it can breathe underwater,' he adds, the teacher that he can't help being.

'Ahhh,' says Rose aloud, adding inside her head, 'breathing underwater.'

Later that summer Rose is playing with some of her cousins and sisters on the fallen gum tree that runs the length of one of the vacant blocks next door. The massive root of the tree has come out of the ground in a ball of red clay, mud, twigs and rocks, making it a perfect playground. Both blocks on either side of the house are still vacant, despite the street filling up with other fibro houses, painted in pastel pinks and blues. It is as if the new neighbourhood is giving the house the room it needs to expand over the summer months when it is full. Allowing its sides to stretch like elastic to fit everyone in.

Walking in a line along the smooth trunk of the tree, their arms outstretched for balance, the children are high-rope walkers in a circus. As the first child reaches the ball of

roots he stops, causing the line of little children behind to bump into each other. Some fall off the trunk, complain and try to climb back up. But as quickly as the game begins it is changed, and the leader is now a bus conductor who sits amongst the twigs and roots and rocks and tells everyone to pay their fare, as the bus is going into town for lollies.

Rose lines up behind her cousins and some of her sisters, searching the pockets of her shorts for pretend money, when her aunts appear nearby.

'Three of them apparently, three men,' says Beryl, Si's American wife still adjusting to life in Australia.

Rose turns and looks at her, overdressed in a summer frock with a pattern of bright yellow dots like smarties. Beryl doesn't like the beach and wears high heel shoes around the house. Her hair is long and turned grey too soon, she ties it in a plait that curls around her shoulder like a shawl. Her fringe meets up with once brown eyebrows, and her eyes are American eyes, big and spacious, with economy sized pupils, blue and perfectly round.

'Really?' says May, who has come out from the States with her children for their first visit to the house. She is dark-haired and olive-skinned, like her twin Si, and like Leale and another brother, Joe. Kit and Jeffrey are the only pale ones of the Bickley siblings. May's hair is cut short, like a boy's. She is a beach lover, like all of her sisters and brothers, but today she isn't swimming and wears a long denim skirt, all the way to her ankles. Her feet are bare and brown and Rose looks from them up to her hands, to see if they are like Leale's. But May's fingers are long and slender and she wears rings on them, large coloured rocks of opal and topaz. Rose wonders whether her own hands will be thin like her aunt's, or thick and strong like her mother's. Leale's hands could be those of a laborer, the skin rough to look at, but soft to touch, wide, competent and sturdy. Her wedding ring is

the only jewelry on her fingers, and the thin silver reminds the children of the ring from a soft drink can. Her nails, though, are beautiful oval shapes and always clean.

'Yes,' Beryl continues, 'they slept here all winter, over there in the corner where the men sleep. Black as the ace of spades, so the man across the road said.'

Across the road is a small shack recently build. The fibro is a pastel blue, babyish in colour. The spotted gum trees surrounding the house look liked tall stalks of broccoli. They seem to sway and bow to Rose. She thinks she sees someone standing at the window of the shack, holding a curtain open. She waves but the curtain quickly falls back and Rose can almost hear the swooshing sound it makes.

'Well, I guess if you're homeless it'd be a dry spot wouldn't it?' May says, a little uncomfortably.

'The sooner we get this playroom built the better, the mud that comes in the house, let alone the sand!'

May laughs, 'It is a beach house, Beryl.'

'Still!' Beryl says as they walk back to the kitchen.

'I'm gowen for a swim,' someone behind Rose says, jumping down off the tree.

'Me too,' says another, following.

'Wait, I wanna get my fongs,' says a cousin.

No one waits. They all run down the side of the house, towel less, thong less, parent less and head for the sea.

Rose can't move her legs. She stands on the fallen tree trunk and waits for the image of those men who don't have a home to settle down inside her. She notices the patterns on the tree that look like a child's scribbles. She has seen these drawings on the white ghost gums surrounding the beach. The flesh of the tree is slightly raised and the

drawings are rust-coloured, bright against the pale trunks. Frank told the children an insect would have made the drawings by burrowing under the surface of the bark. The tree Rose is standing on has been out of the ground for a long time and is no longer white, but dark grey, the remains of the fleshy drawings now only thin lines that remind her of the stretch marks on Leale's thighs. She wonders if all the white fleshed gums are dark underneath, and if it was easy for the insects to get out of the tree once it was dead, if they knew it was going to die and so were able to find another place to live. Or if they were as surprised as the tree, the day it fell over.

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The adults are sitting around the evening barbecue talking about Arthur, Leale's father. It is another summer, 1968. The younger generation knows little about their grandfather, except that his leg was blown off in World War One. Seven-year-old Rose, hearing the story begin, settles down behind a bench to listen.

Arthur and his family were living in a small terrace house in Bondi Junction, Sydney. It was 1935 and they had just moved up from Queanbeyan, a small country town on the Molonglo River just outside of Canberra. Flo, Leale's mother, was exhausted with another pregnancy, her last, and Arthur thought she could do with a couple of hour's peace, so he set out with his kids and headed for the tram.

Once at Bondi they walked to the northern end where there was a small rock pool. None of the children could swim, they had paddled their feet before in the river at the end of their street in Queanbeyan, but the idea of getting their heads wet was foreign to them. They watched Arthur take off his shirt and trousers and then the steel belt that held his false leg. He threw it on the rocks near the pool and jumped in. All of them wondered how he

was floating. They couldn't see his stump or his other leg; the dark water had swallowed them up. His arms were moving about and his small head seemed to be gliding on top of the water body-less, he hadn't even got his ears wet.

'Come on, get ya gear off and jump in, I can't teach you from out there,' he yelled.

Si and Joe gave each other a nervous look, being the older boys they felt there was an example to be set. So they sheepishly took off their shoes and socks, their shorts and shirts and stood by the side of the rock pool in their trunks, feeling completely exposed. The girls, May, Leale and Kit followed the example of their brothers, as did young Jeffrey, the other brother, so that soon all of Arthur's six children were standing in a line beside the pool in their swimmers.

Arthur had been floating up and down, doing breaststroke and freestyle, showing off a little, but thoroughly enjoying the weightless-ness of the sea, the way it supported him and made him forgot for a while that there weren't two legs down there kicking away. The phantom leg sensation that was common to all amputees was strongest when Arthur was swimming.

'Righto get in, it won't bite.'

One by one the children eased themselves into the cold water. Leale helped Kit down. The water was up to her little sister's chest but Kit didn't look at all scared. Arthur swam over to his youngest and swung her onto his back. As Kit clung on he swam out into the deeper water. The others stayed stuck to the edge watching, fearful. Kit giggled and laughed as Arthur tried to get her to float on her back. Being only three she took to the idea of swimming, floating without support, quickly.

Within ten minutes of practice – a process that had Arthur one minute holding his hand under Kit's back and then the next taking it away so that Kit sank to the bottom – she

had got it and was floating about and sinking and floating and laughing. The first time she disappeared under the water Leale screamed, worried she was gone forever. Arthur plunged his hand into the dark blue water and fished out the giggling Kitty who said, 'Do it again, Dad, do it again.'

Their first swimming lesson lasted an hour, and in that time Arthur taught his children how to put their hand lightly under the backs of another child and then take it away till that brother or sister learnt to stay afloat, on their own.

No one had thought to bring a towel or food, and they only had enough money for the tram home. So to get dry and warm after the lesson Arthur had them do a few races on the sand, up and down. Once they were dry they dressed themselves and headed home for tea.

The brothers laugh, as do Leale and May, remembering that as the lessons progressed and they became better teachers themselves, their dad would head across the road to the ex-serviceman's club for a beer. 'I can see you from the window,' he would say, although they knew he couldn't. 'Don't worry, just keep floatin'. Next week we'll learn a stroke or two.'

'I think those clubs didn't do Dad any favours,' Si says, not knowing Rose is sitting on the grass behind him, 'I imagine it just brought back some bloody awful memories, 'cause he always came out sloshed.'

As they finish the story and start talking about something else, Rose runs down to the beach. The others are coming out of the water as she goes in. The water is black, but the sky is blue and calm, with clouds like sheep waiting for the wind to come and move them on. Rose rushes past her cousins and sisters, past brothers riding in surfboards on tiny waves, and dives under a foamy. She can feel her grandfather with her, in spirit, smiling at

her, and she asks him to come out further, to ride a wave in with her, to show her how he did it with only one leg. She imagines him, his arms by his side, his body moving like an eel, slithering through the surf to get out the back. She follows him. They see a set coming and turn ready to catch it. Who, Rose wonders, taught her how to do this? There's no time to think, her grandfather's shouting out with a laugh, 'Areya ready?' And they're off, the wave is about to break and they are on top of it and then cutting through it and ahead of it, and they are fish, dolphins through the whitewash, together floating into the shore.

One

It's the beginning of another summer and school has just broken up. We're each allowed a pillowcase full of clothes as luggage, which we use as cushions to lean on in the car. Leale's in a really good mood, even though she's been packing for days, hiding Christmas presents and doing grocery shopping. Big boxes of tea, catering size tins of peaches and instant coffee, flour, eggs, apples and oranges, ice cream and pounds of mince meat and sausages which she puts in the freezer, ready for the esky tomorrow morning. The nearest big shop to the coast house is an hour's drive, so most of the trailer is full of food. Leale is carrying a crate of coloured soft drink for Christmas Day. The green, orange and red liquid laps up to the opening of the bottle as if trying to get out. I know we're on holidays whenever I see that crate of colour.

'How did you and your brothers and sisters decide on the spot to build the coast house, Mum?' I ask Leale.

'Well,' she says, continuing to walk out to the car with her load, 'with your Uncle Si in Brisbane, Uncle Jeffrey in Melbourne and most of the rest of us in between, we searched from all the way down in Victoria, to far north Queensland.' She nods for me to help her with the bags, 'Eddie had decided he didn't want in.'

'Who's Eddie?'

Leale stops halfway through the kitchen and looks at me, 'Your Uncle! Eddie... My baby brother!' I try and look like I know him. She can tell I'm faking it and laughs, 'Oh dear, isn't that terrible, you not knowing one of your uncles.'

She continues to the lounge room, 'I can't believe that... How old are you?' She stops again, turns and looks at me, as if working out which one of us I am. Leale and Frank

do this a lot. Always going through a list of their children's names before they get to the one they want, Ah, Paul, um, Mark, er, Martha, you, you there…'

'I'm Rose.'

'That's right,' she says, as if it was me and not her who couldn't remember my name.

'I'm nine,' I continue, and just so she knows, 'Ten next February.'

'Of course,' she says vaguely, before adding, 'But then, how would you know if no one told you?' She puts the crate of soft drink on the floor and sits on the couch, nodding for me to join her. So I do, preparing myself to collect another one.

There are fragments of images that come to me in dreams or during the day that are from stored stories inside me. Some of them are like treasures in a chest that I clutch onto whenever I feel scared or alone, others are like tears in a broken bottle that hurt to hold but I won't let go. Some I choose to take in and am prepared for; others push their way inside me with such force I'm left shaking and timid till they've settled down amongst the others. I don't remember when I began this collection of my families memories, it's just something I've always done. Having them inside me isn't strange; often they can even be useful, as they help me escape. Since I can remember I have heard too much, felt too much and taken everything in, like the bruise I imagined yesterday on the road from the whacking skipping rope my sisters and I played with. The black tar turned yellow-brown in front of me, and I could almost hear the whine of the road at each turn of the rope. It's at times like that, that I need to find a way out.

It's not always necessary to escape, some days I don't hear or see anything abnormal. Some days are quiet and well behaved. But other days are rowdy and I'm opened up to it all, the real and the not so. On those days my senses become acute, my hearing is

heightened and I see everything at once. It can be as simple as the different knitted patterns on the jumpers we all wear during winter. They can become a merging mass of colour. I not only notice the bits of loose wool that hang desperately to the elbow of a jumper, I can feel them, experience their hopelessness at the same time. Hair ribbons no longer in bows become angry knots, bobby pins scratch scalps, bangles thrash wrists and sad grey school socks grieve over un-mended holes. On top of this there's usually the chat and singing of sisters, or the shouts and cries of brothers, so that the noise becomes babble to my ears. When there's no hope of finding harmony in the now, I slip into the past. For there I have control and can choose what I feel and see.

I see sand, not in clumps like you use for building a castle, but speckles, individual dots of gold, crusted and embedded between the toes of small feet. It's inside the nails, both chipped and grown long over summer, and it won't be washed away.

The feet I see from my collection are bare. They're mine and they stand on top of feet wearing thongs, feet so dark and lined they make mine look like porcelain, like the statues at mass. From this image I know I'm holding on to my father's hands and being danced around the muddy floors of the playroom. Looking down at our combined feet, concentrating on not falling off.

There's nothing outside this image, no other children, no faces, not even my father's. But I know there's an outside. That somewhere else inside me there's a past that's happened, where my parents were children, my grandparents were still alive and I didn't exist. I like holding onto the past, for if someone doesn't, it might disappear.

Stories have sunk into me like syrup, smooth and slow till they are inside my pores and under my skin. I collect them like other people collect stamps. Storing the ache and the bliss so those moments have a place to exist.

But I'm only small; there's not enough room inside me for everyone. It wasn't until I started school that I realised there were other people besides my family who needed a listener, a tale keeper. And if I was going to survive I'd have to learn to distance myself from all of them. I've become so good at keeping everyone away the girls in my class no longer ask me to play in their games. They no longer talk to me in the lines before we march into class, or share their little lunch or swap sandwiches at big lunch. And whilst it means I spend most of my time on my own, walking on the outside of the concrete playground away from the others, it also means I'm left in peace. On the days when my guard is down and I feel the emotions of a child try and sneak inside me, I concentrate on something else. Smells are useful as they draw on memory and when I inhale the constant burning of paper and cardboard in the incinerator behind the church, I'm transported back to summer barbecues and can stay there protected.

School has become a handful of images and smells, and a set of facts. Sour milk bottles and frankincense, talcum powder and teachers' tangy perfume. Nuns who can't spell or add up, who lash out with a hand on the backs of knees before admitting the sum they've calculated on the board is wrong. Priests who give sermons that bore through my chest with fear and guilt, so that I close my eyes in terror that the statues of Mary and Jesus will come to life and damn me to hell.

It has left me with little faith or understanding in the point or purpose of school. So whenever I can I return, in my thoughts, to the time each year when the sea is close to me. Where I can taste it in the tea and toasted sandwiches an aunty makes me at my family's house at the coast – the coast house.

Leale is still sitting next to me on the couch, gathering her memories in preparation to pass them on to me, looking at the wall across from us intently, as if there's something written there I can't see.

Her mother and father met in Toowoomba in 1923. Flo was Arthur's secretary. After the war, when there weren't many men of a certain age, Arthur was given a job in the Rural Bank. There it was discovered he was a whiz with numbers. It wasn't long before he took up a good position at the Wheat Board, where he met Flo. As if trying to impress her he almost got to the end of his course at the Accountancy College. After one final exam he would be qualified. It was on the job training and he didn't even have to pay for it. But he was never able to finish it, for every time he went to sit for the exam, he would go out and get drunk.

At a dance one night Flo, without speaking, told Arthur what to do. On the dance floor with this amusing, one-legged man, who could move her about better than most men she knew, she said to herself, 'Florence, you're twenty-seven years old and not getting any younger, it's time you got married.'

Arthur, holding her tight that mild Queensland night, was immediately hit by the scent of consent and for the first time since he wrapped that stupid steel contraption around his waist, in place of his leg, he stumbled. Flo had to put her own substantial weight into holding him steady, and so began the pattern of their life together.

The couch Leale and I are sitting on is over near one wall, opposite is the wall Leale's been looking at with such interest. In between us is what she calls Pitt Street. Because of the

traffic of kids that make their way, day and night, through the lounge room to the kitchen and the rest of the house.

Even the few minutes we've been sitting here, five of my sisters and brothers have passed us. The front door opens directly onto the street from the lounge room and I've been watching them carry whatever it is they need for playing out there: hula-hoop, roller skates, a handbag. 'Just going to Jane's house, Mum,' says Kathryn, out the door before her words have settled in the room. Lost in any case by Leale who's still talking beside me, looking now at the corner of the room, as if seeing the things she's telling me, like they're projected up there with the cobwebs she can't reach.

As a returned war hero and a success at the Wheat Board, Arthur was considered a catch. Yet it was often said that men who are the pick of the bunch can sometimes be bruised below the surface, and Flo soon found out what that meant.

The early years of their marriage were everything Flo expected and thought she deserved. They bought a house soon after their honeymoon, they had a car, two Labrador dogs and even an account at Toowoomba's David Jones. Flo was finally living the life she thought she was meant to live. But the day came when she went to charge something to the account at the department store and the woman behind the counter lowered her voice and said, 'I'm terribly sorry, madam, that account is closed.'

Something inside Flo gave way and she almost lost her balance. She didn't even query the shop assistant, demanding that this could not be possible, because deep down she knew it was very possible. She knew she had married a liar and a drunk and this scenario was just waiting to happen.

It was not all Arthur's fault. Partly it was the Depression. When Flo went home to confront him, she found Arthur waiting for her. The pale grey of his skin and the bewildered expression on his face stopped any rousing she was planning on and instead Flo sat down and listened. They no longer had a house, the car was sold and he hadn't actually been working at the Wheat Board for some time. The Labradors were never mentioned. Flo wouldn't allow herself to think what might have happened to them.

It was 1929 and the Wheat Board, along with so many other business and government departments had gone bust. Arthur, like most of the men he worked with had been let go, but he didn't tell his wife. For two months, as the world slipped into a depression, Flo continued with her life, glad that her Arthur hadn't lost his job like so many of the men in town, waving him goodbye each morning as Arthur put on his suit and went out the front door.

Everything they had owned was on credit. And what little they had paid off Arthur re-mortgaged to see them through, till something else came up. But when nothing appeared and with no money for repayments, the bank soon took it all back. What little savings they once had dried up as Arthur spent each 'working day' down at the pub.

Flo sat on the edge of a kitchen chair, gripping the seat with both hands, letting the words Arthur spoke soak in. She felt the wood under her fingers, the raised heads of the nails that held the chair together. It seemed so secure, her chair, the way it was made, the structure of it, like it would never break from under her. She imagined the oak tree that was felled for the purpose of creating the chair, all of the chairs around her kitchen table. She wanted to thank the tree for giving up its life for her comfort and security, and hoped it wouldn't absorb the memory of this awful day inside its grain. Hoped that one day this would all just be the past and she could sit on her chair again, and be happy.

Holding on tight was all that stopped Flo from fainting. She was not a fainter generally, she thought women silly for losing their hold on reality and slipping away from what they couldn't deal with. But now, realising that everything they owned was gone, their entire life turned over revealing nothing on the other side, Flo could understand the attraction of blacking it all out.

From that day on she would squirrel away money into different savings accounts, hidden purses around the house, whenever she could, scrimping on groceries, just to ensure that she would never be without when the next crisis hit.

Leale sighs, stops, and stares ahead again.

I've been trying to listen to everything she has said, but I've also continued watching the traffic of brothers and sisters as they zoom past us. In and out they've gone, grabbing a cricket bat, a ball, their best friend's hand, trailing mud on the lino. Beyond the open front door I can hear my brothers, Mark and Luke ride their skateboards down the middle of the street. The wheels rattling loudly as they get closer. Then I see a glimpse of them as they pass by the door, surfers rolling on land, practicing for the coast.

It was Arthur's ability to bounce back that made Flo forgive him. A few days after the shock had hit, Flo handed the baby – who was Leale, only about a year old – over to him, along with instructions about the twins' needs, their lunches for school, Leale's bottle.

Flo's face was stern but Arthur didn't even flinch. 'No problem, Florrie,' he said, 'don't you worry about a thing, I've got it all sorted.' He leant over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. 'Good luck, love. See you tonight. I'll put some snags on for dinner,' he said as Flo headed down the hall towards the front door.

Leale thought she remembered that day, though the memory was elusive. She clung to Arthur's neck as he wobbled a little, settling her onto his hip, the hip with the full leg. She looked from him to the retreating back of her mother as she walked out the door, to look for a job and a smaller house to rent. Once the echo from the door's slamming had gone, Arthur turned to Leale.

'Right,' he said, giving her a tickle on the tummy, 'How about that bottle of milk then.'

He put the half-full bottle under his pillow to warm it up and lay down on the bed, taking the weight off his uneven back. Leale sat next to him, leaning into his shoulder, a thumb lost in her mouth. The twins, May and Si, came into the room dressed for school. Flo had told them what was happening and they had fed themselves breakfast.

'Are the lunches done, Dad?' asked Si.

Arthur jumped up with an athlete's speed, grabbed the bottle from under the pillow, handed it to Leale and headed for the kitchen. 'I'll have 'em done in a tick, son.'

My brothers run inside the house leaving their skateboards at the front door, straight past us and into the kitchen. They fight over the last bit of milk in the fridge and quickly make sandwiches, shoving each other out of the way, before running back outside to their friends. They glance over at me sitting beside Leale. I know they're wondering what's happening, but they won't come over, they'll just keep going, like the others.

Luckily my little sister and brother, our twins, are asleep upstairs, because Leale's gone. I feel like I'm a plug that might not be big enough to hold what's coming out of the tap my mother's turned on in her telling. This tide of memories is coming out fast and I'm trying to swim to the bottom before they drain away and are lost forever.

All during her first week of work – Flo's stenographer skills were still useful in a time when there was no work for men – Flo shocked herself by thinking how grateful she was to have miscarried twice between the twins and Leale. The idea that there might be another two children to feed during these times did not bear thinking. At home she knew that Arthur had taken to his domestic duties with aplomb. Singing as he washed nappies, made everyone breakfast, collected the milk from the front step, and got the twins off to school. He got through his day and did what was needed, but when Flo came home he quickly handed back the apron. She would cook him his dinner and afterwards he'd kiss her on the cheek and head down the pub with God knows what money he had found inside her hidden purses.

He would be back by closing and up again in the morning as chipper as a bird, to do it all again. He managed to get himself another job within a couple of years, and by 1932 the family was living in Queanbeyan, where Arthur worked in nearby Canberra on the national census.

Leale gets up to put the kettle on and I follow her. In the kitchen the milk is spilt near the fridge, the un-rinsed glass bottle is on the sink, jam and butter are left out on the table and sticky honey drips down the cupboards. There's mud on the floor and breadcrumbs everywhere. Leale's in a trance of telling, and even though I'm tired I don't think I should leave her alone. She's not normally this distracted and the other kids must know it, because they'd never dare leave the kitchen like this normally.

As the tea brews I look out the window down the side of the house and see some of the neighbours from across the road playing hopscotch with my sisters. There's no point

wishing I was out there as well, because I know I've got to take in Leale's story. I make a vegemite sandwich and pour myself a cup of tea with two sugars and milk, to give me the energy to keep listening, to keep Leale company as she remembers stuff I don't think she's thought about for ages.

She sits down at the kitchen table, has a big slurp of tea and sighs.

'Maybe you should stop remembering, Mum,' I say, 'I think it's making you tired.'

'Oh no,' she says, 'just a little melancholy I suppose.' She looks at me then, really notices me. 'Do *you* want me to stop?'

My head's full of the story of my grandparents, but I still haven't found out how we got the coast house, or what any of this has to do with my special place.

'No. But maybe you could just jump to the coast house bit.'

She smiles an agreement.

Like American baseball scouts, some city nuns discovered the clever twins, May and Si, in their rural primary school in Queanbeyan, and offered them full scholarships to fancy Catholic schools in Sydney (so the exam marks for that school, published in the Sydney papers, could look good). The census was finished and Arthur and his family moved to an old terrace house in Bondi Junction. It took another world war to see Arthur fully employed again, as a warrant officer up at Victoria Barracks. And after that war, when rents in Sydney were still pegged, he got a job briefly working for the department of Fair Renting. Arthur wasn't really one for sticking at jobs, ever since the first war – when his leg was blown off and all of his mates died around him – he became less able to cope with responsibility or even just reality. He told his children it was a bad can of bully beef that

exploded and took his leg with it. He didn't like to talk about that day much, except to say it was a bloody shame it happened on his seventeenth birthday.

Eventually he was able to buy the terrace in Bondi Junction. The Church of England owned most of the houses in Henty Street, but couldn't put the rent up, so they sold them off very cheaply. Otherwise Arthur could never have afforded to buy a house. Si and May were working in the States by then, and they helped out with the purchase.

With the sale of that house a few years later Arthur bought in Saratoga, a lovely two bedrooms weatherboard up on Brisbane Waters, on the central coast of New South Wales. He and Flo moved there after their children left home.

Once Flo died, four years later, Arthur didn't want to stay at Saratoga. In a haze of grief he watched his seven children return for the funeral, the first time they had been together as a family since before the Second World War, over twenty years prior.

The service was held at the church in Ettalong and the wake back at the small house on the river. They all stayed together there for the night, Leale with seven of her children, Kit with two of hers. It was wonderful having the children around, it seemed to distract them from the loss they all felt.

Arthur sat around the kitchen table that night, the night of the funeral. The bridge chairs from the back veranda having been brought in to accommodate them all. A grandchild held or jiggled on the lap of every adult. Although he was there with them, it felt as if Arthur had already left. That afternoon he had called Si into the backyard and told him he didn't want to stay living in the house, that he wanted to go home, to Queensland. Arthur looked past his son and down the side of the house, over the large hibiscus bushes Flo tended so well, the large blue flowers round and pretty, and out onto the water at the end of the lawn.

'No,' he said, 'I don't want it.'

'Don't want what, Dad?' asked Si.

Arthur continued to look out at the calm waters, as if needing an unbroken path before him.

'The house,' he said, 'I don't want the house or the money. You kids have it.'

Si began to explain that he would need the money to buy himself a place in Queensland, but Arthur stopped him. Si could see that his father was exhausted, whereas Arthur read his own weariness as longing. He had come to realise over the last few days that there was something missing, something he had left behind in Toowoomba. That boy who was sixteen, before the war, the kid with both legs still intact, he wanted to go back to him, and others like him.

'I don't want another bloody house,' he almost laughed at Si. 'I'm going back to Toowoomba to be with me mates.' And with that he went inside.

Screams come from outside, just under the kitchen window. My sister, Martha is saying that our little sister, Emma cheated in hopscotch. Another little sister, Sam is sticking up for Emma.

'Did not.'

'Did too.'

'Did not.'

'You couldn't see, you were tying your shoelaces.'

'I'm not wearing shoes!'

It gets louder. I hear a slap.

'Ahhh. Muuumm, Martha hit me!' Sam screams.

I turn from the open window to my mother, thinking this will do it, this will bring her back.

'Muummmmm!'

Leale glances over at the window, a frown on her face as if she's confused by the sound. A moment later she returns to watching the blue tiles above the sink.

When no one comes to their aid, my sisters sort it out themselves. Kicked out of the game, Martha comes through the back door and stomps up the wooden stairs near the kitchen. She can shake the house with her temper. I hear her above us, slamming doors, throwing things, but Leale hears none of it. She only hears the murmur of conversations from the past, the lap of the river beside her parents' house in Saratoga.

That night after dinner, the grandchildren asleep in the spare room, and Arthur in his bed, Si sat on the back steps of the cottage next to Leale. She was nursing the latest baby, Martha. The other adults were spilt out on the lawn as the evening breeze cooled them down. They were all squabbling and laughing, even serious young Eddie was in good spirits for once. It was interesting that the death of a parent had turned them into their former, younger selves. Perhaps it was due to there being no one's husband or wife there, so that but for the grandchildren they could have been back at the old terrace in Bondi Junction, out on the front steps waiting for the southerly to hit.

Si knew that Arthur would not listen to economic reason and respected him enough to let him do whatever he wanted, now that Flo was gone. When he told the others the decision Arthur had made about the house and moving north, none were surprised, having accepted the erratic actions of their father. And they knew that without Flo's sensible

budgeting and watchful eye on Arthur's drinking, the money would be gone in six months, and what would be the point of that?

The following morning after breakfast everyone started saying his or her good-byes. May had to head back to the States, Kit back to Uncle Will, others to wives, children and careers. Si was living back in Australia then, after nearly a decade in America, and he decided to stay with Leale to help sort out the house and get Arthur ready to leave.

Their father watched his other children say goodbye, and experienced only a few minutes remorse when they had gone. It was the price he was willing to pay for his freedom. He had done the right thing by his family, the best he could. But he had carried a nagging, unanswered question around with him for over forty years, the question that is at the core of every survivor's guilt, and he wanted it silenced. There was nothing for him to sort out in the cottage. He had already booked his train ticket that morning and would be off to Sydney to catch it at noon.

'Are you sure you want to head off so soon, Dad?' Si had asked, a bit taken aback that Arthur was so keen to leave.

Arthur was sitting on the back steps of the cottage, watching his grandchildren run around the lawn playing a game of stuck in the mud. His small bag, packed with a few clothes, was by his side. A framed photo of Flo could be seen sticking out through a tear in the calico.

'Yep.'

It was still only nine-thirty in the morning and a few hours to go before his Central Coast train was ready to leave. But Arthur had already said his silent goodbye to the little house he shared so happily with Flo, alone together for the first time since the twins, Si and May, were born, back in Toowoomba.

'I thought it might be nice to spend a few days together, take the tinny out, do some fishing,' suggested Si.

'Not right now, son.'

Once the weight of responsibility had lifted, and Arthur had shooed it from his shoulders, there seemed little left for him to give anyone.

'Dad's going,' Si told Leale in the kitchen.

'When?' Leale, an apron around her waist had already emptied two cupboards and filled a large box with the pots and pans worth keeping.

'Today. His train goes at twelve.'

'Oh dear.' She was also hurt that he was eager to leave, thinking they had at least another week together. It was still so soon after they had lost their mother.

She wiped her hands on the tea towel over her shoulder, took the apron off and went to spend the last few hours with Arthur. On the steps together they watched Si kick a ball around with the children. When the sun got higher and hotter, they walked down to the jetty to watch the children jump into the water, as the younger ones paddled on the shore. She and Si leant against the railing of the jetty, one on either side of Arthur, saying little, both taking in his presence. Leale shifted her weight onto one foot so that her shoulder touched Arthur's, and smiled when she felt his weight also change, leaning a little closer towards her.

Later, at the train station, Si shook hands with his father and tearful Leale threw her arms around Arthur's neck, refusing to let go until the last moment. When the whistle blew again, Arthur freed himself from her arms and headed for the train. Turning his back on his two remaining children, separating himself from the last of his responsibilities, he walked into the dark, cool carriage, ready to go home.

I look into Leale's face, imagining her getting onto a train and leaving me. Never seeing her again. I don't understand why my grandfather left his children to return to himself as a child. Why would anyone do that?

For the next week, Leale and Si cleaned out the remains of their parents' life together. Leale's children entertained themselves on the jetty, the younger ones playing closer to the back steps.

Both of them were surprised to discover the joy in touching familiar objects, remembering what each meant as children in that crowded terrace of their former home. The large enamel teapot that never had time to get cold. The worn, thin material of the single leather stool that lived in the kitchen, how every day after school each of them rushed to sit on it and tell Flo the stories of their day. How she would be at the kitchen sink, washing and peeling potatoes for dinner, or making bread and butter sandwiches for afternoon tea. The privilege of sitting there with their mother's full attention and the panic to tell all they needed to tell, knowing any minute another child would emerge and push them off, to get their turn.

There was the good tea set that only came out for visitors, and so rarely came out at all. The cups and saucers were square shaped, and on them were painted images of Wales, small village scenes with cottages and brooks, pastures with sheep and cattle, and children playing with hoops and sticks. There was a matching teapot, sugar and milk jug, a water jug and a large plate for cakes, all with the sepia images of country Wales. Sometimes the children would come home from school and find Flo setting the table in the dining room with the damask tablecloth she got for her wedding. She would lay six places out, using the

good china, with dainty knives and tiny forks, and special spoons for jam to put on freshly backed scones or a home made slice.

Flo said it was a waste to have such a lovely tea set and never use it. So on those days the children would have their afternoon tea around the dining room table, two children sometimes sharing a place setting, they would sit with their mother pretending to be this lady or that gentlemen who had come calling on Mrs. Bickley. Holding up little fingers as they nibbled politely on the warm, buttery scones, giggling as Flo poured the tea asking, 'One lump or two?'

Nearly all the furniture in the river cottage was old, and was brought from the terrace house. But when Flo and Arthur sold up in Sydney in 1956, their children had bought them a brand new dining suite. It was very modern, the chairs made of yellow fibreglass, all one piece moulded and curved to fit the occupant, and the table of ply with wrought iron legs that matched the chairs. It sat amongst their old furniture like a stranger in town, but Flo loved its newness, its squeaky-clean texture, untouched by the grubbiness of little children. Si decided to take it back to his wife, Beryl, who loved all things modern, although she eventually donated it to the coast house.

Leale took the large chest of drawers and the three-quarter bed she once shared with May, as well as a few woolly armchairs.

I know those pieces of furniture. Kathryn sleeps on that three-quarter bed now. It's time-shared, a turn each when you're thirteen, a teenager. That big chest of drawers is in the room I share with my sisters, and those armchairs, the woolly ones, are down at the coast house, along with the yellow chairs. I never knew furniture could have a history too. I like the idea of sitting in chairs my grandparents' once sat on.

One evening, after several hours of sorting the rubbish from the treasure and when the children were in bed, Leale and Si took the tin run-about out. They stayed on the still waters in front of the house for over an hour, soaking in the evening, the quiet lapping of the river against the side of the boat. They could see their parents' house, the pink and white cottage that would soon have to be sold, and both were filled with the same longing. The process of sorting out the house had made them realise what the cottage represented. It was the last piece of their collective history. When it was gone there would be no other place that held their memories as children, as sisters and brothers. Even though they had grown up and moved away, to other cities, even other countries, there had been times when they had joined up together in this small river house.

'Perhaps we shouldn't sell it.' Leale was the first to break the silence of the evening and speak what was inside their thoughts.

Si nodded but said nothing.

'Although it's too small for all of us.'

They remained looking at the cottage, willing it to provide an answer, to guide them through to the idea they knew was close, but couldn't quite see. And it came. A vision appeared and they saw another place, by the sea, surrounded by bush and quiet. This place was bigger than the little two-bedroom home in front of them, it was big enough to hold their own families as well as those of their brothers and sisters.

Neither knew how it would happen only that it *must* be done. And they turned to each other, in that little boat, and smiled.

Most of the family met the idea with enthusiasm, even May who lived overseas, and Joe who didn't have children. Only young Eddie didn't want in. He had no desire to share a dwelling with so many people, again.

So, with an agreement that Eddie could take his share and run, the search began for a bit of land on the coast. Minus Eddie's share they were left with about two thousand pounds. It would take them over a year to find the right spot, for it had to be perfect and suit the needs of the growing clan, a safe beach, an accessible road, dirt or bitumen, and of course something they could afford. It was as if Emery Beach, just outside the town of Moruya on the south coast of New South Wales, came into existence just for them.

By the time they had found the land and made a decision to buy it, Arthur was no longer alive. After heading north he settled in a boarding house in Toowoomba. There he lived like brothers with other World War One soldiers. For the next seven months, till his liver gave up, Arthur was content to spend his days drinking, talking and reminiscing in the company of these men. Perhaps finally stopping the nagging question that had been with him since his seventeenth birthday.

Of why he was the only one who survived that blast.

Leale often wondered what that day must have been like for her father, in a fox hole in France, hundreds of miles from home, celebrating his birthday with his friends, opening the last can of bully beef. The explosion killed everyone else in the hole, all of Arthur's mates dead around him and his leg blown off. He lay there for days as the fighting continued around him, limbs and guts of his friends scattered everywhere, all over his uniform, in his hair. His wound became infected and eventually gangrenous. He lay there till a twenty-four hour armistice was called, where both sides stopped fighting and went out to collect their wounded and dead. His leg was later amputated, not just once but three

times because it kept getting infected, till he was left with the shortest stump in Queensland. Leale thought it no wonder her father needed to drink.

My mother gets up to make another pot of tea. Unconsciously she starts cleaning the mess my brothers have left. I try to wipe the tears from my face without her seeing, worried she might regret telling me all these stories. She won't know that it's okay, that soon, like the others, this sad story will settle down inside me and find a safe spot to live. Sadness isn't all I've gained, for now I have my grandparents inside me I can visit them, I can spend a day with them in the old terrace, or up at the river house. I can even be out there in that fox hole, keeping my grandfather company for those days when he was alone. With them inside me, it feels like they're alive again.

And then there's this new uncle, Eddie, who didn't want to be part of the coast house. How strong he must have been to say no to his family, and how brave to actually want to live alone.

The powerful smell of bleach brings me back to the kitchen. Leale leans over the bench, the look on her face shows that she's back from her trance. The cleared bench is covered with white chucks of Ajax powder and Leale scrubs it furiously with steel wool till it's shiny and clean. Mothers have a way of removing the chaos and mess a family creates without anyone noticing, magically smoothing out the flurry and disturbance to create harmony. She looks around the room to see if anything else needs doing and then heads back out to the trailer to finish packing.

Two

Tomorrow we head to the south coast for six weeks. Tonight, at dinner, I watch my sisters and brothers lean over each other in a frantic bid to get more potatoes or gravy from the baked dinner Leale has made Frank. He and Leale don't usually eat with us, unless it's someone's birthday or Christmas, but this is our last Sydney dinner together for a while. Frank is driving down for Christmas, but then he has to come back to work.

The memories that Leale has passed on to me this afternoon have given me a stomach ache, like I've eaten too fast, even though I haven't touched my food. It's as if there's something inside me that's trying to rise to the top, some memory that's bobbing around in there, causing this pain, like it wants to be singled out. I close my eyes and try and find it, bring it to the surface, like a burp, in the hope of releasing it. The noise of my family drifts away as I concentrate on a visual that's coming clearer. It is Leale's description of the land down south, how she saw it that first day. The bush and dirt road, the broken water tank and the deserted beach. Perhaps the image is just asserting itself because with all the reminiscing Leale did today, she didn't mention my birth, didn't say whether it was special for her to have me arrive that day, their first visit to the block as owners. Maybe I'm just filling in the gaps of what's important in our past. But it seems more than that.

There's a sad hum I can no longer ignore, an ache inside me that won't go away.

'Was the beach really deserted that first day?' I ask Leale as she finally sits down to her own plate of food, having served the younger ones and Frank first.

'What first day?' there's no hint of this afternoon's pleasure in her voice.

'The first day you saw the beach at the coast house, you said it was deserted. Was it?'

She sighs heavily, her tired, hazel eyes checking the plates of her children to make sure there's something green on them. 'Well, if I said it was deserted, it was... Martha, don't bite your fork.'

'Dad? Do you remember?'

Frank's mouth is round with food, he looks like a trumpet player lost in the pleasure of music, such is his love of a baked dinner. His bushy eyebrows are raised in question at my own, nodding at me that he will answer in a moment.

'Um,' he swallows, 'Yes, I think it was, just us of course.' He waits to see if there are any more questions, and when I don't say anything he begins again to pile food onto his fork.

My family continues eating as I play with my food. I don't like meat very much and am tempted to eat the baked potatoes, but my throat is blocked with something unknown.

It is Paul who asks my inside, unknown question, 'What about those Aborigines?'

Leale and Frank look at him.

'What Aborigines?' asks Leale.

'You know, the ones on the horses, don't you remember? They were riding bareback and came galloping down the beach into the surf. It was just before gollywog was born,' he says, referring to me and my frizzy hair. 'It was so cool.'

'Really?' says Ann.

My little sister Emma stops eating and looks up to be involved. Sam, like Luke continues eating in case Mark takes it all. Martha is exaggerating the way she puts her lips around her fork, to annoy Leale, but it's wasted energy. Leale and Frank seem to search for

the memory in their minds, to confirm it for Paul, because he seems so sure it happened. But it's no longer with them, now it's somewhere inside me.

'Joan was there, she'll remember,' he says.

Those of us listening turn to Joan, the eldest sister, but as usual Joan isn't really here. She might be sitting beside the twins, but she's not here in her musical head. I can almost hear the notes she's playing to herself, to take her away.

Then I see it, the memory my brother has described. But it seems more than my mother's recollection; it feels like an emotion. There was a terrible sadness that afternoon, before I was born, a sorrow that didn't come from my family, but was seeped in the surrounding rocks and sand. Even the ocean was stained by it. Somehow I have the memory of that feeling inside me. Was I absorbing emotions even before I was born? It sits with me now, and I wait to know what to do with it.

'Did you ever see them again?' Kathryn asks Paul.

'Nah,' he says, eating fast as he has noticed Mark and Sam serving themselves more meat.

'I don't remember that at all,' says Frank.

He looks to Leale to see if she does, but Leale's face has changed. She looks at the table, her eyes half closed as sorrow takes over.

'You alright, love?' Frank asks, filling her glass with more red wine

Leale remains quiet and I wonder if she's feeling what I'm feeling and watch her to see if she understands it.

'They probably lived there first,' says Ann.

'Der! It used to be a dairy farm, ya idiot,' says Paul, mouth full and all knowing.

'Don't call your sister an idiot,' says Frank, half hearted as he continues to watch Leale's face.

'I meant before that, moron,' says Ann, the word missed by Frank who takes Leale's hand and holds it, worried.

'Oh yeah! What would you know?' says Paul.

Ann sighs with frustration, her cleverness in this family sits unwelcome most of the time, except by Frank, who when he has the time to notice, indulges it. 'I read Paul. I don't expect to learn anything at school, not from those bloody nuns who aren't even trained teachers.'

Paul has already lost interest. Mark and Sam have almost finished their second helping of meat as Luke begins eating his.

Leale snaps back. 'Ann, go to your room, don't you dare use that language in this house.'

Ann pushes her chair back. With a sense of relief that she doesn't have to be here anymore, she picks up the last two baked potatoes on her plate and leaves. I watch to see if Leale will tell me what she's thinking, but she looks cross again, as if the minutes she has just lost were a complete waste of time and she'll be angry until she gets them back again.

Whenever I have one of these attacks, for that's what it feels like, to have my body taken over with emotions I didn't ask to come, it takes me a while to return. My dinner has gone cold. I try and put some in my mouth, willing myself to forget this stuff like everyone else manages to do. Knowing that I only ever succeed in pushing it further down inside me.

~

The drive down south takes seven and half hours. Leale tells us that in the old days, when we first bought the coast house, it could take nearly ten. But with most of the roads sealed now it's much quicker. The car is full of girls only this year, except for Ian, Mim's twin, who at two doesn't yet count as a boy. Paul, Mark and Luke, my other brothers who are squashed in amongst so many sisters, have been given to Aunty Kit and her boys. They are travelling down the coast tomorrow. The time between summers when our life is city based and school centered seems to go on forever, yet as soon as we begin the trip south each December it feels like no time has passed at all. Was it really a whole year ago that I learnt of the story of my grandparents?

Joan's sad singing is the only noise in the car. Normally there would be games of I Spy or Spot the Red Car for hours before we settled down. But this year one of us is missing.

My sister Kathryn began jumping out her bedroom window last April. Leale discovered this one night when she did her rounds, making sure we were all tucked up in our beds. At two o'clock in the morning, when Kathryn climbed back in, she told our freaked out parents that she had just walked over to Leichhardt, to the Italian restaurants that stay open late. She said she wasn't meeting anyone, she just wanted to see what was happening out there in the world. No matter how much trouble she got into after that, she kept doing it. Frank told Leale it was the time, that all teenagers were doing strange things.

A few months later Kathryn jumped out and didn't come back. She rang Leale late the next day and told her she was up the north coast and not to worry, she was safe. She was only fifteen. Once she started writing postcards to Leale and Frank, giving them an address of a place she had just left, Leale stopped crying so much. She would write Kathryn a letter every week, sending it to the last known address, hoping someone there would pass

it on to our sister. She had no idea whether Kathryn got them, and hoped the money she included didn't get stolen.

Kathryn did come home for a little while, when she was still fifteen. Leale hadn't got a postcard from her for a while when the phone rang. She heard Frank saying to the person on the line, 'Well, of course I know where my daughter is'. He then whispered to Leale, 'Where's Kathryn at the moment?'

Leale shrugged her shoulders. The caller was a policeman from Queensland, telling Frank that his daughter wasn't legally allowed to be in that state without a guardian until she was sixteen, and that they could hold her in custody till then, or Frank could send up the fare for her plane ride home. He sent up the fare.

When Kathryn arrived home the next day, Leale told us that our sister was sick and we weren't to bother her, our mother's way of trying to make sure none of us found out what Kathryn had been up to.

But the first afternoon she was home Kathryn called a meeting of kids in her old bedroom out the back of the house. The walls covered in black wallpaper with huge purple flowers on it that she was allowed to choose herself, in a failed attempt, she said, to stop her jumping out the window. Joan tried to stop Emma, Sam and me from coming into the room, saying we were too young, but Kathryn said everyone was welcome, that there were no secrets in her life. So we girls – none of the boys were interested – settled ourselves on her floor to listen.

'I was coming out of this shop in Cairns,' she began, 'and saw these two guys I sort of knew in a Kombi van, and they offered me a lift. The girl I was with gave me this funny look, like, Don't get in there with them, but I ignored her. I was going to hitch back to the place I was staying at anyway, so I didn't know what her problem was.'

Kathryn took out a packet of tobacco, just like May's husband Uncle Bill has at the coast house. But instead of putting it in a pipe, she rolled the tobacco into a bit of white paper and then licked it and suddenly it was a cigarette. She opened the window in her bedroom as wide as it would go and lit her hand-made cigarette. She was so cool. Her hair was straight and long with blond streaks through it from swimming. I could see part of her bottom under her long batik skirt when she moved to sit up on the windowsill and blow smoke out into the garden. Her cheesecloth top was see-through and I could see her breasts. I figured she didn't wear a swimming costume very much because her whole body looked like it had been dipped in golden syrup.

'I soon worked out what my friend was trying to say to me. Deadset you know? She could have just said it out loud, rather than trying to mental telepathy the info.'

She blew smoke out of her mouth and I suddenly wanted to be her. She seemed so different to anyone I knew. She was like a wild bird that had flown in to visit us, knowing all the while that she wasn't going to stay. I wanted to pluck one of her feathers before she left again and attach it, somehow, to myself, so I could grow up and fly away as well.

'Anyway, across the road, in an unmarked car, were two pigs. They were waiting to arrest these guys in the Kombi. My girlfriend later told me she recognised the cops and could see them watching us come out of the shop. I dunno if they were after me, or the guys in the Kombi. Anyway, my friend split and I got busted with these guys for possession, and I didn't even have anything on me.'

'Possession of what?' I asked.

Kathryn looked from me to Joan, who was standing near the door of the bedroom, either to get away from the smoke or to see if our parents were coming. She gave Kathryn a stern look that made Kathryn laugh. 'Marijuana,' she said

'Kathryn! They're only young,' said Joan.

'What's that?' I wanted to know everything.

'It's a plant, a drug you smoke,' said Ann, who was sitting on the bed.

'I knew that,' said Martha, one foot on the bed, the other on the floor, leaning against the desk.

Kathryn nodded. Glad some of her younger sisters knew about these things.

'So, anyway,' she continued. 'They held me in a cell overnight.'

'You were in jail?' said Emma, a little upset. She's only six and half years old and still thinks Santa Claus is the one who fills our empty pillowcases at Christmas.

Kathryn flicked her cigarette into the garden and looked down at my little sisters, sitting crossed legged like monks on the floor, wide-eyed and innocent. I found myself moving away from them, distancing myself from their ignorance, wanting Kathryn to see me as someone like her, someone who wanted to experience life the way she was.

'Yeah, but just for a night. And don't worry, they didn't do anything to me. Not like they did to one of my girl friends, bastards, six of them in a sound proof cell.'

'Jesus, Kathryn, shut up will you, you'll give them nightmares,' said Joan.

I wanted to know what they didn't do to Kathryn but did do to her friend. It must have been pretty bad, because saying Jesus like that in this house is punishable by the strap.

'Far out, Joan, they've got to know what the world's like you know. Mum and Dad won't always be here to wrap them in cotton wool. There are enemies out there man. Fucking enemies.'

I mouthed the F word silently, to see how it felt. It was liberating, like I had the potential to be as brave and cool, as free as Kathryn. I wanted to say the word again, but Martha was looking at me and I wondered if she'd seen.

'So, anyway... the next day the three of us, the two guys in the Kombi and me, are in front of the magistrate. And he's going on and on about lost teenagers and the perils of having no support system to draw on and how it was up to the state to keep us wayward hippies in line with the law. And I suddenly thought, hang on a minute, man! I'm not lost, or wayward. And I put my hand in my bag and took out all the letters Mum had sent over the past few months, with photos of you guys. I had them all, everyone I think she sent me, tied up in this purple ribbon and I just suddenly shouted out, "Excuse me, but I have a family."'

We all laughed at this, even Joan, who had moved away from the door and was leaning on the bookcase, more interested.

'So the magistrate, this big fat guy with a red blotchy face, no bull, he looked like a toad, so he looks over at me as if seeing me for the first time. I don't know what made him not kick me out of the courtroom. Probably 'cause I gave him a big, healthy smile, showing him my lovely white, straight teeth, thinking, if he sees my expensive mouth he'll realise I'm not some vagabond the state needs to look after.'

She rolled herself another cigarette. I found myself licking my lips as her tongue wet the white paper. Bits of tobacco lay on her tongue and she picked them out as if they were mandarin pips.

'He asked to see them,' she went on, 'which was pretty farout. So this court guard, or whatever takes them from me and walks them over to your highness up there on the throne.'

Kathryn was in full swing now, we were totally in her hands and she was enjoying the attention. 'And as he looks at the letters and photos, one by one, occasionally looking up, confused at me there in front of him, probably looking a bit scraggly and dirty,' she

laughed at herself. 'I kept wondering which letter he was reading. Was it the one about Dad's new Heron and how he and Mum tried to take the boat out once a week after the morning surgery? Or was it the one about last Christmas at the coast house and who was there and what everyone was up to. And the photos, I wondered if he was looking at the one of you Sam, on your First Communion, or you guys still dressed for church, just after the Easter egg hunt, all the big coloured eggs lined up on the table in the backyard.'

She looked at us differently then. She was smiling awkwardly, like she was about to cry. I didn't want to see her like this. She looked out the window and took another drag of her cigarette, not saying anything. It felt as if that wild spirit inside her had suddenly gone. As if recalling all those photos of us had somehow weakened her. Maybe that was the reason Kathryn ran away from home in the first place, to distance herself from feeling so vulnerable.

Finally Joan asked, 'So what happened?'

Kathryn turned to look at us, waiting a beat, 'He said to me, holding up the letters and photos like evidence, "What on earth is a girl like you, from a family like this, doing here?'"

She laughed then, signaling that we could too.

A week before she turned sixteen, last month, Kathryn left us again. She went back up north and I don't think we'll see her for a while. I guess she's like our Uncle Eddie and doesn't need family.

We have stopped at the halfway point of the journey, a small park with picnic tables and some toilets, just inside a little country town. Leale has put sandwiches, cordial and plastic

cups on one of the tables. I grab a couple of vegemite halves and a drink and separate myself from the others, under a tree.

Thinking about Kathryn has made me sad, not only because I miss her and she's the first one of us to leave, but also because her leaving has made me worry that I might never go. That even though I imagined myself free like her, flying away with one of her feathers to guide me, I might never be that brave. The thought horrifies me that I'll be forty years old and still travelling to the coast house every summer with adult versions of my cousins, sisters and brothers, all of us somehow fitting into the dormitories and the thin beds Uncle Si and Joe made.

Kathryn's story has also made me think about how crushed you can feel in the crowd of people we live with, and that it makes sense one of us would run away. It's not just at home in Balmain, where there are fourteen, now thirteen, of us. It's at the coast house over summer, with more children, more shared spaces: shared beds, queues for the toilet, lines for food, inventing new ways to single yourself out from the others, to get more attention and time or just a chance to dance on Frank's strong, brown feet. Often missing out or getting the dregs of puddings and ice cream if you're late. Being blamed for something a few others did because you happen to be standing next to them. No chance of an individual hearing, a defence of your own. It can make you feel flattened.

Yet if I leave, who else will complete the collection of stories? It seems that because I started it, I should finish it, but when do you know when that is. Who gets to tell the last story?

It can be wonderful to hold the memory of someone like my grandfather close to me, to snuggle up with him on a cold night when I'm in bed waiting for Leale to come in and kiss us all good night. Or when one of the nuns screams at the child next to me at

school, and I have to quickly find a way out of taking on their pain. I can slip back into my family's past, which has become like a knitted scarf, long and warm, that I wrap around my body till I feel secure and know where I belong.

But how long do I keep them? When is it time to let them go?

Grace will be at the coast house when we arrive. She emerged out of the crowd one afternoon last summer, when I was turning ten and she had just turned eight. She is tiny and freckled, with long orange hair like no one else in the family. People call it red hair, but it's really orange, like the fruit. It's hard to imagine that I didn't notice her before then, not with that hair, although she's so thin and small she could easily slip by unnoticed in that mob of cousins I'm related to. But she noticed me, and one day stepped forward, like you do to receive an award in assembly at school, and I realised she was going to be important to me. I have too many sisters and she has none, and that was the prize she was offering, the sole attention of a child without siblings, the only one at the coast house. To be singled out in that environment is like being thrown a life jacket, the last one left in the boat.

Grace lives in Melbourne with Aunty Sarah and Leale's younger brother Uncle Jeffrey, and I only see her during the long summers at the coast house. She's not just a cousin, she's an angel sent from heaven just for me.

More hours pass. I sleep, then wake to play a game of I Spy Leale has started to avoid the silence and keep her awake. We all count blue cars, then red ones as we listen to Joan sing another song. We sleep some more. At last we arrive in Moruya. As soon as we drive over the bridge into town it's as if the river snatches my sorrow and confusion from me, and

washes it out to sea. For right now there's nowhere else in the world I'd rather be than here, heading to the coast house.

The games in the car have stopped, and our roar of excitement silences Joan's singing. The twins are woken up, but don't cry. We start counting down the signs and landmarks till we get to our beach: the fallen down barn, the winding corner you have to slow down for, the single lane wooden bridge that seems only inches above the narrow creek below it. Every year we hold our breaths, fearful of it collapsing under the weight of the station wagon and packed trailer. There's the old pink house, the big new green place and then the turn-off to Emery, two more corners, four more side streets and then we glide into Emery Beach Road. There she is. At the bottom of the street on the right, through the gum trees I can see the yellow fibro of the coast house.

I look past the heads of my sisters as they too peer out the window to see the house, to try and get a glimpse of the completed playroom and new front wall. We look at whose car is parked on the road, whether any cousins have heard us and are running out to say hello. The trees Aunty May planted when the house was first built have grown a lot this last year. There are wattles and bottlebrush and more eucalyptus, native trees May wanted to see and smell when she came out every year from America. They almost hide the house from the road now, along with the pergola the uncles are building off the new front wall. Two big front doors are wide open and I can see, for the first time, the massive room the olds have talked about building my whole life, the playroom.

Grabbing a pillowcase full of clothes and a sleeping bag I run into the house, desperate to sniff the air. To take in the scents the house has stored for me over the year. The matresses heavy with sand and skin, the human dust of my family, the walls soaked in

the smoke of mosquito coils, books stained with tea and coffee, sugary drinks of Milo seeped into the floorboards. The tang of mothballs amongst stored blankets.

There is a protective layer of salty dust that settles like a veil over everything when we leave, and is stirred up on our return. It is as if the house has held her breath all this time and the moment we come back she exhales it onto us, into me. The families who are already here add the lived-in aromas of orange peels and burnt toast, wet tealeaves and instant coffee. I can usually smell pipe tobacco and cigarettes, yeasty beer and boiled milk, and underlying everything, the stench of our septic already coping with overuse.

All of this I have come to expect from that first step inside the house, but the new smell of the playroom confuses me. It's not familiar. My sisters rush past me and into the girls' dormitory as I stand near the front door and look at the massive new room, which is as big as both long dormitories together. The walls have been painted a strange mustard/brown colour, as if the uncles have mixed too many colours from half-empty paint tins together. They are covered with framed prints, a Welsh landscape, a photo of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, where Uncle Bill is from, and a large map of Australia with the coat of arms down the bottom. The bookshelves are almost full of Beryl's *New Yorker* magazines and Kit's collection of classic novels, both vying for room against a larger collection of Joe's detective novels and Grace's mother's romance ones. On either side of the front doors there are two identical wooden day beds, painted white. The wood is carved like some of Leale's old furniture and I wonder what disposal store they came from. There are three-quarter sized beds against the big window that looks through to the front room, and over the balcony to the beach. A green waterproof material covers the thin mattresses, which are scattered with mismatched cushions, throw-outs from my aunts' and uncles' city houses.

A number of little children are sitting along these two beds, smacking their hands down on a pile of cards in a game of Snap. The beds look like the homemade work of Uncle Si. He stands near a huge new cupboard in the corner beside the door to the girls' dormitory, and is labelling old tea tins, filling them with screws and nails to stock inside his shed. In the middle of the room, between two steel poles that hold up the roof and are cemented into the bare, wooden floorboards, is a large ping-pong table.

It seems this room has not yet soaked up my family's scent. It might need the whole summer before the smells of sawdust and fresh paint are replaced by something stronger, something more familiar. The essence that is my family.

I'm searching for Grace, but distracted by all the other things happening. There are cousins climbing up and down the steel poles so fast it looks like a sped-up film. There are other cousins and some aunts with towels over their shoulders, dodging the ping-pong players. They are making their way towards the front door, to head down the side of the house and onto the clay dirt track at the end of the garden, to the beach. The white ping-pong ball flies around the room like a tiny bird caught inside trying to get out.

When I find Grace she is playing cards with a collection of cousins at a small table outside the boys' dormitory. She obviously has a good hand, because she hasn't noticed I'm here yet. Although there are so many people here already, who would notice that more had just walked in?

Uncle Joe is visible through the window to the front room. He gets up with his book and walks into the playroom. His hair is even wilder than normal, all curly and long, and because he doesn't wash it much it has hairballs in it. My hair is like that, a bit wild. But I brush the curls out till they are nearly straight, in a frizzy way, then put it in a ponytail. Uncle Joe walks over and sits down on the edge of one of the beds under the window. It's

probably his bed for the summer. Maybe seeing more of us come in the door has made him want to make sure no one takes his bed. Suddenly realising I also need a bed I head into the dorm before they are all gone.

'I wish you and I could sleep together,' Grace says.

We are floating on our backs like starfish, around the cove from the surf. It's our first swim of the summer. Both dorms are full, and as my family is the largest we're the ones who are sharing bunks until later in the summer, when people start to leave.

'Yeah, so do I,' I say. 'Sam doesn't take up much room, but she kicks all night, like she's trying to swim to Tasmania.'

I kick my legs and make a big splash and lots of noise. The water flies up into the air and circles above us, hovering for a second so it feels like we're in a tube, that elusive room of water the surfers seek each day. Grace laughs and joins in. Our kicking legs take us further out to sea.

The water is so clear we can see the bottom. In a swift movement I swim down to touch the sand. Grace follows me and we sit crossed legged on the ocean floor, pretending to have a tea party. Our pinky fingers held up, holding our imaginary tea cups. We stay down there nodding and opening our mouths to let out bubbles of talk until we have to come up for air.

We're so far out that it's just a short swim around the rocks to the surf, so we slowly swim back that way to the beach.

'Gee I'm glad the holidays have started,' I say after a while, slowing down for Grace to catch up. 'We had this nun this year, Sister Bender, she was mental.'

'What did she do?' asks Grace as she reaches me, a little out of breath.

The swell of waves bobs us up and down. Soon they'll break. I'm not ready to get out yet. I might have to share Grace if I do that, so I stop swimming and tread water. Grace looks relieved.

'She took this girl in my class,' I say, 'took her by the hair and dragged her up to the blackboard. The girl'd got a sum wrong and Sister Bender just started banging her head against the board, saying, "See it! Do you see it now?"'

'That's terrible,' says Grace, looking at me worried. 'Did she tell her parents?'

I look at the rocks on the cliff, remembering how helpless and stupid I felt, knowing the whole class was watching, and my head just banging against the blackboard again and again till I thought I'd faint. And then this anger inside me came up and I felt it, knew that I had it in me. That any minute now, if this mad nun didn't stop pushing my head against the blackboard, any minute I was going to overpower her. I was going to tear off her head thing-a-me-bob and see what she looked like without it. It was this image that made me refuse to cry or faint, or show any emotion when she finally stopped and sent me back to my seat. The image of the bald chicken head of the nun, ugly and old and wrinkly.

'No,' I say, continuing to swim.

'Why?'

'I don't know. Maybe she thought they wouldn't believe her or that she'd get into more trouble if they found out.'

'Wait up, Rose, I can't go that fast,' says Grace behind me as I take off.

A wave is coming. Even though I haven't looked behind me, I can feel the sea and know what she's about to do. I turn and there it is – the set I knew existed. Grace is out far enough not to be dumped.

'Let's catch it,' I yell to her. She turns around and sees it, a look of panic on her face, she swims over to me as fast as she can.

We prepare ourselves to body surf in. I taught Grace how to do this last summer and I'm glad she hasn't forgotten. The wave is almost upon us, but we've got to swim overarm to get in the right spot, to make sure it takes us with it. Once I see that Grace is going to get the wave, I prepare myself. It's a wonderful feeling when you know you've made it. That you're in the perfect spot, just before the wave breaks, just ahead of it enough not to be crushed by the force of the foam breaking, but high enough to look down and see the slide of water you're about to cut through. Because it's then that you can let go. All the hard work is done, the wave takes over now, and you glide down and in front of the wave and are free.

In that first body surf of the summer, inside that swell of water, I get to wash the school year away.

Grace whispers in my ear. 'I've got something for you.'

We're sitting on one of the church pews, down on the lawn overlooking the beach and have just finished our sausages.

'What?'

'It's a secret,' she says, looking around to make sure no one is listening. 'Let's take our plates up and I'll give it to you.'

As neither of us is on the washing up team tonight we leave our dirty plates and cutlery on the table in the kitchen. We hear some of our cousins coming up the side of the house, talking about a game of doubles, so Grace quickly grabs what she needs from the dorm and we head out the new front doors that lead onto the street.

Jumping over the trunk of the fallen gum tree next door, we wait for the ping-pong players to walk past. The twigs and long brown grass tickle our skin and get inside our swimming costumes, causing goose pimples on our legs. From behind her back Grace brings out a handful of pencils, seven or eight different coloured pencils held together by a long, gold ribbon. The sharp, colourful tips stick out and look like the beaks of tiny birds.

'They're Derwents,' she says.

'Doesn't he want them any more?'

Grace laughs, 'No, silly. Derwent Pencils.' She takes them back from me, 'See?'

The word Derwent is written on the end of each of the coloured pencils. I've never heard of pencils with a name before. They must be very important. Grace hands them back to me and I stare at them, still not undoing the ribbon, just holding them in my hand.

'Thank you.'

She smiles and leans in closer to me.

'I could only afford seven of them,' she says. 'There are over a hundred different shades. I've got twenty-seven of them, so far. They last forever, not like other pencils. These just keep drawing and never let you down.'

She shifts to look at me when I don't say anything. 'What's the matter?'

The weight of her gift is suddenly heavy.

'I'm not a very good drawer.'

Grace laughs again.

'Stop laughing at me!' I snap at her, 'it's not my fault. Just because your mother's arty and clever and has the time to teach you stuff, and doesn't forget to pick you up because she's got to pick up six other children from their sports and shoe buying and ballet and piano lesson and...' and I realising I'm screaming.

Grace stands up and takes a step away from me. The hurt coming from inside her is too painful to acknowledge.

'If you don't like them,' she says, a bitterness in her voice I've never heard before, 'don't use them.' She turns to go and I haven't got the words to stop her.

There's a bull ant near my foot and I concentrate on it, willing it to bite me so that I can have another sort of pain to deal with. Walking around the trunk of the tree Grace pauses at the root ball. I sense her there, knowing that all I have to do is say, I'm sorry. Try and explain to her that I've felt her expectations of me and they are too high. That soon, I know, she'll figure out I'm not worth her attention.

The pencils in my hand are as perfect as she is. I'm bound to break them, lose them or draw only ugliness. But if I tell her these things, Grace might hate me even more. For knowing the truth.

I move my foot closer to the bull ant, offering my flesh up to its needs. It approaches me and is about to climb onto my big toe, but I get scared of that pain too, and snatch my foot away.

Kit's husband Will has a gift with rosters. He's the one who draws up the washing-up roster at the beginning of each summer, adjusting it throughout our time here as families decide to leave earlier than expected. With the new playroom and ping-pong table his roster skills have been used to draw up teams for our first ever ping-pong tournament.

'Rose and Uncle Joe.'

Hoots of 'That's unfair,' or 'Sucked in Rose,' come from the usual sources, my brother Luke and cousin Jack. But Uncle Joe is one of my favourite uncles so I'm happy to be his partner. He's also really good at ping-pong.

'Jack and Sam,' says Uncle Will.

'Oh no way, she's hopeless.'

'Jack, that's enough,' says Kit

'Well we better get a good handicap.'

'Grace and Frank.'

Grace and I haven't talked to each other for three days now, since the pencils. She walks over to my father and sits close beside him. He puts his arm around her and I feel like one of those sharp pencils has just pierced my heart.

Frank on holidays is a different person to Frank at home in Sydney, with work and patients and problems. He hasn't shaved for days and his hair has gone wild from lack of Brylcreem and lots of swimming. Tonight he wears a caftan Leale made him. His skin is almost black from the sun and the pattern on his caftan is of frangipanis, making him look like a Fijian Chief. The jealousy I feel over the closeness I can see developing between Grace and Frank is unbearable. It's them against the rest of us, and it hurts to have yet another person to compete with for my father's attention.

The tournament goes for three nights and with Uncle Joe's skill at ping-pong, we have made it to the semi finals. But so have Grace and Frank, and tonight, Christmas Eve, we are playing against them.

Like a lot of people, Grace can't read others, can't properly see what's inside them, and only judges them by their actions. I know I have an advantage over her in this, that since before I can remember I've been able to feel what others are feeling, sometimes it seems, more than they can themselves. But suddenly I can't forgive her for not trying harder to understand me, for not looking closer and working it out, and now everything about her irritates me. Like the privilege she has in being an only child. Each day Aunty

Sarah takes time out to spend with Grace, special 'one on one' time they call it, where they read a book together, or make something out of clay, or draw pictures of the trees and the beach. It seems stupid for a family with only one child to have one on one time, isn't that what they always have? Uncle Jeffrey takes her into town at least once a week, never inviting any of us, and Grace has told me that they sit at the milk bar by the river and she can order whatever she wants.

When I ask Leale about it this afternoon, she tries to explain it to me.

'Imagine how hard it is for your Uncle Jeffrey and Sarah,' she says, down by the clothesline near the wattle trees, 'to see all you children with so many brothers and sisters, and there's Grace with no one.' Giving me a stern look, she adds, 'Now you're not to tell anyone this, all right?' I nod, thinking, do I ever tell anyone this stuff?

'Well, your poor Aunty Sarah has had a number of miscarriages, the dear thing. Grace was a miracle really. Some women just can't hold babies in their wombs.'

Not you though Mum, it's a miracle you can stand up.

'They just want to make sure she's coping, love. So every now and then they take her out for something special. Her life in Melbourne would be pretty ordered I imagine,' adding under her breath, 'what with my little brother at the helm.'

'Why doesn't Dad do that for us?'

'Oh, love, come on, there's far too many of you, you know that,' she says, popping a peg in her mouth like a cigarette.

'So, are they rich?' thinking they must be rich for her to have twenty-seven of those Derwents, whilst I had never even heard of them.

'They do all right,' she pegs up a pair of worn tracksuit pants and some faded pajama bottoms.

'Are we rich?'

Leale laughs, 'God love us, no, darl.'

'But Dad's a doctor, he does operations and stuff, how come we don't have any Derwent pencils.'

'Whose pencils?'

'Doesn't matter.'

Leale finishes hanging up the clothes and begins to sort out the dry ones she's taken off. 'Dad's not a specialist, love, and that's where the money is these days. He's what they call a general surgeon, with his own practice,' adding under her breath, 'although his passion was teaching and he should never have left the Uni.' Looking down at the beach, at the yellow sand and blue sea, she smiles, 'Anyway, all we really need is right here in front of us.'

Following her gaze I know she's right. But none of it helps, even the bit about Sarah's lost babies, which normally would have sent me off into one of my frozen fits of pain, wondering where the babies were and when they were going to be found. My jealously is stronger, and I can't see Grace as anything but spoilt.

Unbearably needy of my father's affection at the moment, I seek him out wherever he is, knowing it must annoy him. At the barbecue each night, around the fire with the uncles drinking beer, I slide in between the grown ups and lift Frank's arm to wrap it around my shoulders, snuggling into him as if it was his idea. Cherishing the time I get before he removes his arm to turn over the chops on the grill. Down on the beach I beg him to take me out the back with him, but he says he's got to take Sam and Emma before me. In the playroom when he's doing his dancing lessons, I line up with the little ones to stand on his feet, only to be told I'm too big for these things now, and to move over to let the

twins and their younger cousins have a turn. I don't feel ready to be too big for these things yet, and wonder how parents make that decision, wonder if they ever think to ask us if we're ready for such a change. Perhaps they could at least warn us that it will happen, one day at breakfast they could say, 'Oh, by the way, Rose, next week you'll be too big for your father to play with.'

Tonight, there's large pine tree in the corner near Si's inside shed. The older boys cut it down in a forest near one of their surf spots, and we have decorated it with gold and red Christmas tinsel and foam balls covered in different coloured thread. I have to keep looking at it to remind myself it's Christmas Eve, because it doesn't feel like it normally does, all butterflies and excitement at what tomorrow will bring. Dinner has been eaten, the washing up team is just finishing off in the kitchen, and Si has a twenty-cent piece resting on his thumb. He flicks it into the air and Grace calls 'Heads', before I get to say anything. Heads it is. I walk like a sleepwalker over to the ping-pong table as Uncle Joe murmurs words of encouragement to me that I don't hear.

The first serve is from Grace to me, and I can't look at her face or I will burst out crying. How did we get here? How did I let her go from me, so quickly after finding her? The ball flies past me and I hear Jack shout out, "Ace!" I hadn't even seen it come.

Uncle Joe looks at me but says nothing.

Grace swaps sides with Frank and the pat on the back she gets from him makes me lose the grip of my bat. It falls to the ground loudly and everyone waits for me to pick it up. Grace serves to Uncle Joe, he hits it back and Frank whacks it towards me too hard. He shouldn't do that to me, it's not fair, I'm only ten. I miss it again. The score is already 2 – 0.

The game continues despite my inability to play. I go through the motions of holding my bat, moving as if I'm going to hit the ball, only to miss it. I shift sides when Uncle Joe is serving, then serve to Grace and Frank when it's my turn, without seeing their faces, concentrating on the white lines against the green tabletop. The net that divides Grace and me against each other.

In record time I manage to lose the game for us, the score is 21 – 8. Uncle Joe mumbles, and we have to go and shake hands with the winners. I tip fingers with Grace and wait for Frank to say sorry or hug me, or do something nice for me, but he and Grace are hugging each other in their victory. I run into the girls' dorm and dive into my bottom bunk wishing I'd drowned that day at sea and that my flesh was now being nibbled at by fish, or that I'd somehow turned into seaweed and could feel nothing but the water carrying me under the waves.

My two-year-old sister Mim appears in the room, sucking her thumb. Her pajamas are too big for her and the material is faded, covered in a print of cowboys and Indians. They used to belong to my older brothers and once had bright red buttons on them. The buttons have long fallen off and been replaced with others that don't match. I call Mim over and she happily slips in beside me and is asleep in moments. Her skin smells of coconut oil and Aerogard, her hair of smoke from tonight's barbecue. Her body is warm next to mine, and it takes some of the pain away to have someone to hug.

Sounds from the final's game seep through the thin walls of the dormitory. Lying on my lower bunk I can almost feel Jack as he bangs against the wall, dramatically hitting a ball back. Someone mentions that Sam has been practicing with Andrew, one of Kit's boys, and that he taught her how to serve the ball so it spins and is almost impossible to hit back. When I hear this I sit up in bed, still cradling Mim like a doll. If Sam is that good, she and

Jack are sure to beat Grace and Frank. I listen for the score, 2 - All, 4 – 3, 8 – 9 - it's a close game, with Sam and Jack in the lead. And then they do it, what Jack does every game he plays, lets the opponent think there's a chance of winning, and then, when he's bored with it all, really starts to play. He must have gone over this strategy with Sam, for now the two of them take off, as does the score, and within minutes they are the winners, 21 – 10.

It's a relief to hear that Grace has lost, I don't think I could have coped if she was the ultimate winner.

'I can feel a paint set,' I whisper.

'I think there's a book in mine,' she says.

In the pre-dawn light of the dormitory full of the stuffy fug of sleeping girls, we are searching for presents in our pillowcases. The mosquito coil is almost out, only a tiny curl of blue is burning on top of the chest of drawers, the ash in circles under it on the white plate. We are the only ones awake in the dorm. After Grace lost the ping-pong game she also came to bed. Neither of us spoke, but we did smile at each other, connected by our mutual loss to our cousin Jack, who will milk this win for weeks.

Our parents have filled the empty pillowcases at the bottom of our beds, or, if you're sharing like I am, at the side of the bed. Every year we try and stay awake to catch them, but never do. There's something reassuring about still being young enough not to stay awake that late, it means for another year or so we can pretend that it really is some mythical, red suited man come from the north pole to give us gifts. In my floral pillowcase I feel something soft, it's too dark to see yet, but it's folded and smells like rubber.

'Oh wow,' I say too loudly, 'I think I gotta surfmat.'

Ann stirs on her top bunk, opposite us. Both Grace and I freeze, not wanting to get found out. When she starts breathing heavily again, we continue feeling for shapes in the dark.

'Can you work anything else out,' I whisper up to Grace, shoving Mim off my foot as she moves in her sleep at the other end of the bed.

'I'm not sure...something soft, a sarong maybe.'

'Cool.'

Suddenly Grace's full pillowcase falls over the side of the bed and crashes to the ground, spewing presents all over the floorboards.

'Oh no,' she shouts.

Mim sits up and starts to cry. I lean down and pat her, 'Shhh, it's all right,' I say, 'Go back to sleep.'

She is barely awake and falls back down easily, reassured someone is here for her. I wonder what bed Sam moved to tonight, having found Mim in here with me, and whether the pillowcases have been changed accordingly. I get down on the floor on my hands and knees, telling Grace to stay up on her bunk, feeling for presents in the dark. A flat bat and a ball, a book, the sarong, another piece of clothing, maybe a shirt, other things I can't make out. There's got to be another bat with that set, but I can't find it. I put what I've collected back in the pillowcase. The material feels stiff and thick, not like the soft, worn ones my family sleeps on. I place it gently on the end of Grace's bed.

She giggles, 'So *you're* Santa!'

I laugh. 'Ho, Ho, Ho.'

'Will you two shut up.' Ann says.

Jumping back into bed, I lie still as if I've never been up, suppressing the urge to laugh, giggling instead into my real rubbery pillow. Willing myself to go back to sleep so daylight can come and I can look in my sack before we have to go to mass.

We only manage a week of sunshine after Christmas day before it begins to rain. The sun is hidden behind sad grey clouds, evenly covering the sky like fog. Where the block slopes down to the beach the dirt has become like potter's clay in the wet. Aunty Sarah shows us how to take clumps of it and make bowls and vases, putting them in the oven, which is lit more this year than ever. Our sculptures don't last, cracking before they are fully dry.

One rainy afternoon, during Grace's 'one on one' with her mother, I'm invited in.

'Grace tells me you have done some drawings, Rose,' says Aunty Sarah as we sit at one end of the three dining tables in the big front room.

Uncle Will donated a large roll of butcher's paper to the house this summer, and with my seven coloured pencils and my box of paints I have been making pictures. They are rough and the figures in them are only sticks, but I show them to Sarah.

'Oh, these are lovely, darling. They look like stories of some sort, don't they, Grace?'

I've drawn small rectangles on to the thin paper, and each box has part of the stories I've been holding inside me. Squares would look too much like a cartoon or an Asterix comic, and might take away the meaning of them, whereas rectangles look like landscapes and so are more real. The one Sarah and Grace are looking at is about Arthur taking his children on the tram to Bondi beach for a swimming lesson. There are other drawings as well, of the river house and my grandmother Flo dying, and Leale hugging her dad at the train station before he got onto the train with his one leg.

'They're stories about our grandparents,' I tell Sarah.

She gives me a strange smile then that I don't understand, but from the look on Grace's face I guess that the smile is good, that her mother's impressed by what I've done.

'These are very special, Rose, you should keep them.'

She then goes into her art teacher mode, and starts talking to both of us about shading, showing us how we can make a drawing of a cup look more real by filling it in with lines or lots of tiny crosses. She sets up a bowl of fruit with bananas, grapes and peaches in it, and we spend the afternoon practicing. Without me realising it, another four children have slipped into seats beside us and are borrowing my pencils and sticking their wet fingers in the circles of my paint box, tearing off large pieces of butcher's paper and drawing shapes to colour in. But I don't mind sharing today. It feels so good to have shown my pictures to someone.

Later, when I'm getting a jumper out my allocated drawer in the girls' dorm, I notice the newspaper lining at the bottom of the chest of drawers. It's the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald,* from a long time ago. I lift my other clothes to see what year it's from. 1967. I don't read the headline, but look at the photograph of the man on it. He's smiling at me and looks like the sort of person who is responsible. I decide to store my drawings underneath the photo of his face, underneath the lining of newspaper in the drawer. The coast house seems the perfect place to keep the stories of my family, the ones I've managed to transfer with pencil or paint out of my head and onto paper.

Tonight, as I wash up I break a glass. It slips out of my hands, soapy and slimy and slides onto the ground.

Smash.

Then another, and another.

The more I break, the angrier I get, and drop and break other things. I can't stop myself and the dryer-uppers are looking at me like I'm mad. They take steps away from me and the broken glass on the floor, holding their tea towels like shields in front of them, waiting for me to stop. But I keep washing up and keep breaking things. Knives, forks and plates drop onto the ground, soap and water are everywhere. I'm so tired and sun burnt. A strange sunburn from a day of floating on my surf mat under a grey sky that must have let the sun sneak through it, because I'm red all over. My eyes sting and my head hurts and I just want to fall down on the wooden floor and sleep forever.

Someone dobs on me and I get into so much trouble from the adults, grumpy with bad weather and too many children. There are five of them shouting at me, and only two are my parents. I sway, exhausted, in front of them, but none of them see it, none of them know that screaming at me isn't what I need right now. What sort of adults are these who can't see I'm sick?

Frank clips me in the ear for being sullen, because I don't answer Uncle Jeffrey's question about why I broke so many glasses. He sends me to the dormitory, but I run outside and vomit up my dinner near a shrub by the road. Dizzy and sick, I hide behind the fallen gum tree, sobbing into my hands, trying to hide the sound so that no one will find me.

Grace finds me.

She sits down. 'You okay?'

I nod and sniff, feeling so wronged it hurts more than feeling sick.

Leaning against Grace gives me comfort. Normally she's so tiny, so thin and frail, but tonight she's like a goddess, a magical child with arms and shoulders big enough for me

to find comfort in. Her feelings of sorrow and concern for me have overtaken her previous thoughts on whether I'm worth the effort of her attention. Right now, with my stomach twisted in pain and my head throbbing, I don't care that sympathy has replaced respect in our friendship. It's just the two of us out here by the tree the little ones play on and I take all she has to offer.

You need at least one person on your side in a place like this, someone to watch out for you. Someone you know will make the effort to come and find you when you've run away. My sisters have paired up, with each other or a cousin, the same with my brothers. But I think I've got the best pair-up ever, the only cousin without a sister or brother, the only one who truly has the energy to care about someone, properly.

Days pass. We swim and fish in the rain, build a million sandcastles out of wet, perfect sand. Ride our boards and rubber mats through long grey days. Go on forced walks with our mothers to get us out of the house and give the men some peace, wearing large green garbage bags as raincoats, because no one packed for this weather. We eat inside and play endless board games of scrabble and Monopoly, draw and paint and shuffle cards around in games of poker and pontoon, or hit a ball back and forth in round after round of ping-pong.

There's talk we might all go home early, for what's a summer holiday without the sun. But no one leaves. We stick it out, grumpy, bored, crowded, damp, waiting for it to improve. Waiting for it to be like last summer and the one before that.

When the sun finally comes out and rescues us it takes only an hour to dry up everyone's bad mood. They're like goldfish, my family, their memory of how grumpy we have all been has disappeared. They've swum around their fish bowl once and turned up in a new place where everything is good again.

By three o'clock most days I'm not the only one who needs to have time out. Time away from all these people, noise and movement. This summer seems the longest I have ever spent here, as if we've all slipped off the real world and are living in our own universe, where time doesn't exist. I have no idea what the date is or how long we have till school begins again. Sometimes it feels like I've lost my sense of self and am just a body that is part of a mass of bodies that feeds and sleeps here. Even Grace's friendship, the one unique element in this house where everything is divided up and handed around, even there I feel we've been drawn in to the rhythm of the house and are not permitted to exist separately.

Others head off wearily in the afternoon to find a quiet spot as I slip into my lower bunk bed, moving two sleeping toddlers over to make room, the sheets scratching me with sand. Sometimes the whole house just collapses: Frank in one of the woolly armchairs in the big front room, Sarah and Jeffrey on a blanket in the sun on the lawn, Leale and May on a daybed in the playroom. Two or three children sharing a couch or bed, wherever there's space they just lie down and take advantage of the house in slumber.

The readers read now and the chess players think moves. Cooks contemplate recipes that could feed many, beyond barbecued meat and salad, as the Americans long for a cup of brewed coffee. Children dream of revenge over card games and ping-pong scores. Or hide in sleep from being dropped in by a younger cousin who can suddenly surf. Beryl blows softly into her flute on the balcony, her sheet music held onto her stand by a wooden peg. Si beside her in a deck chair, snoring in time, thinking of building materials and making fires. Will lies in one of the adult bedrooms and ponders rates and rosters, as the house relaxes into its siesta.

All is quiet until a child wakes and wonders around looking for something to do, and someone to do it with, and you know it's time to get up when you hear the ping-pong ball echo off the walls.

Grace and I sit next to each other in the playroom, sharing one of the chairs from the kitchen. Her legs still don't touch the ground and I swing them back and forth with my own legs. She's peeling dead, sunburnt skin off my shoulders, showing me the longest sections she can get. Someone hands us a chocolate each and I suck on mine, watching my little cousins climb up and down the steel poles. There are poker players in the corner and chess players behind me. The babies, toddlers and early morning surfers are already asleep in their beds, teeth un-cleaned and tomato sauce stains around their mouths. Leale and Kit are dancing in the kitchen to old-fashioned music as another four adults try and concentrate on a game of bridge. The rest of us watch Jack and Sam compete at ping-pong, neither admitting defeat so that they are now up to their seventh game.

Right now I think that I could never experience anything better in my life from this point on, and still know that I have been happy. That I have experienced what it means to belong, that I have been loved and have loved back. That I was not alone. Even though the minute you feel this good you know it's going to stop, that there's nowhere else to go but down, I don't care tonight. I'll deal with that feeling tomorrow, or the next day, or next year, whenever it chooses to come and annoy me. For now, my little sister Sam has just aced Jack with one of her spinning serves, and life can't get better than that.

Three

The nuns are to be blamed for my obsession this summer that I'll be possessed by the devil.

They are always going on that if we swear, think bad thoughts, look at boys, touch ourselves, it means the devil is at work inside us. There are only four nuns left at my school – the rest of the teachers are normal Catholics – but the old nuns have taken some oath with God to scare all of on to the road to heaven. My sister Martha hasn't helped either. She's been terrifying all the older kids over the last week with a face she can pull. I'm too scared to see it, but each night I'm aware of the effect of it.

Martha's eyebrows are so thin they look as if they've been drawn on with a black pencil. She's almost fifteen and has plucked them for years. She wears eyeliner and mascara and is dark from sunbaking all day smothered in baby oil. When she wants to, she can make her face look evil.

As the olds stay away from us down on the lawn around the barbecue, I sit in the playroom and wait, like I've done every night this week. The door to the girls' dorm is shut and there's only a torch on in there, to make it even scarier. I'm almost fourteen years old and shouldn't be out here with the 'babies' playing cheat, trying to keep my eye off that door and my mind off what's happening on the other side of it.

Grace is filled with scorn for what they are doing. 'Why would you want to go in there and be scared half to death? Have you seen the way they look when they come out, Rose, who'd do that to themselves?'

Grace, my sensible angel who is sometimes too sensible and I wish she'd come with me to do things that aren't necessarily good. Will she ever be tempted to experiment with life like Martha does, and like I want to do, to try smoking a cigarette, just to see what it

tastes like? Martha can blow smoke rings out of her mouth, and then blow little rings into the bigger ones. I'd love to know how to do that. But Grace, at twelve, might be one of those people that skip from being a child to an adult, like my sister Ann will probably do. Both of them seem confident enough with how the world works or how they fit into it to be able to stay in childhood longer. Something tells me I'm not one of those people, that instead I'll be the one who needs as much rehearsing for life as possible.

The screams have begun and I hear the rumble of bodies as they jump off top bunks and run, terrified, to the door to get away from her. From this transformed evil devil that sits in a corner, up high, a torch under her chin and a contorted face, that is somehow the devil himself. There they come, large bodies squashing, trampling over smaller, weaker cousins, screaming in excitement and self-induced fear, desperate to get out of that small door, out of that long dark dormitory and into the safety of the light and space of the playroom, where innocence still reigns.

Some of my cousins try to describe the face and the feeling it gives them to see it and that's enough for me. I can't even bring myself to be in a room with Martha on my own at the moment, even in the middle of the day, for fear she'll pull that face and haunt me forever.

A few nights later someone dobs on her and Uncle Jeffrey reads all of us the riot act, about the devil and worshipping him, although no one sees what Martha is doing as worshipping, but Jeffrey isn't one to argue with. He's very religious and strict. I'm a bit pissed off at Grace because I think it was her that dobbed, and I can't figure out why. She tells me she didn't, but that it's probably good that Martha has stopped scaring everyone, especially me.

Something happens inside me over this. Suddenly the two-year gap between us has widened and there's no chance Grace will ever catch up. She'll always be too young for me. Normally I would never be able to walk away from someone I care about, knowing that when I did the pain they felt would boomerang right back at me. But there's a loyalty I have to my immediate family and suddenly it feels stronger than it's ever been. A choice has to be made – a sister over her. I choose a sister for they are the ones who are always with me. Grace lives in Melbourne and I only ever see her here over the summer, what good is she, really? She's never there during the year when I need help. I have to defend the ones who are.

'Do you want to go on another picnic tomorrow?' she asks as we finish another game of scrabble and begin collecting the tiles to put away. I realise I hate scrabble and only play it because it's Grace's favourite game and she always wins.

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I dunno, I just don't want to.'

'But it was such fun last time, I've got pocket money now, we can buy lollies.'

I sigh heavily, hoping she'll see what a baby she is, talking about lollies and pocket money. 'Look, I'm probably gonna go with Martha tomorrow, she's got some friends around the next beach and she said I could spend the day with them, all right?'

I walk away from her, just leave her sitting in the playroom surrounded by the black and white tiles, and head towards the girls' dorm where Joni Mitchell is playing on the tape deck. It's so liberating. As I enter the long room, full of my older sisters and cousins lying on their beds, singing and harmonising, I'm surprised at how little I feel about dismissing Grace, excited that I might finally have got control of this pain thing.

I can't feel her at all.

Martha has been offering to teach me how to smoke for days, and after the devil lecture, I grab the chance. The next morning after breakfast, we walk around the cove together to the main beach called Robinsons. Martha's boyfriend, a local guy who delivers our milk, lives across the road from this beach. Our parents don't know she has a boyfriend, and Martha makes me swear not to tell them, because she wouldn't be allowed to come around here if they knew. We told Leale we liked swimming at Robinsons because it has flags and a lifeguard, and is a safer beach. When she gave us a two-dollar note to spend between us at the milk bar, I felt a little guilty that our mother was so gullible.

There are more tourists here than on our beach and no houses with direct access. There are landscaped grounds, a playground near the milk bar, and a large car park, full of blue numbered plates from the ACT. The sand dunes that used to be on this beach, before the main road went by it, were huge, and when we were little we'd slide down them on pieces of cardboard. There are still some sand dunes left, although they're only small.

There's a large gang of local boys and a few girls sitting on one of the dunes. Martha goes straight over and sits near her boyfriend, and the way she turns her back on me indicates I'm not to come any closer. So I sit down crossed-legged near them, covering my legs with my sarong, hoping my bikini top doesn't look stupid without any breasts to fill it up.

Martha tells everyone that I've never smoked before, and the boys take on the job of teaching me their methods to draw back. Some of them have mullet haircuts that I only ever see down here on the coast. Their board shorts look like King Gee work shorts, and their straight, brown legs stick out of them like thin tree trunks. They all wear faded, salt stained

T-shirts like uniforms, the necks of the shirts ripped and worn. There's a strong smell of tobacco and sweat coming from them and I keep looking over to where Martha is, to make sure she's close enough if I need her.

'Smoking's easy, right,' one of them says – there have been no names given, although they all seem to know mine. 'You just sort of gotta suck on it, Rosie,' he says with his mouth completely around the cigarette, taking it in and out of his mouth, moaning with pleasure. This makes the others laugh and me go bright red.

I try holding a lit cigarette someone gives me between my fingers, the way I remember Kathryn doing. Although somehow I don't think I look as cool as she did. I pull on the cigarette and smoke comes into my mouth, but I don't know how to swallow it. It just sits there like vapour, slowing pouring back out into the air. Everyone laughs.

'Maybe you should try suckin on somethin bigger,' another boy says, grabbing the front of his board shorts. Martha laughs along with the rest of them and I guess this is the way boys talk to girls. Having been separated from boys since third class in school, and now going to an all-girls' high school, I have no contact with the opposite sex, beyond my brothers and cousins, who would never dare say stuff like this.

'Don't listen to him, he's a dickhead,' someone says. I haven't noticed this one before. He's been looking at the surf and turns towards me now. His hair is blonde, naturally, not just surfer's blonde. I can tell because his eyebrows and eyelashes are also blonde. He could almost be an albino, except that his skin is a beautiful buttercup colour. His hair is normal, not a mullet. It's down to his shoulders and unlike most surfers it doesn't stick out like straw, but looks brushed and soft. He must be the leader, because all the others stop laughing and step back as he stands up and comes over. He sits cross-legged in front of me so that our knees are touching and we face each other. He pulls his soft hair

away from his face, revealing pale blue eyes, and I wonder what it would be like to have a boyfriend who was prettier than you.

'Have you ever been out the back,' he begins, pausing a moment as the others snicker behind him, and continuing only when they have stopped, 'and a huge wave comes, right? And you think you're gonna make it and you paddle for it and you're goin' down the face of it, and then it all goes to shit and you wipe out. Your board's lost and there's water over you, under you, inside you, and you don't know which way's up or down, and your lungs are bursting for air, but you gotta hold your breath longer and longer, cause you know to breathe now would drown you.'

His voice is smooth and steady and I feel caught by it, like I'm stuck in honey. He looks directly into my eyes and hasn't let go of that gaze. I find myself leaning into him, to hear more, because I know that feeling of being dumped by a wave. And to have someone describe it exactly as I have felt it makes me wonder if this blonde boy can read me, if he can see inside me and has drawn on my experiences to teach me.

'You know that feeling, don't you?' he says, smiling, seeing how trapped I am. I nod, wanting more. 'Well, you've got to inhale this smoke,' and he takes a cigarette out of his packet of Winfield Blues and lights it with a lighter. He draws back on the cigarette. Thick, white smoke comes out of his mouth for a second before he inhales it back up through his nose, in a curved, neat arc of smoke, not letting it go again. 'You've got to draw it back right inside you,' he says, 'just like when you finally break the surface of the water and there's air all around you, and you suck in that air like it's the first time you've ever breathed.'

He hands me his cigarette and I bring it to my lips and imagine myself coming up for air after being dumped, filling my lungs with a huge breath of smoke. Suddenly my

throat's on fire and then the heat goes down into my lungs, and I can't breathe. I can't even cough, it's like the smoke is trapped inside me. My chest heaves but there's no way to get air in or out. I feel like I'm going to vomit and my face must be turning blue, like I'm really drowning, and all of this sends the boys around me into fits of laughter.

'Yeah… she's got it,' says my teacher, who has lost interest in me, and the lesson. He stands up, grabs his board and walks down to the surf. The other boys obediently follow, tied to him like tails to a kite.

My breath returns and I cough up as much smoke as I can, throwing the cigarette into the dunes. Martha is sitting on the knee of our milkman, who seems torn between her and the surf, but the surf wins and she gets a kiss on the cheek in farewell. As he does, I notice the local girls on the sand nearby. They've enjoyed my humiliation but are now whispering and giving Martha filthy looks. I'm not sure what fun my sister could have here all day with these people, and really, all I want to do right now is go back to our beach and swim with my family. Or run back up to the coast house and drink tea with sugar and milk to get rid of this horrible taste in my mouth. But there has to be something that draws Martha here every day. And I want to find out what it is.

As the surf is good today, our mutual surf widow status causes the local girls to move closer to Martha and me. They are keen to find out what life in Sydney is like. Most of them are desperate to get out of this town, which is funny, because I'm always so desperate to get back here. Martha starts to make up a life in Sydney that isn't our own. She tells the others that everyone our age, in Sydney, goes to bars and discos, that all boyfriends have cars, and every weekend we hang out at King Cross till four in the morning. I'm horrified by her fabricated stories, and can see the others are beginning not to believe them.

'Who wants to go for a swim?' I interrupt, desperate to stop Martha from telling more lies. But the local girls just give me a mocking look.

'Yeah. Right,' one of them says, lighting a cigarette and inhaling it, her thin eyebrows raised in a superior look towards me as the smoke disappears inside her. But at least it's stopped Martha's flow. The girls begin to put more sun tan oil on. Their brown skin looks moist and wet, and makes my desire for a swim even stronger. Martha turns away from me as if she doesn't want to be associated with me any more, after my suggestion to swim, and I have no idea why it's warranted such hostility. Surely she can see that I've saved her from talking herself into a corner where these girls will know she's lying.

No one says anything for a while and we sit in silence on the dunes. My face is burning, my mouth dry, and the blue water in front of me looks so cool I could drink it. After another twenty minutes of doing nothing, the local girls decide to see if I can do smoke rings. Relieved to be allowed back in to the group, I try my best to inhale the smoke without choking, hoping I don't turn blue or drown again in the horrible taste of it. They show me how to click my jaw and open my mouth round and large, so the smoke gets pushed out in a perfect, donut sized ring. But I can't do it and am beginning to feel sick again. This amuses them as much as my first attempt, but not for long. Soon they are lying back on their towels or sarongs, checking the positions of their bikini bottoms and where their breasts are, so that no white bits stick out, no ugly pubic hair is seen. And when they are assured that everything is perfect they lift their faces to the sun, as if that slight raise of a chin will bring the sun's rays closer to their face, turning it browner quicker.

None of these girls swim, all day they just lie on the dunes, moving only to check their costumes, brush their hair, or apply more oil before turning over and baking the other

side of their bodies. Occasionally they sit up and light a cigarette, and with their arms hugging their knees watch other people on the beach, or look out at the sea.

'It's beautiful isn't it?' I say, attempting to connect with one of them.

'What?'

'Who's beautiful?' asks another, sitting up and scanning the beach.

'The sea.' I say.

Another cold stare, a familiar raised eyebrow and a filthy look from Martha makes me decide never to talk again.

Martha buys two dollars worth of hot chips in a cone of newspaper for our lunch, but I don't get many of them because we share them with our new friends. By the time the flags are being taken down and most of the tourists have gone, I feel light headed and sick from lack of food and too many cigarettes.

'I reckon it's time we went back, Martha,' I say, as the lifeguard drives away in his panel van.

'Yeah, all right,' she says angrily, looking around for her boyfriend, who has come out of the surf, but not back to Martha. I notice one of our new girl friends is missing as well.

Standing up and re-wrapping my sarong under my arms, to cover as much of my body as I can, I whisper, 'We'll get in trouble,' not wanting the few girls still lying on the dunes to hear what our real life is like.

Martha turns to the girls, 'Ah, look, we're gonna go now, so, can you tell Gavin that I'll see him tomorrow?'

'Sure,' they smirk, looking like they did when I first noticed them, as if they really don't want us to be here.

On the way back Martha doesn't talk. Maybe she's embarrassed that I've seen what she's capable of, how fake she can be when she wants to. She looks at the sand as she walks, but the expression on her face is peaceful, her whole body emits a calm I've never seen in her before, as if she's achieved something today that she wanted to achieve. Perhaps this has been the attraction for her all summer. To become for a day someone different, to separate herself from who she is when she's with the rest of us. Maybe instead of running away like Kathryn, Martha just acts her way out of the family.

But then why invite me, why risk having someone from the family witness her change? We are almost at the end of our beach, just under the path that leads up to the house, when I work it out.

'Wanna come again tomorrow?' Martha asks, without looking at me. There's only the slightest hint of pleading in her voice, but it's enough to make me realise my purpose. I go on these visits with her so that I can bring her back.

'Sure.'

We walk up the track together and enter the house without mentioning our day to anyone.

As I walk past Grace in the playroom I feel her watching me from the card table where she plays with Emma and some of the other younger ones. When I look over she puts her head down to her cards, or pretends she's talking to another cousin. I hate what's happening, but know how important it is for me to keep going, to continue walking past her. For since I've managed to let go of the hold she's had on me, I've felt released from my burden. Since I've found myself not listening to her, ignoring the thoughts that used to run at me whenever she was sad or lonely, no matter where I was or what I was doing, I've been able to shut everything else out as well. Grace was the person I loved most in this

house. By letting go of her I've stopped myself caring about others as well, the real and the not real. For the first time I understand how other people have lived their lives. It makes sense to me now why my sisters and brothers don't cry as much as I do, as I did, and why Leale has never understood me looking so intently at her during those times she felt silently overwhelmed by her role as our mother. With Martha I no longer have to pretend not to hear, or fake not feeling anything that I don't want to feel, because with her I don't. It's not that I don't care about Martha, that I can be unfeeling around her because she isn't important to me. She is. It's just I don't have to protect her, she's not vulnerable like Grace, or some of the others. Martha's strong enough not to need me to take anything from her. With her I can ignore all the bad things and just live like a normal person. Losing Grace is a small price to pay for that freedom.

A pattern begins. Every morning Martha and I eat our breakfast with the others, acting like we're expected to act. Lining up to put toast in the toaster or to grab a cup over someone's shoulder, hoping there's still tea in the pot. Taking a buttered-covered knife from someone who's just finished using it, to spread jam or honey on our own toast, reading over someone's shoulder an Asterix or MAD comic, or those wordy magazines of Beryl's, *The New Yorker,* whose cartoons are for adults. After that performance we change into our other costume – bikinis covered by coloured, batik sarongs, puka shells around our necks, our bodies smothered in baby oil, hair brushed, clipped back or braided.

We head around to the next beach, no longer having to tell Leale because she just presumes that's where we'll be. She stops giving us money after the first day, and tells us to take a sandwich. I did this once, but the idea of eating a vegemite sandwich in front of those

guys, or especially those girls, didn't fit the character I was trying to play. So I just starve myself every day, smoking more and more bludged cigarettes.

As soon as we leave our own beach behind and have settled down into the sand dunes with the others, we become different people, we turn into sophisticated Sydney sisters who live a wonderful life that's much envied by these small town locals. Martha still makes up the stories. I just nod in agreement whenever anyone looks at me.

During the day Martha and I are best friends, but back at the coast house we're normal again, we aren't singled out as close, the way Grace and I used to be.

When the surf is flat and the local boys hang around us, Martha's stories get more exaggerated. Suddenly we own horses, or one of our uncles does, because my original smoking teacher, the one with the soft hair and blonde eyelashes asks, 'I thought you two lived near the city?' So Martha quickly changes the story to our uncle who lives just out of Sydney on a property and breeds racehorses.

By the end of the week I'm exhausted from all the bullshit that has come out of my sister's mouth, and am beginning to think the others know she's lying, because their questions are getting more and more complicated, and the smirks on their faces, wider. Even the serene look of achievement that was once on Martha's face, during our walk back to the house, has gone.

'I've decided to drop Gavin,' she tells me before we go to bed tonight.

'Why?'

She doesn't answer. We are in the corner of our dorm. The room is full of girls, some of them naked, looking more like women than teenagers. Martha's smothering Oil of Ulan on her smooth, shaved legs. The pink moisturiser disappears into her dark skin like

evaporated water. It's a communal bottle, the largest Leale could buy at the Mall, and all of my older sisters use it. From my bottom bunk, looking up at my older cousins with their full breasts, their pubic hair and sweaty underarms, I feel skinny and awkward in comparison. Their scents of baby oil, moisturiser, deodorant and essential oils fill up the room. It is sweet and comforting and I enjoy breathing it in each night, not yet brave enough to join them in this ritual. Although my period has come, my body's still that of a child's, my breasts just little bumps, like I've been bitten by mosquitoes, one on each nipple causing a slight swelling of the skin. These older girls are sure to pay out on me if I become one of them too soon.

'So, I'm not going around to their beach for a while,' Martha adds in a final note.

'Fair enough,' I say, relieved I don't have to watch the locals laugh at us anymore.

She looks around the room to see who is close by, then sits down on my bunk, causing my sleeping bag to tighten around my legs.

'Robert's going to find mushrooms tomorrow, magic mushies.'

Our cousin Robert is seventeen and recently got his P's. He uses Uncle Bill's car everyday to go looking for better surf and prettier girls.

'Oh,' I mumble, wondering why she's telling me this.

'He's asked me to come.'

'Uh huh,' I add, nervous that she's going to ask me to join her.

She seems to be making a decision and I try and busy myself with the zipper on my sleeping bag, hoping she thinks better of it.

'Do you want to come?'

'What'll we tell Mum?' I blurt out.

Martha laughs and stands up again, 'Don't worry about her, she doesn't even know we're missing half the time.'

As Martha goes to her bed at the other end of the room, specks of sand drift down from the mattress above me as the person up there shifts. It's Grace. The older girls in this dorm have always treated the younger kids in here like babies, presuming they don't hear the secrets they tell, but I know that Grace, like me, has always heard them.

There's little chance she'll dob again. Looking at the mattress above me squeezing through the gaps in the wire, the sheets tucked in unevenly on the sides, the way the material moves when Grace turns over, it feels comforting to know she's still up there. That she's still available to me if I need her, even though I can no longer be there for her.

The next morning she's on the balcony reading, there are a few younger cousins down the other end of the balcony, so I whisper to her what we're doing today and ask her to come with me.

'You could die! Some of them are poisonous you know?'

'Robert knows which ones to look for. He says that after last night's rain it's the perfect time to find them,' I say, lowering my voice some more, 'Oh go on, Grace, come and try a bit, it'll be cool.'

'Why do you want to do this?' she asks, 'What are you looking for?'

I roll my eyes and laugh, 'I don't know.'

'You're only thirteen.'

'Almost fourteen.'

Grace is never going to do something as stupid as eat wild mushrooms, but that doesn't stop me wanting her to be there with me. 'Maybe you could just come and watch, or something... you don't have to, I don't care, it's no big deal or anything.'

She narrows her eyes and turns her head slightly, as if to get a better look at me. I hate it when she does this, it makes me feel like she knows more about life than me.

'Alright, I'll come.'

'Cool, thanks.'

Last year Robert would never have let us come with him. Normally he would have gone with Mark, who is also seventeen, but our brother has recently found God – although how God can be missing in such a large Catholic family is beyond me. It appears Mark's God is a fundamental Christian God, whereas our God isn't. This has upset Frank and confused Leale, and sometimes I wonder if Mark is just doing it to take the heat off his school marks, which don't seem to have benefited from his new found connection with any God.

In Uncle Bill's car, Robert drives us to the paddocks just out of town and we walk around the cow shit searching for free drugs. Both Robert and Martha took some convincing to allow me to bring Grace, but when I told Martha I wasn't coming unless Grace came, she agreed. And when she told Robert she wasn't coming unless I came, he also agreed. It seems no one wanted to come out here alone.

We find what we're looking for in the third paddock and drive to a deserted beach and eat them. They're slimy and disgusting, but I'm interested to see what effect they have. Grace watches us with her arms folded, looking more like her father than ever. I'm in the back seat next to her, but looking at Martha up front. We are both already giggling, although I'm sure it's too soon to feel anything.

The day is cloudy and cold for summer, and I'm glad of Kathryn's old woollen poncho wrapped around me. Looking at the sea through the windscreen, waiting for something to feel different, I wonder where Kathryn is right now, and whether she's missing us. Maybe I could write to her and tell her about all of this, how Martha's a bit like she is, that in acting out other roles she gets to step outside the family's role for a while. And how the two of us are here now, near this deserted beach, and there's a poison inside me that I'm hoping will take me away as well. I could paint her a picture of the sand, how it's made up of billions of little specks and that each one of them is dancing in front of me.

Drawing makes me remember that Grace is also here somewhere. There's a little cough beside me and there she is, looking almost too small to see out the window. I'm glad she's here though, because I'm slipping away and want her to hold on to me, to bring me back to where she is, inside the car, un-stoned and safe. Kathryn's poncho is warm around me, as if my big sister were hugging me, helping me to shake off the sadness I feel whenever I go too far away from what I know, too far away from my family.

Robert says he is going for a walk. He leaves the door open and Martha gets out too.

'Are you coming?' I ask Grace.

She doesn't answer, but her look shows how disappointed she is, so I leave her in the car and go and sit next to Martha on the dancing sand. Once the mushrooms take their full effect I can't move. I lie on the cold mustard coloured sand and feel as if a tunnel has come out of the sea and wrapped me up inside it, like a cocoon. Like I'm a caterpillar that's been reclaimed and must travel down through the tunnel, whose passage is wet and empty and waiting for me to enter. But there's a corner at the bottom of the tunnel and I can't see around it and I'm scared to let go, for fear of never being able to climb back up again.

Close beside me lies Martha, her eyes are glassy pools, and the sight of all that refection seems to dissolve the tunnel. I must be a butterfly now, free and colourful, although my wings are bruised, for I still can't move. Martha's laughing at me. Can she see my faulty wings and knows that I can't fly away yet?

We are both just lumps on the sand.

Robert is still off on his walk. Grace comes over to Martha and me, to check we aren't dead or slipping off into another dimension. The closer she gets to us, the taller she becomes, like it's her who has swallowed a magic potion, not us, a potion that's made her as tall as a giant, and as strong too. She's like a bodyguard, come to protect our trapped bodies.

'What's it feel like?'

Her voice comes from far away, travelling from the national park behind us, swooping around her tall body before reaching me lying in a foetal position below her on the sand. I really want to tell her what it's like, but there's no way I can talk. My tongue collapses out of my mouth as I open it to try and get some words together for her, so she doesn't feel left out, but it's so heavy it just drops and gets covered in sand and Martha and I laugh hysterically at this.

The day moves on and the clouds disappear revealing an afternoon sun stretching long shadows of trees on the beach. I can move my legs now and sit up. Grace has stayed beside our bodies as I continued to slip in and out of tunnels that had potential, but never seemed to lead anywhere. It was nice to know she was there for us, for me. Robert comes back from his walk and seems completely normal. Maybe walking around diluted the poison in his system. I hug my knees. Despite the sun, it's really cold and I just want to go home.

On the way back, Martha and I sit huddled together in the back seat of the car, the world continues to look weird. Grace is still tall, sitting up front beside Robert. When we turn the corner into Emery Beach Road, the house seems to stand out on its own, like it's waving to me. The yellow fibro is so bright amongst the other fibro houses, whose pale blues and pinks look subdued in the surrounding green trees. The newer, brick houses make our old yellow place look run down. And where everyone else's house is neat and small, and sits on their land like an obedient dog, ours is massive and spreads itself out messily, like it's trying to stretch out onto the vacant blocks on either side of it. As we drive down the street I can see underpants and bras hanging out both windows of the girls' dormitory. A glimpse of the balcony, through the trees down the side, is littered with people, towels and worn nappies, the cotton looking almost as yellow as the house, after so many years of use.

Our house is the only one in the street without any direct neighbours. Over the years we have slowly been moving our belongings into these blocks of overgrown land, as if to claim them back, like they were always ours and we are worried someone will try and take them from us. The block with the fallen down gum tree in particular is full of my family's belongings: surfboards and rubber mats, and an old canoe full of holes ready for mending. The younger kids dump their buckets and spades there, their toys and bikes. There are two small bright red play tents and a brown teepee pointing out of the long pale grass.

It was Uncle Joe who first claimed use of the land when he pitched a real tent in there a few years ago, spending the summer in blissful isolation, only inviting our American Uncle Bill in for their daily game of chess. He stopped doing it though, because soon the other uncles were storing spare floorboards and building materials around his tent,

and they began to bang away all day, fixing windows and fly screens, or building new coffee tables, to put more books and magazines and tea cups on. Uncle Joe contemplated moving his tent to the other side of the house, but that block of land has become an unofficial right of way, with most of the people in the street using it to get to the beach.

The olds always tidy up before we leave, taking everything back under the house, but over summer the vacant block becomes a playground for the kids, and a shed and workbench for the uncles. It's no wonder the blocks have never been sold, who'd want to live so close to all of us, with our mess and noise?

Walking into the playroom I realise the mushrooms still have a hold on me, because the room looks enormous, like a massive hall the townspeople use for community meetings and public witch trials. The olds are in the kitchen, lunch has been and gone and they are at the end of tidying up.

Robert heads straight down the beach and Grace into the girls' dorm. Martha and I stand in the doorway to the kitchen and watch fascinated as Leale and Aunty Kit stand by the sink washing and wiping. Uncle Si is down on one knee fixing a broken chair as Uncle Joe sits on another, reading. Leale holds a tea towel and has been wiping the plate in her hand for eternity.

'Who moved the furniture?' Martha suddenly asks, in a heightened state of awareness at the new look of the room.

But the three tables and mismatch of fibreglass, plastic and wooden chairs, the vinyl couches and old woolly armchairs are in the same position they have been in for years. Aunty Kit, Leale and Uncle Si stop and look at us confused. Uncle Joe observes from a distance. No one answers Martha's question, because it doesn't make sense. The olds begin to sniff the air for drugs, alcohol, something to justify the strange teenagers before them. I

pinch Martha's arm, give a big healthy smile and lead my stoned sister outside and down to the beach, where we swim the poison out of our system.

'Are you normal yet?' Grace asks me.

'What?'

'Well I'm not going to talk to you until you're you again, there's no point.'

She's not looking at me, she could be talking to the soapsuds in the sink, but I know she isn't talking to Sam and Andrew, the other two on tonight's washing up duty.

'Yes, I'm normal again. Yee Haa, isn't it great to back in the real world, doesn't everything look bland.'

Lifting her head she does the eyes squinting, head on the side thing.

'Just get lost, Grace!' I say louder than I meant to, so that Sam and Andrew look at me. I take a pile of wiped up dinner plates and move over to the other side of the kitchen to put them away. By the time I get back, Sam and Andrew are talking cricket.

'You've changed,' Grace whispers to me, like she used to do when we were friends. The thought of that time makes me want to hit her. It's so bad between us now there's little point in remembering that it was ever good.

'So what? Things change, Grace. Nothing stays the same forever.'

She stops washing up, but the dryers don't notice as they have moved down to the other end of the room where a game of table cricket is under way. A small green of felt material lies on one of the tables, and little men stand around doing nothing, like in the real game, waiting for the tiny ball to be hit by the tiny bat. Each figure operated by a child.

'I don't want you to change,' she says, 'I don't want anything to change, ever. I want it to be like we were at the beginning of summer and cast some spell on you so you

never grow up.' There are tears in her eyes and part of me wants to feel for her, begins to feel her pain. But I won't do that again. When I don't step forward to hold her as I know she wants me to, she bursts out crying and runs to the dorm. I move to the sink, pick up the dishcloth and finish the washing up for her.

Packing at the end of a holiday is always depressing. Food has been eaten, Christmas presents have been unwrapped, played with, broken and thrown away. There are plastic bags full of wet towels, sandy costumes, flippers and snorkels, all thrown into the backs of cars and trailers wherever they can fit. Surf mats are trodden on by barefooted children, their feet stomping up and down squashing the air out like grapes in a barrel.

Uncle Will and Frank left last week to return to work, taking Uncle Joe with them. Si and Beryl have the furthest to drive, back up to Brisbane, and left two days ago. May and Uncle Bill are returning to America with Robert and our other cousins tomorrow and have already left for Sydney this morning.

While we wait out here by the cars Leale and Kit do a final washing of the floor. We're not allowed down the beach, not trusted enough to stay dry, or walk off and come back in time. Some of the younger children are playing cricket on the road. Martha says she's going behind a tree to have a cigarette before we go. She asks me if I want one. Grace hovers close by, annoyingly, as if she wants me to reject her again. Martha shrugs when I don't answer and goes off on her own. I lean against our car, wishing Leale would hurry up so we can go, Grace watching me in this needy, desperate way. Neither of us speaks.

Finally Leale and Kit march out of the house, slamming the door in case any dirt or sand sneaks back in, annoyed and flustered. It amazes me how quickly the holiday spirit

can leave parents. I don't lose mine until we get closer to Sydney, when we have to stop at the first traffic light. It's then I know we're back and there's nothing I can do about it.

'Right, come on, everyone in, hurry up,' shouts Leale to her lot.

'Andrew, leave that alone, no you can't take it with you. Get in the car, we've got a long drive,' says Kit to hers.

Sarah comes over to get Grace. Their car is parked a little down the street. I can see Uncle Jeffrey behind the wheel, ready to leave.

'Goodbye, Rose, have a lovely year,' Sarah says to me.

'Yeah.'

Grace whispers something in her mother's ear. Sarah smiles. 'We'll see, darling,' she says.

'I asked Mum if you could come down to us some time this year,' she tells me.

I have never been anywhere in Australia besides the coast house and I'd love to see what Melbourne looks like, but… I don't know.

Sarah laughs. 'No promises, you two. I'll talk to your mother throughout the year, okay, Rose? Come on, Grace, Dad's waiting.'

Sarah walks over to say goodbye to Leale and Kit, as she does I feel a little wet kiss on my cheek. Grace is close to me, her straight orange hair falling over her face like a curtain, the little gap in between where her blue eyes, freckled nose and full mouth are peeking through. She's still so small she has to stand on tippee-toes to reach my cheek. I wonder if she'll ever grow up.

'Bye, Rose, I'll miss you.'

'Yeah, see ya next year.'

She smiles and walks away.

Four

'Rose!' Leale shouts at me and then changes her tone, adding softly, 'Your father and I have asked you to come into the lounge room with the others.'

The nice way she says this is almost scary. It's a school night and I'm upstairs trying to finish a painting for school, enjoying having the bedroom to myself for once.

'Alright.'

Putting another pair of socks on, because in winter the house is colder downstairs than up, I try and slide my feet down the wooden stair case, rather than walk it, but Leale's at the bottom waiting for me, a forced smile on her face, so I walk properly.

Inside the lounge room is the rest of my family, except for Paul and Joan, who both left home last year, and Kathryn, who still hasn't come back. Paul failed his year twelve exams three years ago. For a few months after that he just hung around the house, unemployed. After Leale found out about the boy across the road, the one who died in the war in Vietnam, she was extra nice to Paul, letting him get away with not looking for a job. He was about to turn eighteen just before the government stopped sending troops over. Before that, every time a new list of birth dates was read out on the television, Leale and Frank would wait to hear if any of their children's dates were mentioned, even if that child was still only ten years old.

'Don't worry,' Frank had said. 'He won't be going.'

Paul told us that flat feet could get you out of conscription and that Frank had assured him his feet were flat. We all inspected them to determine how flat they were. They looked perfectly normal to me, but I'm not a doctor. After doing some labouring work

at Uncle Will's place in Birchgrove, Paul decided to head up north and live with Kathryn, who had sent him a telegram saying the fruit picking season was starting.

Joan won a place at the Conservatorium of Music, to study violin. She didn't accept it and tried to explain to Frank and Leale that she wasn't interested in studying music in a formal way, and had only applied to keep them happy. Frank couldn't understand how touring New Zealand with a band, playing guitar and violin, was more important than studying for a degree. Joan had been saving all the money she earned from her baby sitting jobs and Thursday night and Saturday mornings at Coles, so when the time came she had the money to go. Next in line for Frank's high hopes would have been Kathryn, but she left school at fifteen, so the pressure's on Mark now. But it seems that Frank will probably have to wait another two years, for Ann, before he sees any of his children enter university.

The couches are already full, so I sit next to Martha on one of the beanbags on the floor. She obliges me, only because not to would get her into trouble. There's one month every year when Martha and I are the same age. This is because when I was born in February, she was still only eleven months old. It's as if for that one month we're twins, which I quite like the idea of, but Martha absolutely hates. The older we get, the more she hates me for it. She blames me for being born too soon. That if I hadn't come five weeks early on our beach, down south, this would never have happened. Usually her hatred only surfaces after my birthday, but with Sarah's invitation to Melbourne last week, she feels I've usurped her position as being older, and that I've done it on purpose. Fortunately I don't take any of these things seriously any more. Because finally, at fourteen, my breasts have appeared, and with them I feel more confident to challenge my sisters, especially Martha. My older sisters' breasts are large and round, like wobbly water balloons, whilst

mine still fit inside a training bra and are more like two small bubbles of detergent. I'm skinny and shorter than all of them, but my breasts exist and I claim them as my own.

The attention I've had over my invitation to Melbourne has been enjoyable, Leale urging me to go, telling me what an adventure it would be, Frank suggesting all the art galleries I could visit. He has finally caught on to something that distinguishes me from the others, drawing and painting. Frank likes to find something that each of his children is good at, or at least has an interest in, and then will only ever talk to them about that subject. Another ploy to get us to university.

My decision not to go and visit Grace is that I don't want to slip back into old ways. If I spend two weeks with just her in Melbourne, I might return again to caring and lose the freedom I've lived in for the past seven months. I also don't want to miss out the trip to the coast house for the first time in winter. The uncles put a slow combustion stove in the front room last Easter, so next holidays, when Grace wants me for herself in Melbourne, I'm going to be with my family at the coast house. I want to see how everything looks during winter, what colour the ocean is, or the sand. Is it still fluffy and white, or more like the mustard colour on that deserted beach we took the mushrooms at? Will the sky be bluer than it is in summer, is winter rain a different shape to summer rain?

'We have some very sad news, children,' Leale says.

She's almost crying and Frank looks devastated. I keep forgetting that I no longer pick up their emotions, so when they come now they are always a surprise.

'What?' asks Ann.

Leale looks at Frank, but he can't tell us, so she says, 'I'm afraid that one of your cousins has died.'

No one moves. It's as if each of us wants to stay frozen in the moment we were just in, before Leale spoke those words. As if by staying very still and holding our breaths we won't have to face what's coming next. Finding out which one of them it is, which cousin we no longer have. It feels like the cold of winter from every corner of the world has gathered in here with us to hear the bad news, and frozen us stone stiff. Someone manages to ask who it is, who has died. And as I hold my breath waiting to find out, something inside me opens up, something that's been locked all year, and I begin to feel the pressure I'm putting on the beans inside the bag Martha and I are sitting on. The sandstone walls begin to shift as the house takes on the growing sadness inside it. My little sister Mim is about to cry, I can feel her pain inside me.

Leale looks directly at me, 'Grace.'

A cold hand grabs mine, Martha's. I squeeze it hard, watching her brown fingers turn pale as I stop the blood flowing to them, they look like marble, like the statue of Mary in our church, like the fingers of a dead person, like Grace, lying somewhere cold and gone from me.

Leale watches me, waiting for me to react. Then Martha cries, she hasn't done this since we were little. The tears drop on to the beanbag and I wait for mine to come. Mim runs over to Leale who picks her up. She buries her head in Leale's shoulder, taking my mother's attention off me. Other sisters cry behind me, brothers sniff and hide their damp eyes behind long sleeved school shirts. Frank leans against the dining room table, his eyes closed and his hands folded as if in prayer. The whole house seems to be grieving, except me.

Martha doesn't notice me squeezing her hand too tight. I watch her profile to see if I'm hurting her, but the pain that shows on her face doesn't come from me crushing her

hand, and the agony there is something I don't want to take in. There's a blank space on the wall opposite me that I turn to, a blank space between two coloured prints. It's all I want to see right now. For there's a ripple inside me, a small wave forming, folding itself around my feelings of guilt and sorrow. Guilt over how I treated Grace last summer, and sorrow because I'll never be able to take it back, never be able to make it good again. If I allow these emotions to swell up and break they'll take me down, tumbling and turning with no air and no way to find the right way up. I have to find a way to contain them, smother them with something else, something that disguises what they really are.

An image forms itself on the canvas-coloured wall opposite me. It's a memory. One plucked from a different corner inside me. With it I'm drawn back to the beginning of last summer, when it was still good between Grace and me, when we were still best friends.

The image invites me to step back into the past as if it was the present and I swim towards it, knowing it's the raft I need to survive.

Grace and I are spending the day exploring the cove at the end of the three-beach walk from the coast house. We have packed ourselves some sandwiches and a bottle of orange cordial and set off on a expedition to the distant shores of Monkey Cove, where the cliff forms the shape of a monkey's face, above the sea, and the sand is covered with pebbles. We walk past the lifeguards and swimmers on the main second beach, past the sailboats and ramp of the third beach, across rocks and along sandy, grassed paths. The sun is hot, our hatless heads and peeling noses long for a dip in the sea. Grace puts our supplies on the pebbly sand and together we run into the ocean. Once in the water cold bubbles of salt tickle the dry caked layers on our skin, tingling sensations as old salt mixes with new and the heat on the top of our heads is relieved, drowned and floated away by the cool south coast water.

We climb the face of the submerged monkey. I hold Grace's thin arm and pull her up the steep bits, together drying off in the hot breeze on the top. There's a collection of dead seahorses here, a midden of dead sea-life. Piles of emptied oyster shells, the rainbow coloured insides of abalone that are smooth to touch, the same shells that our older cousins use as ashtrays back at the coast house. Grace makes patterns with the tiny bones of fish and seahorse.

When hunger takes over we leave the sea cemetery and climb back down to the cove. There I lay out our sandwiches and cordial bottle, a straw each to share. Sitting on the pebbles, digging in to find the sand beneath them, we create a comfortable spot to rest, we sit for a long time, listening and watching the sea before us. It's so warm and peaceful we both fall slowly backwards and sleep for an hour. I wake first and look over at Grace, her strange, pale beauty something I envy. She feels my gaze and wakes also. She smiles at me in a way I could never accept from a sister, it's intimate and uninhibited, and I resist the temptation to be embarrassed by it. Hot and thirsty, our cordial bottle finished, we run into the sea to cool down, before making the trek home.

'Viral Meningitis is very lethal,' I hear Frank say, and wonder if Grace has heard him as well, for I can't see him on the beach with us. 'It can kill in days,' he speaks again and I shiver with cold, as if a southerly wind has blown up out of nowhere. He's using his doctor's voice, the one that helps to distance him from pain. 'She was too frail to fight it,' he adds, soft and deep, his sorrow failing him and turning him back into an uncle and a father. With that voice I find myself back in this cold, grieving room, Frank has snatched me from my warm memory and I hate him for it.

'What sort of word is meningitis?' I yell up at him.

He looks confused by the outburst, the sudden angry tone in the subdued room. My sisters and brothers look at me as well.

'What's that?' Frank stumbles to say.

'What sort of God takes a couple's only child...' I add, standing up with my hands on my hips, the wave of tears inside me struggling to be kept down.

Leale puts Mim back on the ground to move closer to me. 'Rose darling, I know you're – '

'...when there are so many children to spare in this house?'

This stops my mother moving towards me. She looks around at the nine of us still living here. There's little chance that Frank and Leale could not feel guilty about all their healthy children. But no one could feel as guilty as I do, because I killed Grace.

When Aunty Sarah rang just last week, to ask me to come down to Melbourne and I said no thank you, she also asked if I'd like to speak to Grace. I've got homework, I said, or netball practice or Dad's on call and I've got to keep the phone free. I can't even remember the excuse I gave, I just knew it would be harder to say no to Grace, than to her mother. A voice over the phone is powerful, no blue eyes or orange hair, no freckles to distract me, just a voice, her lovely, soft strong voice. She would wheedle me into doing what she thought was good for me.

And now I realise that after I said goodbye to Aunty Sarah, and put the phone down, Grace got sick, and died.

'Rose...' Leale whispers.

'LEAVE ME ALONE,' I scream, my hands outstretched, keeping her, keeping everyone away. The room has become unbearably noisy, with sniffing, sobbing sisters and sighing brothers. They surround me on every side.

Like a hidden abalone on the beach, I want to be unopened. To hide inside my rainbow coloured walls and not see or feel any of this. But as I stand here surrounded by my family it feels like the colours inside me are washing away, that those crying, clinging barnacles have found a way to break through the shell. Who asked for this to happen, who's responsible for opening me up and making me feel all of this again?

It must be a punishment. Horrible, selfish people like me, who don't want to care for anybody or love any thing should never be allowed to be happy, ever, ever again.

Later that night, when Leale puts me to bed with a hot water bottle and Frank makes me swallow a squashed white tablet in a glass of warm milk, my mother doesn't say her usual, 'Good night, God bless, see you in the morning.' She can't find the words to comfort me, because they don't exist.

When my parents have gone and the light from the landing is the only light coming in to our room, I hear the sleep of my sisters. Their sighs and moans, the hiccups of dreams, shifting limbs burrowing deeper into blankets and soft snorting breaths. Someone is crying. It could be Sam or Emma, or Mim, the younger sisters I share with, but it sounds stronger and louder, as if Martha has crept back upstairs and into our room again, not wanting to be out the back with Ann, in Kathryn's old room. But it isn't Martha, or any of my sisters, who are quietly sleeping their sadness away.

It's me.

One of my hands is wrapped around the other, as if someone has slipped into bed beside me and holds me tight. I sob into my folded hands, hiding them below my pillow, no longer willing to pray to a god who has forgotten to be fair. The sighing moans of my little sisters is of no comfort to me. I'm alone. The only person I want is the person I have

succeeding in losing. The light from the landing is too bright and my eyes ache already from the strain of crying and trying not to see things. I squeeze them shut, enjoying the pain it brings, enjoying the pain so much one of my hands pinches the other and it's only in that piercing pain that I find comfort and succumb to sleep.

The winter trip to the coast house is cancelled. Instead of sitting in front of the new slow combustion fire, we all just hang around the house in Balmain. Normally I would spend the time painting and drawing, but it's as if the world has turned into a black and white movie and all the colours around me have been bleached away.

Most of the holiday I lie in bed watching the tree outside, the one the bats like to come to at night. When school begins again it's a relief, a distraction. Leale gives me a lot of freedom and lets me go back to bed as soon as I have eaten some afternoon tea after school. But when she and Frank suggest I visit a psychologist friend of theirs because I might be depressed, I finally get out of bed. Worried they might find out what's inside my head, how full it is of other people's emotions. I realised a long time ago that what I do isn't normal, accumulating stories is one thing, but collecting pain is another. It seems better to feign happiness than get put away.

Now that school has finished for the year and we're heading south again for summer, I'm hoping Leale will let me slip back into bed and wallow in the nothingness I found tucked in there between the sheets.

The car is slowing down to take a corner. I know we've arrived even before my eyes are open, because Mim is shouting in my ear, 'We're here, we're here'. The drive down seemed too short this year, and for the first time I find I'm not ready to walk back into the

coast house. As I never saw Grace during the school year it has been easy for me not to fully accept that she's gone. I know that when I walk in through those front doors I'll be forced to acknowledge it.

Leale told us on the way down that Uncle Jeffrey and Sarah are not coming up from Melbourne this summer. Usually they are one of the first families to arrive, taking a whole day to travel up from Victoria. I step out of the car and notice that something else is missing. The tree has gone. The fallen down gum tree that has been by the side of our house since before there even was a house has been removed. In fact the whole block next door has been cleared. Posts with little red flags and pieces of string connecting them form the outlines of a future house. It's too much to take in and I run past it and into the house, searching for unchanged surroundings. Of unmoved dust and salt, the exhaled breath of our house after she hasn't been used for a year. We are the first family to arrive. The others not yet ready to face what is here, the loss and memory of Grace.

Everything is as we left it, the ping-pong table, the chairs, the day beds, bookcases filled with the cracked spines of well-read novels. It's all so familiar I can't imagine she won't be here.

I stumble forward carrying my pillowcase of clothes and enter the girls' dormitory, certain that Grace will be sitting on top of her bunk by the window, drawing or reading. She'll jump down and run and hug me and my sisters, and we'll talk so fast no one can understand a word, as my sisters and I fight for the right to a top bunk.

Instead, in an unspoken gesture of sympathy, my sisters give me Grace's bunk, the one she chose last summer, the summer I got it wrong. I climb up onto it and bury my face in the soft-ribbed chenille bedspread, but I can't smell her. The dormitory seems long and

empty, even though five of my sisters are unpacking their costumes and clothes, and making their beds.

We didn't go to the funeral. Leale went down to Melbourne by herself to represent our family. I realise now, sitting up on this home-made bunk bed, which is beginning to be too narrow and short for me, that I haven't been to a funeral where the person in the coffin meant anything to me, yet I've been to dozens of funerals, singing. At school the nuns take us out of class and we walk in two neat lines over to the church in the middle of the concrete playground. There we sing at the funerals of other people. Many times I've harmonised to the words of *Nearer My God To Thee*, as a black dressed widow cried into her handkerchief.

If I had sung at Grace's funeral would I be able to let her go?

When Si and Beryl arrive with their children two days later, and Uncle Joe turns up one morning, having hitched from the bus station in town, the house fills up a little and slips into a gentle routine, despite the banging and hammering of the builders next door. Rumour is the new owner is a millionaire and building a mansion. The intrigue of this is the only thing that stops us from feeling sorry that our vacant playground has gone. That and the sacking of Mr Whitlam last November are the main topics of conversation around the dinner table at night.

'Do you realise what this means to us as Australians, to have our own Prime Minister sacked like that, by the Queen of England?' demands seventeen-year-old Ann.

It's the first time any of the older children have joined in a conversation with the adults. Perhaps it's the lack of numbers here at the moment, so that we are all eating together rather than the usual two or three shifts. This means some of the teenagers and Si's

son, Tom who is studying at university, stay around the table after dinner and have their say.

'The man was going to ruin us, Ann,' argues Uncle Si, 'spending money like it grew on trees, then when he ran out started borrowing from anyone who'd let him, blow the economy.'

'I must admit,' Frank says, 'it was a worry, sweetheart,' seemingly nervous to take sides against his clever daughter.

'But the precedent it sets up for –' Ann begins.

'What appalls me,' interrupts Tom, 'is the gutless way in which the majority of the population abandoned Whitlam within weeks of it happening.'

'Exactly,' says Si, thumping his fist on the table, 'even his own supporters saw it for what it was.'

'How could you not with the media coverage of it, completely bloody biased.' says Ann, and I watch to see if she gets in trouble for swearing. But Uncle Joe shouts out 'Yes.' so loudly it stops everyone and we turn towards him.

His hands grip his tangle of hair as he struggles to find the words, 'It's just, so… God, I mean, who are we?… a nation of… Do we believe in any… or care about…?'

We've never heard Joe say so many words, and whilst there is little sense in them and he's now looking at the floor, we take a moment to let the words settle in the room, as if welcoming them and encouraging them to come again.

'Tom's right though,' says Frank eventually, 'I don't agree with Whitlam's methods, but this sacking… it makes us look gutless, and scared. If we don't learn to stick up for ourselves we'll turn into a bloody pathetic little country that anyone can ask anything of.'

Uncle Si's face is burning red, and I don't think it's just from the claret he's drinking, 'You sound like a bloody republican, Frank, or worse, a communist.'

Tom laughs with scorn, 'If it weren't for Whitlam, Dad, you'd be forking out a bucket load for my university degree. But you don't mind that sort of socialism do you?'

Beryl interrupts before Si and Tom come to blows, 'Well,' she says, drawing out her words, 'it would never happen back home in the States.'

'No,' says Frank as quick as a fox, 'they'd just assassinate him.'

Most of them laugh, but Beryl looks hurt, as if the idea is not one to joke about. She must be eager for Uncle Bill to arrive tomorrow, to support her in this argument. Although I imagine Uncle Bill might side with the Australians.

Leale walks past with a wet sheet from the boys' dormitory and says, 'What does it mean for our children, that's what I want to know?'

With my head resting on my hands on the table I listen as the argument continues, wondering if talking passionately about this topic means none of us have to talk about Grace.

Without Uncle Will here yet, the rosters for the washing up teams are confusing, but we try and sort it out amongst ourselves. If no one calls me to help I slip away and back into bed. If you're quiet and unassuming in this house, it's easy to be forgotten.

Martha has been kind to me for months, even though February is not far away and both of us will be fifteen for nearly four weeks, she seems to have let that go. She tries to get me out of bed and down to the beach, offering all of her special belongings that normally I wouldn't be allowed to breathe on. Her new sarong, the tanning lotion she saved

up for and hides in her drawer, even her new overalls, the ones that are cut off like shorts. But none of it tempts me away from the darkness of the dormitory. Not yet.

Because I know that one day there's a chance Grace will begin to fade from me, just as the Polaroids in the playroom photo albums have begun to do. And the idea that she might completely vanish is more terrifying than this misery I'm trying to maintain.

As it is I've already sneaked out of the dorm, drawn back into the sunlight towards my beloved sea. Alone I've swum out the back and caught waves in, and not felt sad. How can I do that to her? How can I still swim and catch waves and let the sun warm my skin when her skin is cold, and her bones buried? It seems unfair and I struggle every day to remember her.

Do the dead only see things in black and white? Slowly I begin to draw again, but only in charcoal and pencil, my equivalent of wearing black. In my drawings at school I sketch the three-dimensional objects the teacher puts in front of us. But here at the coast house I'm free to draw what's in my head and so slowly I transfer the story of Grace and me onto paper, notebooks, the back of newspapers, inside magazines, even on the wet sand. There I put the things we did together, sitting and talking by the old tree next door, swimming on our backs, or cross-legged on the ocean floor sipping pretend tea.

In these drawings, where I've given great detail and attention to the sea, the sand, rocks, cordial bottles and thongs, I can't draw Grace's face, or even my own. Both of us are just outlines, still and empty.

'Have you ever kissed a vacuum cleaner?' he asks me.

I'm too tipsy to understand the question, but enjoy the sensation of not caring. Martha has dragged me away with her tonight, New Year's Eve, and I haven't been in this

altered state since we took mushrooms last summer. If I had known that drinking could numb me like this, I would have come out a long time ago.

'No,' I laugh.

He laughs too. 'Well it's a bit what your kissing's like. It feels as if you're going to suck my tongue down your throat.'

'Oh,' I say, not even embarrassed, for there's no reason to feel bad after four rum and cokes.

'It's okay. You're really good despite that,' he says quickly. 'All you've got to do is slow down your tongue, don't move it around so much... want to try again?'

It's way past midnight and we are in the middle of the bush, on someone's property just out of town. There's a band playing noisily in the wool shed, covers of Doobie Brothers and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. The olds were keen to get rid of as many teenagers as possible so it was easy for me to tag along with the others. One of the advantages of coming from a big family is that you get away with more. Uncle Si has even let his daughter, Genevieve, invite her boyfriend to the house for a few days. Although Troy has to sleep in the boys' dorm, he's still a boyfriend, something the house has never had before. They go off on long walks to Monkey Cove and come back all red faced, and I laugh when Beryl asks them if they got sunburnt again.

There's a small jetty by one of the dams on the property in front of me, and a boy by my side. His name is Jared and his hair is the colour of wattle bloom from surfing. He has gorgeous dark eyes and a really cute nose that spreads out gently on his dark face. He's seventeen and lives in Maroubra in Sydney, and is looking for sponsorship this year, so he can go to surfing competitions overseas. His mother says it won't be easy to find because

he's part Aboriginal and there are still a lot of racist people around, but Jared doesn't seem worried. He says surfing goes beyond race.

Offering my mouth and tongue to him again I see what he means, this is much nicer than my first-ever kiss at midnight. Some guy who stank of beer came out of nowhere and grabbed me even before the countdown had finished and stuck his big sloppy tongue in my mouth, moving it around like the propeller of a boat. I just presumed that was how it was done.

'Hmmm,' he says when we stop, 'You're a quick learner. That was nice.' He turns his head on the side and looks at me. The smile on his face is so sweet it could belong to a girl, but Jared smells like a boy – of sweat and something old and comfortable, as if he's been around for a long time and knows things. It makes me feel pretty for the first time to be the reason for that smile. 'Do you want another rum and coke?'

'No. I've had enough.' I say, not wanting to break this romantic setting. My first real kiss, a handsome boy beside me on a jetty near water, of course. How could this happen without water nearby? The lights from the wool shed bounce off the white ghost gums and it feels like mythical giants surround us, guarding us from the bad things that sometimes come when you're not looking.

'And anyway,' I continue, a cheeky grin comes unexpected onto my face and I think I'm flirting, 'If you go up there, you mightn't come back.'

He laughs and settles back down, kissing me again. We stay on the jetty for another hour, kissing and talking. He holds my hand in his and I look down at them on his lap, milk and dark chocolate fingers intertwined. I tell him about the coast house, about all my cousins, my eleven brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, but not about Grace. Jared tells me how lucky I am, says the idea of such a house is very cool.

'I've only got an uncle, my mum's brother,' he says, 'we're down here staying with him for Chrissy. She didn't think she'd ever find him again, there's meant to be another sister somewhere as well.'

I'm about to ask him what he means, wondering if like our Uncle Eddie, his family forgot to tell him about some of his relations. Before I can, a voice shouts behind us, 'Rose!'

Turning around I notice most of the lights from the wool shed have been turned off, that Jared and I are sitting now in the dark. 'I have to go.'

He leans forward to kiss me again, our tongues gently dance together. 'Happy New Year,' he says when we're done.

'Rose, is that you down there?' I hear Troy's voice and jump up, worried I'll get in trouble, although I'm not sure what for.

This is the moment I should say something to Jared, sitting there looking up at me, something meaningful and intelligent about the night, how special it was for me, but I can't find the right words.

'Ah, well, I'll see you then.'

'Yeah, maybe,' he says standing up. 'I'm heading back up to Sydney tomorrow, got a comp on Tuesday.'

'Right,' I say. Mark and Troy are coming down the slope towards us. 'Well good luck with it all, the sponsorship. I'll look out for you in my brothers' surfing magazines.'

He laughs and turns from me to my brother who is suddenly beside me. Troy moves into the space between Jared and me.

'Everything all right here, Rose?' he asks me, although he's looking straight at Jared.

'Yeah,' I say, annoyed.

Mark gives Jared a nod in the way of greeting and Jared returns it with a smile. Troy turns his back on Jared and says to us, 'Come on, we're going.'

Troy has driven us all here in his car, which seems to have given him some authority over me. I don't understand why he's so cross and look at Mark for an explanation. My brother just looks at the ground and mumbles, 'Come on, Rose.'

I move my head around Troy's body to say goodbye to Jared, who is leaning to one side trying to find me.

'Bye,' I say.

'See ya,' he says.

'Come on,' Troy says, pulling my arm.

In the car on the way home everyone is quiet. It's about three o'clock in the morning and I'm squashed in the middle of the back seat between Robert, Martha and Genevieve, who are all asleep. Mark sits up front with our driver, who smokes a joint and drives too fast.

'Did I see you kissing that bloke?' Troy asks, eyeing me off in the rear vision mirror.

Who are you? I think to myself. Why would I have to answer to you, you're not even family. But I don't say anything. I'm worried that if he knows I was kissing Jared, he would know I was drinking as well and might tell Leale and Frank. I wonder what Genevieve sees in him, he's a huge boy, massive shoulders, plays union no doubt. His nose is spread all over his face, but not like Jared's, Troy's has been broken about four times from football and he looks like a meathead.

'You know he's an Abo, don't you?' he says, blowing smoke towards the mirror at me.

'So?' I say angrily.

Troy turns to Mark beside him. 'Your sister's been pashing off an Abo down there, mate, he could have done anything to her and you wouldn't know. I wouldn't let my sister off like that, she could turn into a real mole.'

'Fuck off, Troy, just leave it,' says Mark, before I've got time to say something similar. The fact that Mark is using the F word again is a sign that his God has lost some of His appeal. Troy laughs loudly and turns the music up. I'm glad he's going tomorrow, back up to Queensland. Hopefully we can all convince Genevieve he's a jerk and she'll drop him.

He can't ruin my night, though. Nothing could take away this feeling inside me, this tingle between my legs that's growing into a distracting pulse. As if needing to wee I clench myself closed then open, to make the feeling increase, and lose myself in the pleasure of it. The rum and coke warming me up and not letting the sensation go away.

New Year's Day is quiet. I wake up late and by the time I get to the kitchen the breakfast things have been washed up and put away. It's almost eleven so Leale and Kit and the other mothers would be down the beach already. I put the kettle on and slice some bread for toast. The room looks strangely clean and empty. The tables and chairs are still down on the lawn from last night's barbie, and it feels as if we're moving out and have sold off some of the furniture. And for a moment it hits me that this might happen, that one day the olds might sell the house and none of this will be here for me. What if it's true that Jeffrey and Sarah want to sell their share of the house, and then they all decide to sell?

It's too big a concept for my throbbing head so I push it aside and think about more immediate concerns, like whether Troy has said anything to my parents about last night, whether I'm in trouble or not. He would have left by now, and I can only hope he was gone by the time any of the olds got up. There's no one here to let me know for sure though, no one who will look at me in a way that I know means I'm busted, for there are no secrets in this house. Things tend to leak out.

In Sydney I've never seen Leale or Frank fight, let alone kiss, or hold hands. But here, over the summer, I see every part of my parents' relationship. It's the same with my aunts and uncles. Perhaps it's the wildness of the place, the sea and bush that sets free their true natures. Or maybe it's the crowded, shared accommodation, where the privacy of normal lives no longer exists. Most couples don't even sleep together here. The men are on couches and day beds, the women in tiny bedrooms with toddlers and babies. Whatever it is, this place brings out the best and worst in people.

An argument between a husband and wife is witnessed by the entire household, is heard by everyone and felt mostly by me, yet the next day those same two are in love again. A screaming aunt is suddenly sitting on the lap of her husband, who a moment ago was a 'bloody bastard', as he plays fondly with her hair. Leale and Frank can have a huge row and then hold onto each other down near the barbecue, as if they're saying their last goodbye. Children also show their emotions freely here, they fight in the morning, boys with fists, girls with words, and have made up by lunch, they are the worst of enemies, then the best of friends. A child dies, a cousin and a niece, and we grieve for her and our loss, quietly and deeply, but then get on with our summer holiday.

Like a cat stopping to lick up spilt milk it seems I'm the only one who can't let these things go. That I always need to sip them back inside me.

The toast pops up. I'm starving and crave vegemite. Taking my tea and toast out onto the balcony, I sit on one of the deck chairs and look down at the beach. The glare off the sand hurts my eyes and I squint to relieve them. The brightly coloured umbrellas and new Christmas toys: large blow-up rainbow coloured balls, yellow plastic boats and red surf mats break up the white sand and black driftwood. It looks very festive down there and I long to dive into the ocean and clear my head, but am too nervous to see Leale or anyone else in case they know.

From the side path I hear voices. It's my uncles, Bill and Joe. They appear around the side of the house, one holding the chessboard, the other the box of wooden pieces. Watching them walk past to the tables down on the lawn I don't move, hoping they might not see me. Part of me wants to stay hidden, so that I don't have to face anyone, but then the waiting is unbearable.

'Morning, Rose,' Uncle Bill says in that slow, deliberate way of his.

'Morning.'

'Did you have a good time at the party last night?' he asks politely.

'Yes thanks.'

'Goodo.'

Nothing more. Joe nods his morning greeting and I know they know nothing.

I let myself relax then, and settle into this new year, 1976. My uncles set up their game, Uncle Bill fills his pipe and lights it, the sweet smell of the tobacco drifts up to me on the balcony and clears my foggy head. The taste of Jared's kiss is still inside my mouth and I move my tongue around searching for the memory of it, the lovely soft feel of our kissing. I'd like to tell someone about my night, about the beautiful boy I met who taught me how to kiss and made me wet for the first time. But there's no one to tell. Even if Grace

were still here it seems too private, too intimate to let out. I might try and spend the whole day alone, go round to the small cove and sun bake, and if there's no one there I can swim in the rock pools and feel myself, touch the part of me that pulsates whenever I think of Jared.

Maybe the real reason the olds fight and then make up so passionately in this house is because none of them are having sex. Although the idea of my parents or any of my aunts and uncles naked and feeling what I'm feeling now, between my legs, is weird, those who have had children must have had sex. I can't deny them that. Uncle Joe and Eddie are the only ones in Leale's family without children, I've never met Eddie, but Joe's wild look, his non-communicative personality and obsession with chess might be the reason he's never had sex. Although sometimes I wonder if he just feels things the way I do, if he's over sensitive to people's emotions.

There's something in the dark rings under Joe's eyes, the way he reads so much, as if hiding himself in the stories of fiction allows him to be free of the stories he can't help consuming. Even his job as a proofreader would fill his head up, leaving little room for much else. I don't want to become like him, to avoid life and love, living alone in a boarding house and only ever coming out when he comes here at Christmas. As if he made a decision long ago that it was only for his family that he was willing to try. I've seen the way he observes what goes on around him, the pain on his face when a parent or aunty tells off one of his nephews or nieces. The sorrow he feels when one of us is losing miserably in a game of cards or ping-pong. Sometimes I've seen him with the same expression on his face that I have, both of us watching a tired child wander around the house still in their swimming costume, wishing someone would put them to bed. I know he's taking it all in, just like me.

An imagine appears before me and I cling to it, to prove to myself that I'm not my uncle, that I have the capacity to take in other people beyond this family. It's of Jared, naked and brown and sweaty beside me, and the two of us are passing our scents and smells onto and into each other.

My legs are crossed and I sit on the edge of the seat and move back and forth, caressing myself. It feels hypnotic and stops me thinking. I could do it forever. Then laughter comes from behind me. There are cousins in the kitchen putting the kettle on. Sitting perfectly still, petrified they've been watching me, that they know what I've been doing, I wait for the pay outs. When none come I gulp down the last of my tea.

There's no privacy in this house, nowhere to even think quietly, let alone take advantage of a lover. Chess and reading, the activities that need silence are usually done late at night or when the house is empty of activity, during sleep time in the afternoons or now, when everyone's down on the beach. But sex requires closed doors and an intimacy that's impossible.

There might be someone I've not met yet, some boy I'll fall in love with when I'm older, a stranger who takes me away from this family and helps me experience another life. The thought fills me with a frivolous joy, like the excitement I remember feeling on Christmas Eve's when I was little, waiting for the filled pillowcase to be put on the end of my bed. It has an innocence about it, like when I still believed in the tooth fairy, still trusted the things I couldn't see.

But what if this person doesn't exist? Or what if he was Jared and I've already lost him, like I lost Grace?

The lust inside me dries up and I don't even want to swim any more.

Five

It can take years to build a barrier to keep people out. I've been constructing my invisible wall since kindergarten, forcing my classmates to remain strangers and never allowing them in. As soon as those girls realised I wasn't going to be their friend they left me alone. Any time a new girl joined our class after that it could take me weeks not to hear her, not to feel what she was experiencing, the terror of a new girl's first days. But I managed it, I'd drift off inside my head and get stuck in some moment long gone and stay there until I was either in trouble with the teacher for being vague, or the girl had stopped her whimpering. It's a skill that really only works on a few people at a time.

Everything was working fine until Leale decided to abandon the nuns and the Catholic education system for not educating us enough. There wasn't a discussion about this, one day we were told to try on second hand uniforms from the local state school's clothing pool, the following week our own uniforms were donated back to our previous school. And before I had time to protest and explain the situation to anyone, I found myself in a classroom of thirty girls and boys who I had never met before.

Change isn't the way I've learnt to manage my ailment. My sanity exists only because I've kept a routine of distance from any new individual who tries to come too close. But now I'm the new girl, surrounded by strangers and new teachers and every pore of my skin is open to them.

A car pulls up.

'Where'ya goin, love?'

I hadn't meant to come this way, if anything I should be running the other way, away from the familiar, like Kathryn did. Having taken all of Frank's twenty-cent coin

collection, the one he keeps for the Harbour Bridge toll and ferry fares by his bedside table, I had enough money to catch a train to somewhere. I wanted to go north, or maybe even west, but when I walked up to the ticket office at Central Station I got scared. The only destination I knew of and could afford was Nowra. The train to Byron where Kathryn lives was too expensive.

As it was the ticket seller got the shits with me when I handed her fifteen one-dollar piles, made up of twenty-cent pieces. I had sticky taped them together to make it easier to handle, but she complained it was going to take her too long to get the tape off. Standing there quietly, my hand on the counter ready for a ticket I hoped was coming, I kept my head down and looked at my neat piles of money on the other side of the counter, near her. I could hear her breathing heavily, annoyed that I wasn't going to go away. She sighed and huffed loudly, but shoved a ticket in my direction. I arrived in Nowra at 12.30 this afternoon and have until after 3.00 when school breaks up before they notice I've gone.

The inside of the car beside me is full of empty chip packets and lots of Tally-Ho papers on the floor, there's spilt tobacco on the passenger seat. The car, or the smell of man driving it, reminds me of my brothers' bedrooms. Dirty socks, unwashed shirts and stale air.

'I'm headed to Bega, that work for you?' he says when I still haven't answered him.

It's 2.30 in the afternoon and I've been walking and hitching along the highway for hours, his car is the first to stop for me.

'Okay,' I say, climbing in.

On his rear-view mirror hang two small black figures, one of them is a little plastic skull. It makes me think of the real skull Frank has at home, along with the body it came with. When he was still teaching anatomy at the university he would use the skeleton for

lessons. We call it Fred. It lives in a small wooden box on top of the linen cupboard, piles of bones all clumped together. The other figure hanging in front of me is more demonic, it stares at me, swinging in time with the movement of the car and reminds me of the face Martha pulled a few summers ago, the one I never saw. I didn't tell her I was running away, didn't trust that she wouldn't try and stop me. She's never understood how painful it can be to hear so much, to take in so much. What choice did I have but leave?

'You know sometimes,' the man beside me says, 'in the past, I've picked up chicks and they'd be wearing these tight mini skirts so that when they sat down you could see their undies.'

He smiles at me. His teeth are yellow, but straight. His hair is oily and his fringe sticks to his forehead as if it's been raining. His grey eyes squint at me, trying to stay open. The pasty skin on his face shows scars of acne. I smile back. Some of the tobacco is sticking to the skin under my thighs. He has the car heater on and I'm beginning to sweat.

'They wouldn't have any money, you know? And so they'd say well look I can't pay you nothin, but you know?' he says. I don't know, but I think I should be polite and smile at him again, because he keeps looking at me. 'They'd suggest we go off somewhere quiet and they'd pay me there, you know what I mean?'

The rest of Frank's twenty-cent collection would only amount to ten dollars and I've kept that on purpose for food. I thought hitching was meant to be free. Isn't that the point? This guy keeps glancing over at me and down to my legs. Does he think I'm stupid wearing such a short skirt in the middle of winter? If Leale saw me dressed like this she'd tell me I could catch a death of cold. I took my tights off at the train station in Nowra as the nylon was making the back of my knees itchy.

'You Stupid Fucking Bitch.'

The words fill the cabin of the car like a loud echo and I wonder where they came from. It couldn't be the man as he's still smiling at me. But his expression looks strained, as if he's trying hard to maintain the grin, that another look inside him wants to come out. Did he just call me a stupid bitch, or did he think it? Did I think those words? The inside of the car suddenly feels cold, as if the heater has stopped blowing warm air onto my bare legs.

'Right,' I say to him, because he seems to be waiting for a response about those other girls he was talking about. I figure if I don't say much else it'll be better, that like the ticket seller this guy will give up and I can keep my ten dollars. Through the windscreen I notice the way the white lines on the road slip so quickly under the car. I've never sat up front before on the drive down south. I wonder if they paint the lines on the road with a machine, they would have to otherwise it would take them forever. These thoughts are better than the feeling of dread that has entered the car, a feeling suddenly so strong I can no longer hold it off.

I'm torpid under the weight of it. My heavy limbs feel like they've been tied to the seat, for I can no longer move them. This man's thoughts are falling out of him like marbles from a string bag that's been cut. I'm going to die in this car today and my body will never be found. He's going to hurt me so much I won't be able to scream, my voice will fail me.

He still smiles as he drives, as if he's imagining each part of the scenario that awaits us. Soon there will be a dirt road that he'll turn onto. It's still daylight and the weak afternoon winter sun is soft and beautiful, but there's no one around. No summer tourists and travellers to see what's about to happen to me, to witness my death. I could try and get out of the car when we stop, but he'll hit me in the face and knock me unconscious. Maybe that'll be better than being awake and feeling everything I'm feeling now, for real.

There's a dull calm in knowing how your life will end, and that there's nothing you can do about it. This stranger beside me has plans so strong I can read them effortlessly. Just as I could on the first day of my new school, where I felt and heard everything and almost collapsed under the weight of it. I tried to be sick everyday after that, clutching my side to feign appendicitis, complaining of sore glands and a high temperature so they'd think of glandular fever. But Leale and Frank always saw through these dramatics and never noticed what was really wrong with me, how pale and exhausted I was. How the change of school had tore open the wound I'd long protected by stability and hard work. They kept sending me back, so I had to run away.

Perhaps the lesion that's still exposed is why this man's intentions beside me have been so easy to read.

We continue driving, him searching for the turn off, me rigid with acceptance. There's a sound in the car, as if two people are humming very different tunes. One is my killer, his song is familiar and I try to place it. The other humming must be me, but I can't imagine I'm physically capable of it, my inertia is so strong. It sounds like a hymn and the thought that it might be my sisters singing at my funeral loosens some of the hold that has been over me. I realise now what the man is humming, and the smugness of the tune enrages me. It's a song my brothers and cousins have played often down south, and I can almost hear Jim Morrison singing the words, *This is the end, beautiful friend, the end.*

It's as if an angry, invisible angel has flown into the car and unlocked the force that has glued me to my seat in such a passive way, for suddenly I fling both arms up in the air and start pummeling the man on the shoulders and around his head, screaming words of abuse I've only dreamt of saying out loud.

'LET ME OUT, LET ME FUCKING OUT YOU FUCKING ARSEHOLE, YOU BASTARD CUNT FUCKWIT, LET ME OUT OR I'LL FUCKING TAKE YOU WITH ME.'

Unprepared for this outburst, he lets go of the wheel and puts his hands around his head to protect it from my fierce blows, around his ears from my screaming. The car brakes and swerves over to the side and I know I have a chance to get out. I try and pull at the door handle, willing to jump out of the car rather than die at his hands. But as soon as I stop hitting him, and just before the car hits a tree, the man grabs the wheel and slams his foot down on the break so we stop too suddenly. My head hits the dashboard and I feel that I'm about to pass out. But something stops me, for if it do that I'll be lost forever. Neither of us have seat belts on and the man is holding his head, there's blood dripping down his face from a gash. I grab my backpack and jump out, running up the road away from him.

A moment later, when I hear the car reverse out of the ditch, the wheels struggling in the mud, I realise I have to run into the forest and hide. The darkness in there isn't enough to protect me, but to stay out on the highway will only bring him back. To the sound of acceleration and the screeching of tyres, I jump behind a tree and crouch down. Yet before I've even settled into a hiding position the car speeds past me. It seems my killer is as keen to get away from me as I am from him.

For the next half-hour I take my anger out on the trees, intermittently thumping them with my fists, knowing that my puny power could never hurt them, then hugging them hard, thanking them for being something solid, a living creature that means me no harm. I stamp and kick up the ground, screaming a horrible, high pitched squeal like a cat, creating a whirlwind of fallen leaves and sticks, a circular flurry of bush around me. Punishing the

eucalyptus trees and spiky ferns for not warning me sooner, laying blame anywhere else but me. Finally I collapse on the forest floor and sob into the dirt. My heart stops beating so frantically and now feels broken.

It's almost dark. The force of hitting my fists against the tree has broken my watch. It has stopped at exactly 3 o'clock, the time I would have left school and walked home with my brothers and sisters. It must be closer to 5 o'clock now, and I have to make a decision about what to do next. It's got so cold I've changed into a pair of jeans and put on as many shirts as I can fit, and both the jumpers I packed. Leaving the security of the forest I venture back out onto the highway, praying to as many gods as I can think of to protect me and get me to the coast house alive.

They would know I was missing by now. Or would they? There are still a lot of children living at home. Maybe no one will notice I'm missing until after dinner, when the washing up is being done, or not until Leale does her rounds, counting heads on pillows and finding she's one short.

A number of cars and trucks begin to pass, they must be workers going home for the day, back to warmed houses and families, to hot dinners and flannelette sheets. The more that pass and don't stop, the calmer I become. As if their rejection of me is some sort of confirmation that not every driver is a potential killer. I'm crouched by the side of the road, a ball-like creature with my knees to my chest, both arms protectively hugging my legs as my head looks down at the ground. My thumb is barely stuck out reluctantly asking for another lift. If I were one of these drivers, I'd be tempted to pass me as well.

Breathing deeply, I take in the evening smells of the bush. A breeze is travelling through the gum trees behind me. I feel it gently pull my hair as it passes, heading across

the road into the state forest. The sound of it breaks up the silence of the almost empty highway and reminds me of the calm of being alone.

Maybe I will have to live a life like Uncle Joe, or even Uncle Eddie, who left the family and the mainland back in the sixties, and went to live in Tasmania. No one has seen him since. His address is a post box and he has no phone. There must be advantages to being a hermit, for both my uncles haven't changed the way they live. Perhaps this journey is the beginning of my life as a monk, this trip some kind of pilgrimage to find the meaning of life, or perhaps just some peace.

The ground in front of me is copper coloured. The dirt from the side of the road mixed up with the clay soil of the south coast. I pick up a stick and start scratching there, making lines and squares, circles and triangles. Rubbing them out, I start a drawing. It's of the man with the pock marked face and slimy hair. I draw the look I saw inside him – the one that captured his every thought and gave him away, hidden as it was behind a menacing grin. Once I've put his face there, I can rub it out and it will be gone.

'Well, do you want a ride or not,' laughs a woman's voice. An old Valiant sits in front of me like a chariot and a woman with a colourful scarf around her head is smiling at me. Before I move I look into her face for a moment, to see what's hidden there. When all I see is a sad tiredness and disappointment, I rub out the drawings in front of me and jump into her car.

It smells sweet and clean and I settle into the seat and thank the trees and the wind and even my monk-like uncles for getting me a lift. My driver is a sculptor. She lives down near Tathra and is on her way back from an exhibition of her work in Sydney. The disappointment I felt inside her is because none of her work was sold last night, which, she tells me, doesn't bode well for the rest of the exhibition. She's keen to separate herself from

the madness of Sydney and its art scene, and return to the peace and quiet of her life down south. I'm clearly riding with a kindred spirit.

'Have you been hitching long?' she asks me.

Telling her about my first ride, I realise that it no longer hurts me, that I can speak of it as if it happened to someone else.

'So, you just felt it, felt the stuff he was going to do to you?'

'Yes.'

'What a gift that must be.'

I nod, not wanting to let on that mostly it's a burden.

'You must be in shock,' she says, glancing over at me.

'Why?'

'Well, you're so calm, I mean, my God, if I felt that someone was going to do that to me, well, I'd freak out.' The look of her face is troubled and I worry I've made her day worse by telling her my story. But then she smiles and her voice softens. 'You must have some grand guardian angel watching over you, that's for sure.'

There's an opportunity to tell her about the strange force that came into the car and of how it helped free me and gave me the strength to fight. That I realise now it might have been Grace, who in death has become stronger and fierce. I would also like to talk about drawing, as this woman's an artist and she might have some ideas about freeing what's inside you, letting it out through other means. But the music that plays in her tape deck is Joni Mitchell, and it makes me think of my sisters, and of home, and if I don't force myself to sleep immediately I'll lose what little courage I've gained from getting this far.

The smell of incense wakes me. It smells like the perfume Kathryn used to wear when she was still living at home, the one that gave Leale headaches. A stalk of purple sticks out of the ashtray and I breathe in deeply to restore my strength, imaging Kathryn here somewhere, guiding me. We're just crossing the bridge at Batemans Bay, the lights from the town reflect on the river, and the wooden beams rattle underneath the car. In less than an hour I'll be at the coast house. There's a pouch of tobacco on the dashboard, it's Drum, the brand Martha smokes. I haven't smoked since Grace died.

'Can I bludge one of these?'

'Sure,' the sculptor woman says, watching out of the corner of her eye to see if I can roll my own. I lick the Tally-Ho paper and join it together, feeling I could be Kathryn five years ago in the back room in Balmain. 'So you're not at school?' she adds, passing me the car's cigarette lighter.

Suddenly cool and totally together as I hitch my way to a new life, I say casually 'Um, I don't know. I'm deciding what I want to do.'

My first drawback gives me tobacco spins, which I savour. My answer seems to agree with my driver for she nods her head, like she understands the need for time out, in a peaceful setting to make important decisions.

'Are you hungry?'

At the word, 'hungry', my stomach suddenly aches and I realise I haven't eaten anything since this morning's bowl of cornflakes at home. It seems another lifetime ago.

'Yeah, I'm starving.'

'There's a cheese and tomato sandwich in my bag you're welcome to.'

'Thanks.'

A little over an hour later she drops me at the top of Emery Beach Road.

'Good luck with those decisions,' she says as I gather my backpack and climb out of her car.

'Yeah, and thanks for the lift, I was worried I'd have to sleep out there all night.'

With a sad smile she looks at me, worried.

'But I'm here now, and my aunty's coming down soon, so... that'll be good,' I lie, so she can go home with a free conscience.

'All right then, take care,' she says before driving away.

Walking down the hill I get a glimpse of the coast house and am momentarily confused, as I was expecting to see yellow and instead see olive green, lit up under the street light. Last summer, as the new house next door took shape and most of us were grieving so heavily, the uncles, having mended everything that needed mended twice already, decided to paint the house.

It's been raining and the eucalypt trees smell fresh and strong, like the Vicks Vaporub Leale rubbed onto our chests when we were little and had a cold. It's dark and I have to feel my way down the side of the house to the fuse box, where the spare key is kept. I've never turned on the electricity before, it's always on by the time we get here. Si's writing is just visible next to a couple of the switches. *Electricity On and Off*, and *Hot Water On and Off*. I turn both to *On*, grab the key and go round to the front door.

'Hello,' I say to the house once I'm in the playroom. 'Didn't expect to see me so soon did you?'

Searching for her breath, it comes over me. Mosquito coils and salty dust, mothballs and mouse droppings, mattresses filled with my families' scent. The whiff of mouldy orange skins hidden behind the backs of couches and the rubber of old pillows.

There's also the smell of wet tealeaves and burnt toast, of toothpaste and sun tan oil, odours of the house in use, although this house has not been used since January. Can smells, like ghosts, linger in a house, alive and breathing?

To have the house completely to myself is such a luxury and I let myself take in everything she has to offer, my stomach tingling at the thought that I don't have to share her with anyone.

Knowing the layout of the house so well I could go through it blindfolded and so don't turn a light on. Once in the front room I look over the balcony to the beach. Even though it's cloudy there must be a moon up there somewhere, because the sand glows bright in the dark. A wave of sadness hits me. I've never arrived here at night before. We always left Sydney so early in the morning we would be here by the afternoon, in time for a swim. I don't know what I thought was going to be here for me now, but not to see the sand spotted with people, umbrellas, beach balls and surf mats, makes me feel strange. I shake off the sadness before it takes hold of me and run into the girls' dorm, turning on the light laughing out loud at the choice of beds.

It's so cold I decide to take a top bunk in the middle of the room instead of one by the window. I don't have any sheets, Leale usually brings them, so I go to the big cupboard in the playroom and climb on a chair to reach the black plastic bags stored there. The knot is an adult knot and I'm too tired and cold to bother doing it properly, so I tear a big hole in the bag and all of the grey and black woollen blankets fall onto the floor, along with a handful of moth balls. They sound like dropped maltezers on a cinema floor as they roll into the corners of the playroom. It's nice to hear the sound in the silence of just me and the house.

After I tuck four blankets around the mattress on top of the bedspread, hunger hits me again. But the idea of making something from the food I know will be in the cupboards seems such an effort I just slide under the wool and fall asleep with the light on.

Rain falls heavily on the corrugated-iron roof. The sound of it comes into my dreams where I see Grace drowning. She's waving at me to help her, but I've forgotten how to swim.

I force myself awake to find the long dormitory quiet and empty. It's freezing. I never knew it could get this cold here, although I've never been here in winter before. Longing to cover my body in a hug of warm water, I jump out of bed, pulling off my clothes and stand naked, waiting for the shower to heat up. It takes forever.

Getting dressed again I go to the fuse box to check the right switches were turned on last night. They have been, so it doesn't make sense that the water could still be cold. Seeing that the rain looks like it will be here all day, I go back to bed and hide some more in sleep.

Yesterday sleep took over me like a coma. It's strange how tired a body can get and how sometimes it just has to shut down and rejuvenate. As I walk into the kitchen this morning it's a little confusing that there isn't anyone here again. It's a stupid thing to feel, who did I think was going to be here, saying, 'Good morning, Rose, sleep well?'

One of the grey blankets serves as a shawl and is wrapped around my shoulders, keeping me warm. The potbelly stove the uncles put in last year is the only heating in the house, but all the wood is wet. Down on the beach I collect kindling and driftwood, wrapping them up in another blanket to carry back up to the house and dry out. The sand is

the colour of morning wee. There are no footprints on it but mine. Even the seaweed hasn't come to the beach today – perhaps it's warmer in the water than out. The dark grey clouds are full of rain and it makes the sea grey as well. These are not the colours I hoped to find here. Where is blue?

We used to be able to get wood on the vacant blocks on either side of us, but the block that's the right of way to the beach for most of the street has been cleaned up. The big gum trees are still there, but the bush scrub has gone and the grass is all mowed away. The story the neighbourhood tells is that a woman won the land in a divorce settlement in the mid-sixties, and won't sell it or build on it, which suited us fine. It means we've been able to sit on the windowsills in the girls' dorm and look out onto trees, rather than someone's brick wall. I hope the clearing is just new fire regulations and nothing more.

The other block, the one that used to have our fallen down gum tree, is now suffocating under a huge, ugly red brick house, the one they started building last Christmas. It looks like a fortress of walls and gates so that you can't see in, and they can't see out. Every square inch of the block is house, garage, or wall, except for a small, landscaped yard on the beach side of the block. No window looks out to the sea. They all face inwards, to a courtyard with a swimming pool in it, as if this was the most beautiful vista they could imagine. I had to stand on the side railing of the balcony to see the pool, noticing the reflection this morning on one of their walls and wanting to find the source. It's a small in-ground pool surrounded by concrete, with sliding doors into rooms hidden by long, beige curtains. They might regret building their pool on our side of the house, and when summer comes, they'll work out why.

It seems strange to build a house on the coast if you don't want to see the sea. There's no one in there at the moment. Despite the look of the place, it's a holiday house

and unlikely to be used in the middle of winter. In fact most of the houses in this street are holiday houses and there's an eerie feeling being the only person living in such a silent street.

The new olive green of our house has almost camouflaged it from the beach. Strangers approached us last summer asking why the change, what happened to the old yellow place, that it was famous and everyone didn't want it to change. Even I didn't want it to change. Yet now, seeing what an eye sore our neighbour's house is, I'm proud of my uncles and Frank for making the coast house blend into its surroundings so well.

Our house is such a simple design, square with a wide balcony and flat tin roof. The lawn is long and open, with no trees or fence distinguishing it from the public land that leads down to the sand, whereas our neighbour's neat, landscaped yard is guarded by a fence of wrought iron, with spikes on top. From their gate a concrete path leads to cement steps that go down to the beach, as if it was their own private path to their very own beach. These were finished last summer, even before the house took shape. As the land is public property the whole street uses the stairs, and it's fun sliding down the rail, but I don't see what was wrong with the steps the men in my family carved into the hill, long before any of these other people were here.

It occurs to me that the person who designed this new house may have built it that way because of our house. Did the rest of the street tell them what happens here over the summer, the explosion of people and noise, the house seeming to split its sides under the pressure of all those inside her, and so instead of a holiday house they've built themselves a sound proof jail?

The collected beach wood lies on the floor of the playroom drying out, and I'm in the kitchen assessing the food situation.

The corner cupboards underneath the kettle and toaster are full of food. Until it runs out I'll stay here, then keep going. Maybe I'll go all the way to Tasmania and find my uncle, and together we can live in his hermit hut like crabs.

Lining the food up in categories on the floor I discover four cans of baked beans, two of tomato soup, another of chicken soup. A bag of Arborio rice, it's open and has an elastic band around it. Fortunately it has the instructions on the back, as I don't cook much, beyond the few cakes I learnt in Home Science at school and make when I'm bored or pre menstrual.

There are some stale biscuits in a plastic container, they'll come in handy later on I imagine, if I run out of the other food. A packet of Bingo Custard Powder, the instructions say I need to mix it with milk, so I might have to spend some of the ten dollars on a bottle of milk. Then I see that there's a huge packet of powdered milk I just have to add water to, so I scrap the store bought milk. Because really that ten dollars is only enough for a packet of Drum and some papers. Since smoking that rollie in the sculptor's car I have an overwhelming craving for more, and figure it will keep me occupied in the days or weeks, or however long it takes me to work out where to go next.

There are half full jars of jam and honey, three used jars of vegemite and an almost empty jar of peanut butter. A tin of Milo a third full, a small packet of self raising flour, two boxes of Weetbix, both open and half empty. At the back of cupboard I find more cans, one of tuna and three of beetroot. The tea tin is full of leaves, and there's another packet unopened as well. There's also a big tin of International Roast instant coffee if I get desperate.

First thing I do after sorting the food is make up a big jug of powdered milk. I eat three bowls of Weetbix, one after the other, barely stopping to breathe. As soon as I've finished I feel exhausted again and go back to bed. As I can't light a fire yet it seems the only warm place to be. I sleep on and off, enjoying the quiet of the house, no one telling me to get up, go outside and get some fresh air. No sisters annoying me with their music, their games, no brothers or cousins bouncing balls or their bodies up against the side of the house, boom, boom, boom. Just silence, order, peace.

It's my third night here and I make myself a dinner of warmed up baked beans with a side serve of beetroot. I try heating up the beetroot as well, but it isn't very nice.

It's so cold I've started burning old copies of *The New Yorker*, the magazine Beryl gets sent from her sister in the States. It's the only paper I can find. Every summer the house is littered with newspaper, all over the kitchen tables, the chairs, everyone bagsing sections and comics, and now there's nothing. Hopefully Beryl doesn't notice next summer. Some of these magazines go back to 1968, who's going to read that?

The covers can't be burnt though. In fact some of them are so beautiful and weird I've stuck them on the wall above my bed. My favourite is of an apartment in what I guess is New York City. It shows a small room with a table near a window. On the table are books and paper and an orange peel. Next to the table, on the windowsill is a cat, sitting in the sun. The window's open and through it you can see the city, large buildings, some trees. Just life outside. What I like about it is there are no people in the painting. The room belongs to someone, someone owns that cat, pats it and feeds it, and those books are read by someone who might have just eaten that orange, but as they aren't in the painting, it means you, the person looking at the picture feels like you own the room. When I look at it

I feel like I'm sitting on a chair just outside the painting and it's what I see. It's my table and my cat in my apartment in New York. I'm alone and living an interesting life.

The hot water still isn't on. The tank is in the boys' bathroom, just near the shower. I touch it to see if it's warm, praying that it will suddenly just work, but it's stone cold. Turning the tap next to it doesn't make any difference, so I turn it back on, worried I might have broken something. There should be instructions somewhere, although no one uses the house but family so there isn't much point.

I wish I'd paid more attention and asked more questions. But you don't ask questions in a house you've always been a child in. There's a presumption that adults know everything, and that what you need to know they'll pass on to you. Grace would know where to look, though. She didn't need to ask questions, for she noticed stuff like this, like how the uncles turned the hot water on, or where they kept important tools, like the axe I need to chop my wood.

It's a year since she died but I keep imagining she'll turn up again, especially in this house, where she really only ever existed for me.

Today I'm going for another walk, just to warm myself up and pass the time. I've lost track of how many days I've been here. It might be six, or maybe eleven. Long enough to have smoked nearly all the packet of tobacco. Long enough to be dipping stale biscuits in the custard to break up the monotony of custard or rice for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I haven't done a good job of rationing the food, eating when I wanted so that soon, after only a few days, all the cans of baked beans and soup, the Milo and Weetbix were gone.

Some bread could be made out of the self-raising floor, a damper with jam on it, to eat while it's still hot. I could cook it in the potbelly fire I've finally been able to light

because the wood is dry and I found the axe. Guilt got the better of me and I stopped burning Beryl's magazines. The milk bar around the next beach has thrown away newspapers in the bin I can use.

I've been here long enough to be thinking creatively about my diet, but not long enough to work out the hot water situation, let alone what to do next.

The rain has stopped and with the sun out the sea is blue again, the sand the colour of rust. It's not fluffy the way it is in summer, but firm like a sun-backed dirt track. The wet leaves on the trees seemed soaked in a dark green hue. The colours are so strong it's as if they were just created and the paint is still wet, dripping down the side of the beach and into the sea.

Routine is something I've been trying to maintain over the last few days. There are no parents to organise games of Scrabble or Monopoly on the wet days, no breakfast, lunch and dinner to break up the hours, for I'm trying to eat only once a day now. After I wake up I put the kettle on and go into the bathroom to wash my face in cold water. The fire is usually out so I have to find more kindling and get it going again.

After a cup of tea I go over to the game of chess I'm playing against myself. Checkers and snakes and ladders bored me after one day, so my opponent and I upgraded our skills to chess, our understanding of the game is limited, but we know where the pieces go and what they can do, and it offers us more of a challenge.

An hour of chess is usually enough before I head out for my morning walk. Down on the beach with a canvas bag I found under the sink, I collect more wood, making piles of the larger pieces of driftwood along my route, to collect on the way back. Each day I use the same grey blanket to help me drag the big pieces back up to the house. The other

blanket, my shawl, has become a poncho and is easier to wear now that I've cut a hole in the middle of it, and use some rope as a belt. This leaves my arms free to collect kindling.

Walking slowly, for time needs to be filled in, I saunter along our beach, then around to the main beach. Up at the milk bar I wait until there's no one around. There are trades people and some locals who live here that use the shop for morning papers, milk and finger buns. The smell of the buns is almost unbearable and soon I might be so hungry it won't just be newspapers I'll be scrounging from the bin. Over near the swings I sit and pretend to be an adult, a woman on a retreat, like my sculptor lady, an artist who has come to capture the beauty of the beaches. Although today, looking at the sand dunes and remembering sitting there in my sarong learning how to suck smoke out of a cigarette, I feel like an old lady whose life has already happened. It seems impossible that that day was only a short time ago.

No one ever notices me. I hide my face in a scarf and beanie a friend of Leale's knitted. It's blue like the sea.

My walk lasts till the end of the third beach, where in summer I would find sailing boats and fishermen, or children collecting shells and rocks in their plastic buckets. But now there's not even a stray dog to disguise my lonely footprints. Over the rocks and the grassy path is the pebbly beach Grace and I had our picnics on. It's not part of my routine. Just near the boat ramp on the sand is where I usually sit and draw. Not on paper, for I stupidly left Balmain without any of my pencils or charcoal. The damp sand serves as a wonderful canvas though, and each day at low tide I try and draw pictures from inside my head, using the sharp ends of the kindling in my canvas bag, or the round, smooth surface of a pebble. Shells make different patterns on the sand, and by brushing the leaves of seaweed I can fill in sections that require waves, or lines. The best part of my new studio is

that each afternoon the tide comes up and washes all of my drawings away. So the next day I'm greeted with another blank canvas and can start again.

I must smell by now. Even though it's cold and I'm not sweating, I've just finished a period and would really love a shower. With hot water from the kettle I've been filling the laundry tub and washing myself, remembering that I was once small enough to sit in the same tub as a baby. Watching the bustle and colourful movement of my sisters and cousins getting ready for bed or a younger aunt undressing another baby to go in the water after I was done. But these washes now as a teenager are not the same. I know my hair smells. Walking past the boys' bathroom mirror today I saw a stranger. 'Is that you?' I asked myself. Without a brush my hair has sprung up into coils of curls. There are shadows under my eyes and I'm thinner than I remember being. My teeth are beginning to yellow.

It has begun, I thought, I'm turning into Uncle Joe.

Why haven't they worked out where I am? Are there really so many of us they can lose one and not notice?

Standing up from drawing my reflection on the sand, the one I noticed this morning in the mirror, I make my way back to collect the driftwood. Dragging the heavy blanket along the beach feels like dragging a dead body. The load is full and I have to stop every few minutes to get my strength back, for without proper food this daily hauling of firewood has become exhausting. I rest and watch the ocean, hoping to drain some of its power to pour into me. I can feel the pull of the sea and walk towards it. As I step up to the waves, letting the bundle of wood go, I realise I have taken off my shoes and socks without noticing. The water's warmer than the air around me and this invites me further in. The familiar feeling of treading gently on the ocean floor makes walking out to sea as simple as

breathing. Soon I'm up to my chest in water. The poncho around my neck becomes heavy with soaked-up sea as a large wave knocks me over.

Just as when the man's thoughts entered me and I knew I would die, I have slipped into the narcotic state of giving up. They say drowning is peaceful, and I've found it, the peace that's under the sea. I had no idea it could be this easy. The rip that curls around my body takes me further out as waves continue to hit me whenever instinct takes over and I come up for air. My family comes to me at this moment and I wonder about the stories I've asked questions about, the sadness I've taken inside me and the loss I've nurtured. What's the point of having this so-called gift if no one cares where you are, or if you're safe? The pain of thinking about this hurts so much it feels like I've been hit across the face, the salt water drips like blood down my cheek from the blow. It isn't until I taste it in my mouth that I realise I'm no longer under the water. The rock I've been deposited on is black and smoothly flat. And the idea that the rip has chewed me up, had a taste of who I am and rejected me, spitting me out of the sea like a rotten fish, makes me start to laugh. A fit of hysteria takes over my body, forcing the water I've swallowed to spew out of my mouth in a desperate bid to reconnect with the ocean. And this makes me laugh even more, forcing large amounts of air into my lungs and giving me the hiccups.

As I drag myself off the rocks and back over to the sand, to my discarded pile of driftwood, I can't stop laughing, or hiccuping. If there were any people up in those empty houses that look down on the beach, they'd think my swim was intentional. That it was part of my plan to dive into the water fully dressed, float over to the rocks and be thrown out of the sea like a drunk from a pub.

There are tears sliding down my cheek across the salt water on my face, my body shivers and my teeth chatter from the cold as I pulsate with every new hiccup. The heavy

poncho feels like a hair shirt and I laugh and cry my way back up to the house. Inside I have just enough energy to load up the fire and crawl out of my wet clothes, before I retreat again in to sleep.

Nights are the worst, the house seems so huge without everyone in it, and I camp out close to the fire, where I start to read. I've resisted reading up until recently, for as a hermit who plays chess and doesn't wash her hair, there's a risk I will lose my identity altogether and transform forever into my uncle. But what else fills the day? There's no paper to draw on and the stubs of pencils I find in the corners or in drawers by the adults' beds, are broken and of no use. Reading is better than staring at the walls until I get tired again.

The first time I went into one of the adults' bedrooms I felt like an intruder. Those rooms have been off limits since I was born. Babies and naughty toddlers are the only children who get put in there. Lying on a bed that overlooked the beach I contemplated moving my things in, but it seemed so small and adult like. The walls were almost bare but for a few framed prints of antique motor cars and an aerial shot of the suburb of Emery, just after it was subdivided, our house and a few others the only ones in the street. The smell was different too. The musty sweat of uncles, the sweet perfume of church-going aunts, and the queasy smell of babies – lanolin, powder and sick. Somehow, there was also the yeasty aroma of beer and the grease of a lamp chop, as if an uncle had just burped after dinner. More ghost smells.

Two days after almost drowning and then bobbing up like a cork, I come home from one of my walks and realise I have only one match left, and it's dead. All of my money has gone which means I'll have to try and keep the fire alight the whole time. The thought of that, of going back to having no heat in the house makes me start to cry, to sob in front of

the fire. I thought the laughing fit I had a few days ago was enough of a release, but it seems there's more inside me to let go of. It's dark already and there are noises. They are probably just limbs of trees scraping on the roof, but they sound like moaning, like there's some awful moaning person up on the roof, trying to get in.

Looking at the fire, crying, all I really want is for someone to hug me. Not the mad man on the roof, but a sister, or one of my brothers, if they dared, or Leale or Frank. The desire for a hug from a parent you hated a moment ago but would love to see now is really confusing, and it makes me cry even more. Have they forgotten me? Do I have to wait till the August holidays for them to arrive and find me? Saying as they walk in with their luggage, 'Oh there you are, Rose. We wondered where you'd got to?'.

Last night I fell asleep in front of the fire. The warmth must have seeped inside me and filled whatever hole was there, because I've woken this morning feeling stronger. Or maybe it was the house that did it, maybe she tried to soothe me and make me feel better. Even though my sleep was nourishing, and the cry has done me good, it means my attempt to keep a vigil by the fire won't be necessary, for it is out, cold and gone. No amount of paper and kindling and blowing on it will bring it back. Even the stove, which is electric hot plates, won't light a rod of rolled up newspaper, to help me get the fire going again.

Knowing I won't be sleeping out here any move, I go into the girls' dormitory and move my bedclothes down to a bottom bunk. It seems cosier there.

Looking for more clothes to put on in my drawer, I notice the newspaper on the bottom, there's a man's face looking up at me smiling. He seems familiar, as if he's trying to make me remember something about him, about this drawer and the newspaper that lines it. Taking my clothes out I read the headline, "Harold Holt missing, feared drowned."

Reading on I discover that this smiling man was once our prime minister and in 1967, just before Christmas when I was six years old, he went for a swim one day and didn't come back. A shiver goes up my spine that I could have ended up missing like this Prime Minister, that my body, like his, was never found.

I realise now that the sea I require so much in my life could never drown me. That it wasn't a rejection I received that day but a second chance.

Hidden underneath Mr Holt's face, lying flat and yellow like the newspaper above it, are drawings I hid years ago. Taking them out I find my grandparents are here with me. Alongside my *New Yorker* covers I stick up the paintings of Arthur and Flo. Of them by the river house, in the terrace and of Arthur as he made his way back to Queensland.

Despite the cold later that night I feel warmed by the presence of my grandparents, so close to me, keeping me company and reminding me that I'm never really alone.

I haven't smoked a cigarette since my tobacco ran out. I got over the headaches from the first few days when the craving was unbearable, and now I'm so preoccupied with food I don't really miss smoking at all.

Searching the books in the playroom and living area I'm trying to find a cookbook. I've been avoiding the food situation, pretending it will be fine, that like the loaves and fishes my custard and rice diet with go on forever feeding me. But the last of the rice went yesterday and now I'm going to have to do something with the flour. I find an old *Women's Weekly* magazine in one of the adult bedrooms. In it's a recipe for scones, the closest I can find to bread. Most of the ingredients I don't have, but I mix the flour with some dried milk and add a bit of custard power and water to make something that resembles dough.

After putting it in at the temperature suggested in the magazine, I sit by the oven, my hands close to the glass enjoying the heat coming out of it, waiting for the bread to cook.

After some time has passed, where I can't remember what I've done or thought, or looked at, the smell of bread wafts into my head. It has risen over the sides of the tin and has a golden look about it, more than normal and I wonder if that's the yellow custard powder. It drops heavily onto the counter near the oven when I turn it out. Too hungry to wait for it to cool down, I break it open with my hands and eat it with the last of the vegemite.

The bread making lasted three days. It was nice and comforting to eat when it was still warm. The colder it got the worse it tasted, a bit gluggy. But if I toasted it, it was edible. Now of course it's gone, and I'm back to the custard and only have a couple of spoons full of that left. Maybe I shouldn't have kept putting it in the dough.

With no firewood to collect, my daily walks have lost their appeal. It's the middle of the day and I shift myself from bottom bunk to couch to continue my reading. Filling myself up with hot, black, sugarless tea has become a new ritual now there's no food left in the house. Heating the pot up, and the cup, preparing the leaves, getting the spoon out, laying it all out on the second sink near the kettle. Just trying to take as long as I can to fill in time and force myself not to think about how hungry I am. I don't know if I'm imagining it, but I think tea tastes better if you do it the long way. There are women's voices somewhere. The section I'm reading in the Agatha Christie novel is of two women on a train, gossiping about another one of the characters. Have I been alone too long and brought these women to life?

Then I realise the noise is coming from outside, and over the balcony there are two women walking up the lawn towards the house. Jumping off the couch I hide under the window. Surely they are only using our side path to get to the road, but I don't want anyone to see me. I can just make out what they're saying as they get closer.

'Oh, yes, it's been here for years. The first built I believe, in the very early sixties,' one of them says.

'It looks like a scout hall doesn't it?' comments the other.

'I know. You should see inside. It's huge. I play bridge in Canberra with a woman who knows one of them, and we dropped by one summer a few years ago. The place was absolutely crowded, inconceivable how they could fit that many people in it... Catholics of course.'

I stay well out of sight under the window, glad there are no steps from the yard up to the balcony.

'I'd love to have a squiz inside. It's fascinating,' the other woman says.

'Well, I'm sure no one's here. They never use it in winter, my friend says. We could... yes, look here, we could climb up here and have a peek in through the window. I'm sure no one would mind.'

Shit. Bloody busy bodies. They're just like the two women in my book, always sticking their noses in other people's business. The thought crosses my mind that I could stand up and say, 'Excuse me, this is private property, do you mind?' But I know I won't. They can't get in, and they don't seem to be the sort who would break in. I hope.

'You right? Do you want me to give you a hand?'

'No, I think I've got it. Ah, there you are... I feel a bit naughty.'

'Yes. It's a bit cheeky of us isn't it? But anyway, come over here. This is the main room.'

They are just above me. I can see their hands against the window, cupped around their faces so they can see through the glass.

'Oh yes, isn't it huge!'

'And through that big window just there, can you see? That's like a rumpus room sort of thing, where all the children go. They've got an old ping-pong table in there and beds and couches in every corner. The day I came that room was swarming with children, they were everywhere, climbing up and down poles, running around the room, completely out of control, all barefooted with wild hair. They seemed totally ignored by the adults, it was really quite extraordinary.'

'Fascinating... Where do they all sleep I wonder?'

'Dormitories. Can you believe it?'

'No. Oh how marvellous.'

Oh go away ladies, go away and leave me alone.

'It's a bit messy isn't it. Look over there at the kitchen, why they haven't even cleaned up properly. The place must be overrun with mice.'

'Yes... it is a bit untidy isn't it. I wonder... I can't imagine anyone's staying here, I'm sure my friend said – '

'Oh dear God, is that...'

'What?'

There's a little thud on the window above me, like a finger or fist has bumped the glass. Looking round the room I wonder what they've seen. Then there's silence. After a moment they begin to whisper. What are they doing out there?

'Well, anyway,' one of them suddenly says very loudly.

'Yes,' says the other, also loudly. 'It's a lovely place, but we should be going, don't you think?'

'Oh, yes, yes. Time to go.'

I hear them climb back down the balcony and wait for a while before moving. Peeking a look over the windowsill in case they're trying to catch me out.

But the coast is clear.

Going back to my couch I continue reading about the ladies who aren't real.

My eyes are tired so I give them a break from words and instead start looking at the front room, really looking at it. It's the next best thing to television. The wind is blowing strong today. It's sort of comforting in a way as it disguises the moans that come at nighttime. I'm watching the yellow fibreglass chairs, for I'm sure one of them moved before, when I wasn't looking. Did I imagine it or is this place haunted? Not by ghosts or anything, but by... I don't know. It's hard to explain.

Like maybe that piece of furniture, those yellow fibreglass chairs, which once belonged to my grandparents in Saratoga, maybe they still hold parts of them in it, and Arthur and Flo are trying to make themselves known to me. Maybe by uncovering the paintings I did of them I have somehow unlocked them from the past.

I wonder if that's possible, if furniture can store some essence of their previous owners, a piece of skin, hair, dust from their clothes, something that's part of their spirit. And if this were true, then this holiday house, which is full of discarded furniture from all of the families, must be overflowing with the past.

Beyond the chairs there's the table, and I imagine the first day my grandmother Flo sat at it, enjoying its newness. If all of Flo's other furniture was old, second hand, she would never have had something that was hers first, where her fingerprint of ownership was the first to be left on the wood, iron or fibreglass. I imagine her hand as the first to rest on the plywood top of the table, the imprint of her body as the first to be left on the chair. And now that chair and table are here in this house she has never entered.

With this thought in mind, I turn to see the hooks above the kettle that hold our teacups. Unmatched cups from other people's city houses. With every sip do we drink in more of our family's past? In the wooden box in one of the cupboards there are thrown-out knives, forks and spoons, mixed up with other cast off cutlery. Forsaken furniture fills this house, from beds to mattresses, to chest of drawers, coffee tables and bedside lamps. There's nothing new here except the fibro walls and the ping-pong table. Even the sinks, taps, showers and toilets are second-hand.

Once this idea takes off in my head I can hear the furniture speaking. They're so excited I've worked it out. Worked out that there's another calling for this house. That I was never intended to be the only keeper of stories in this family, that the coast house is here as a sort of vault. Another place to store our memories. Maybe that's the real reason Arthur wanted his kids to have the money from that river house, because he knew that we'd need it for our stories. And not just the old stories, like his and Flo's, but the new ones as well. For every summer as we kids tread these sandy floorboards, as we drip salt water through the house, make grooves in the wooden floor at each end of the ping-pong table, or dream into our pillows, aren't we making a deposit? Isn't every visit an investment in our bank of family history?

The murmuring furniture hushes now as my head begins to ache with all the thinking. My eyes are so tired they drop down and all is black for a moment. But then I open them again, because I feel the presence now, of all that past and it's a little strange. I think I see Arthur sitting on one of the woolly armchairs having a glass of beer. My grandmother plays cards at the table, she's cheating in a game of solitaire.

My eyes can no longer stay open, so I stagger my way to bed, to my bottom bunk and lie down under the blankets and covers. Happy with the hum that has replaced the wind, the music that is full of the familiar.

I can't get the memory of the last bit of toast I had out of my head. It's doing me no good tasting an old remnant of imaginary vegemite on my tongue. Even my tea ritual is getting hard to maintain.

'I thought you didn't like vegemite,' says Grace.

She's lying on the opposite bunk to me in the girls' dorm. I found her here tonight, just lying on top of the bedspread, waiting for me to come to bed. She's also chosen a bottom bunk, so we can see each other.

'Yeah, I like vegemite. It's you who doesn't like it, remember?'

'Oh yes. I'd forgotten,' she says.

The first thing I asked her when I lay down was why she'd taken so long to show herself. I've been here for… well, for a long time it seems, pretty much alone. If she was here, why didn't she come out sooner?

'Because you didn't need me yet,' she said.

I've always needed you, I thought, but didn't say so.

'Are you always here, I mean, have you always been here?' I asked next.

'Yes,' she said.

'Even last Christmas, when it was full.'

'Especially last Christmas, when it was full.'

'Do you, you know… sleep in a bed?'

She laughed. It was such a lovely laugh. I'd almost forgotten what it sounded like.

'If there's one spare!'

I've been watching her for a while, too scared to take my eyes off her in case she floats away or something. Even though I've missed her so much, I hadn't thought it would hurt like this to see her again. She hasn't changed at all, and I know now that she never will. She puts her feet up and pushes the mattress above her, like we did as kids. She was never strong enough to push the person on top off, and I wonder if she's been practising.

'What's heaven like?' I ask.

'Crowded,' she says without a pause.

'Really?'

'Yeah.'

'Is that good, I mean, do you like it that way?'

She sighs a little. 'It's all right. Sometimes I just need to get away though, too many people. You can't think straight.'

I know what she means.

The moaning noise on the roof has stopped and I wonder if Grace had something to do with it. Maybe she went up there and asked him to keep it down.

'What are you going to do now, Rose?' she asks me.

'When?'

'Well, you can't stay here forever can you? What do you want to do with your life?'

'God, I don't know. I'm only fifteen.' She stays quiet and lets me think. 'What would you have done. If you hadn't... you know?'

'I would have been a painter,' she says immediately.

'Really?' It makes sense of course, she was always artistic. 'I'm not a great painter,' I say. 'I couldn't do anything like that for a living.'

'You shouldn't say that, Rose. You can do anything.'

Yeah, yeah, easy for her to say, she's clever and talented and pretty. And as if she can read my mind she suddenly says, 'That may be so, Rose but I'm also dead.'

I look at her. She's smiling at me, she isn't angry or anything. She just wants me to accept what's happened. To let it be okay. I look at her for a long time, her orange hair, so straight and shiny, the opposite of mine, curly and dull. Her eyelashes that go on forever, almost hiding her eyes behind them. It's only when she's surprised or laughing and her eyes open wide that you see how beautiful they are. Blue discs floating in the whitest of whites.

Looking at her I realise she has gone from me in one way, but in another she will always be here. Any time I need her. Like my grandparents she's a part of this house whether she's physically here or not. Her history lives here now, and I'll make sure it's never lost.

Moments later my eyes can barely stay open. As I shut them I hear Grace roll over on her bed and figure she's going to sleep as well. Just before I nod off I remember to ask her.

'Do you know how to turn the hot water on?'

'No. Sorry,' she answers sleepily.

'That's okay.'

'Goodnight, Rose, Sleep well, God bless.'

It feels nice to have someone say that to me.

'Goodnight, Grace. Thanks for being here.'

When I woke this morning Grace's bed was already made.

Is there a set length of time you can survive on just water and black tea? Is it forty days and forty nights? I can't remember how long it's been since I last ate something, but I'm past the hungry stage and just sleep a lot now, either in bed or on the couch. I should probably have tried to fish or something, but it's too late for that now. I barely have the energy to make tea.

I'm still reading though. Having read most of the Agatha Christies on the shelves, I've moved on to something different. Today I'm reading *A Fortunate Life* on the couch, intrigued to read what someone thinks a fortunate life is. After about twenty minutes I have to rest. Mainly because I'm tired, but also it's so sad, this poor man's life. Being rejected by his mother like that and having to leave his loving grandmother, and all that walking they do. Just the idea of it exhausts me and I fall asleep with the book under my arm.

There's a sound that's very familiar. A key in a front door. In Balmain it meant that Frank was home from the night's surgery. Here it means another family has arrived.

Is it August already?

I sit up on the couch and look through the window to the playroom. There, at the front door, is Leale and Frank looking straight at me. Are they real? The expression on their faces tells me they are. Leale's is full of love, full of a mother's love for her child, all the love that the man in my book never got. There's my mother and she's come to take me

home. I don't have to walk anywhere. She hasn't abandoned me, which is lucky, because I don't have any grandparents alive left to love me, like Bert Facey's grandma loved him.

But then her face changes. Like Frank's beside her, it becomes screwed up and cold, the face they both wear when we kids get it wrong and are in trouble. I don't have the strength to deal with those faces at the moment, so I lie back down and hope they go away.

Someone is shaking me. It's Frank, standing over me.

'Are you here alone?' he shouts.

Well, there's Miss Marple and Poirot, but they're busy, and of course I've got A.B. Facey in my head, but that's not what you mean is it, Dad? I contemplate telling him that Grace is always here, and the furniture and cups are full of our relatives, but that too seems like a bad idea.

'Yes,' I finally say.

'Your mother and I have been frantic about you. Phone calls to the police, your old school friends…'

What friends?

'… no one knew. What the bloody hell are you doing here? I'd never of thought…'

What *took* you so long?

'… here, this place in the middle of winter! It's freezing…'

Where *else* would I go?

'… police told us to wait by the phone. You never called to let us know…'

I'm not Kathryn, Dad.

'…your sisters have been crying, won't go to school…'

Really? They missed me?

'…your mother…'

Yes… my mother and you… you're both here now.

'…lighting candles, prayers. If those women hadn't called, telling us someone was in the house…'

My visitors?

'…how long were you going to stay here for God's sake!'

I smile up at him.

He stops his lecture and tries to breathe. His nostrils are flaring like a bull's and he's so pissed off. Gee it's nice to see his face again.

Leale stands behind him and her expression keeps changing from a caring, exhausted mother about the cry, to an angry, fed up one about to scream. Maybe when she's made up her mind, she'll feel better.

I stay on the couch and watch as my parents start cleaning the house. I hadn't thought about cleaning before. I've managed to give myself a wash every once in a while, but the idea of washing dishes, sweeping or clearing the table just didn't occur to me. No rosters posted on the fridge during my stay. It's quite amusing to have some people here, working noisily around me.

I stand up, a little dizzy, and walk through one of the adult bedrooms and the girls' bathroom into my dorm. I quickly remove my drawings and the covers of Beryl's *New Yorkers* magazines from the wall, hiding them all under Mr Holt's face. In the playroom Leale's on the floor folding up the blankets that spilt out of the plastic bag, all those nights ago. She sees me standing in the dorm doorway and is so angry she opens her mouth to say something, but can't speak.

I know the feeling, Mum.

I'd like to say something to her. Something comforting, like how I appreciate them coming all this way to get me. How I was pretty stupid to think I was ready to do this yet – be alone without them. I want to tell her that it's okay they didn't work out I was here by themselves, that strangers had to tell them. And how I understand there are lots of us, and I can't expect them to know everything about me. Even my attachment to this house. But I don't say anything. I just lean against one of poles and watch. Frank walks towards me with a big bag full of rubbish.

'Dad?' I say, as he's about to storm past me.

'What?' he answers furiously.

'Do you know how to turn the hot water on?'

He stops and looks at me confused. 'What?' he says again.

'I turned it on down the side, but it didn't work. I want to know how to turn it on.'

He watches me for a moment. Leale stops folding the blankets. Frank glances at her then back to me. His voice a fraction less angry, he says, 'There's another switch, above the tank.'

I nod, taking it in.

Another switch.

Who would have thought?

Leaving my parents to clean up I head for the boys' bathroom. There, like Frank said, above the faded purple hot water tank is another switch. It's black and old looking, not like a light switch, this one is big and fat and I have no idea whether I've seen it before. No memory of it existing at all. How many times had I come into this room and stared at the walls, the floor, the shower, and the cabinet above the sink, searching for something that would help me? How could I possibly have missed it?

And then, like when the matches ran out, I start sobbing. I feel such a failure. How can I take another step from here when I'm so useless I can't even see what's in front of my face? The crying makes me hyperventilate and there are black dots in front of my eyes. I'm falling and I don't ever want to get up again.

Before I crash and hit my head on the stone floor I'm caught. My father is here. Frank has caught me and holds me up, his arms are around me and I think he's crying. Then Leale comes in and she sees us both crying and barely standing up and she comes over and surrounds us with her arms. And she cries too. I look for a moment at our reflection in the large mirror of the boys' bathroom and see myself sandwiched between my parents, and they are holding me up.

Just before I faint I feel two things very strongly. I feel loved and safe, but also, I feel like I can't breathe.

In the car a few hours later we are driving over the bridge, leaving the coastal town behind us. I lie on the back seat, the whole seat to myself. The fish and chips my parents bought me by the river were thrown up a few minutes after I ate them. The oily food after so many days of just water and tea didn't mix. Leale rubbed my face with a wet handkerchief and I tried to smile at her through the material to stop the pain I felt flowing from her.

Neither of them has said much since our sandwich hug in the bathroom. I'm too tired to contemplate whether it's them or me that's embarrassed.

'Rose?' says Leale in the car.

'Hmmm?'

'If you want to go back to school, we've talked to the principal and she thinks you can make up the time you've… the time you have not been there. I'd like you to finish year ten at least. Then, I guess, we'll see.'

'Okay,' I say as light heartedly as I can. Remembering that it was school that got me here in the first place.

In the silence of the car, with Frank driving and Leale fidgeting in the front, I begin to slip off to sleep. Rocked by the rhythm of the wheels turning, by the movements of the car like a cradle, and by Leale's voice softly telling me a story about when she was young.

End of Part One