

The Heaven I Swallowed

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Abstract

My novel *The Heaven I Swallowed* tells the story of Grace Teresa Mary McAllister, a World War II widow who decides to “save” a young Aboriginal girl, Mary, by adopting her into her home, believing she will be able to redeem the child by giving her all the benefits of white society. In Part I of the novel Mary arrives and it soon becomes obvious that her presence is bringing back the deceptions in Grace’s past. In Part II five years have passed and Grace is struggling to cope with the way she treated Mary. Exploring the myth of “for their own good” *The Heaven I Swallowed* is a tale of the Stolen Generations, told from the perspective of the white perpetrator.

The exegesis accompanying the novel, ‘Whose Shoes? Writing *The Heaven I Swallowed*’, is also divided into two parts. Part I traces my awareness of the Stolen Generation stories and the reasoning behind the decision to narratively take the perspective of a white woman who steals an Aboriginal child. In Part II, I turn to two contemporary literary texts – Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and Gail Jones’s *Sorry* – to examine different strategies that the non-indigenous writer might employ to counter-act stereotypical representation of Aboriginality. Further analysis of the novel in the lead up to the final draft is then aided by another two texts: Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well* and Joyce Carol Oates’s *Black Girl/ White Girl*. Using these as models – one in regards to a Gothic re-rendering of the work and the other in regards to the depiction of ambiguous race relations – I find a way to reconcile myself with the representation of Aboriginality in *The Heaven I Swallowed*. Finally, I come to the conclusion that the novelist might often travel a great deal away from their original intent but that these footsteps have to be taken to ensure motivations are justified and one’s conscience is at ease.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

(Signed) Rachel Hennessy

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This work owes a great deal to the memory of two women: my maternal grandmother Jean Kearns and my paternal great-aunt Noreen McAllister. I knew neither of them very well but I hope they might have been flattered by the attention.

Finally, having dedicated my first novel to my mother, this work is for my father: eternal optimist, pillar of strength and general bringer of joy. Never let the turkeys get you down.

The Heaven I Swallowed

For my father, Lance

I

‘ . . . you must e’en take it as a gift of God, though it’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil.’

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

‘Are you really sick, Mary?’

‘Yes, Auntie Grace.’

‘Shall I leave you?’

‘If you have to, Auntie Grace.’

When I was twelve I believed the Virgin Mary had visited me in bed at night, hovering over my face. Not a clear vision, just the overwhelming sense of her presence. I could not say she was there, as in painted beauty, as in the statues in the chapel. Rather, I felt the outline of her, her shimmering essence.

My bed in the convent was small and I could hear the other girls breathing in their seemingly unconcerned, undisturbed sleep. I was uncomfortable, as always, with my blanket too thin and was trying to find comfort in other filthy ways, lying in the in-between state of sleep and wakefulness, trying to fly away from them all. My eyes flickered open and it was then that Her presence appeared above me. At first I was afraid, my breath came to me in short gasps. Gradually they began to slow – quietly, quietly – as I realised she was not there to scare me but to give me peace. I did not want to lose sight of her, her closeness like a breath of the freshest, coldest air.

The Loreto Sisters who gave me my home and education loved the Virgin Mary but I did not say anything to them. There were only two possible reactions to such a story: they would whip me for telling sacrilegious lies, or they would embrace me, turning the visitation into a sign of my calling to the nun-hood. This, I felt as a child, was as frightening as any kind of lashing.

I kept the visitation to myself, then, believing the Virgin had come to me when I needed her, when those feelings had begun to emerge that I knew to be shameful. I could not fly away. I must enjoy the bliss of lying still, of letting the waves of pleasure run away from me rather than reaching out to them. How much closer to God was I when I surrendered those feelings I had stolen in half-dreams and, instead, lay motionless on my thin mattress, with the memory of the Virgin Mary lying on top of me

like a layer of ice? God would be watching and He would approve of my restraint, of all that I would hold back in the years to come.

My visit from the Virgin was the reason I gave such importance to the name Mary. I took it as my Confirmation name, running it alongside the Grace and Teresa my dead mother had given me. *Holy Mary, mother of God, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women.* Grace Teresa Mary McAllister. I liked the thought of Mary being part of me, as much as I enjoyed Mass and the taste of the holy Eucharist slipping down my throat. These were signs of the goodness inside me, the heaven I had swallowed.

I did not see the Virgin again, although I did try. I would flicker open my eyes in the darkness and wish her back. She never came. Even if I thought I caught a glimpse of her it was only my own weak will, creating phantoms for company.

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On the day the real Mary arrived, twenty-eight years after the visitation, I was still tightly wrapped, my auburn hair pulled back in a severe bun. I did smile to think how proud the Loreto Sisters would've been, to see the adept way I could now manipulate bobby pins to ensure not a stray wisp would fall loose, nothing to ruin the composure of my face. I have strong hair, although forty years of life have thinned it out more than I would have thought possible.

At the mirror of my dressing table I applied a thin layer of lipstick and dusted my cheeks with the faintest hint of pink. These additions the nuns never would have approved of but I enjoyed the moisture on my lips, liked to use the round, cream porcelain rouge-holder painted with lilac bunches of grapes pouring down towards a brightly-blue Kingfisher. Fred had sent this to me from Japan. It was part of a set – with a matching smaller ring box – and hearing the gentle clink as the lid fitted back reminded me of perfect proportions, everything in its proper place.

The bevelled edges of the mirror doubled my shoulders and arms back at me, the navy cotton sleeves of my dress short enough for the heat, long enough for decency. This was not a dress I was fond of, bought more for the appropriateness of its colour than for anything else and I tried to imagine how I would appear to the young girl travelling toward me.

Would her heart be pounding as mine was? Or would the insipidity of her race enable her to glide without concern to her destination, to my waiting, anxious arms?

I picked up my navy cotton gloves, cross-stitches running along the fingers. A part of me wanted not to be wearing these gloves on the girl's arrival, the other part of me knew it wasn't appropriate. I didn't know who else would be accompanying the girl, aside from Father Benjamin. He, surely, had known me long enough for such formality

to be unnecessary but there was bound to be a stranger there, someone from the Girls' Home who would scrutinise and examine me, and it was necessary to pass the test.

Ten minutes after they were due to arrive I stood waiting on my driveway, holding my gloves. My legs in their stockings were damp with sweat and I continued to studiously ignore the man at number 22 who was clipping at his box hedges, working them into those rectangular shapes, his own particular way of protecting himself from the rest of the street. He, no doubt, wanted to ask me about what I was doing out here but I was in no mood to indulge him, the sound of his clipping cutting into my head.

From my vantage point I could see the memorial park at the end of the road, the statue on the corner of a young soldier with a bandaged head and a recently broken bayonet. The local council said it was a storm that'd broken the bayonet but I had my doubts. Wayville Street – my street since marriage had delivered me here – was seemingly quiet. Two streets back from the harbour, its residents getting on with things after the war; it was rarely touched by the growing number of cars coming in from abroad. Quiet and un-assuming, so it appeared. My neighbours were not often willing to leave their own four walls to comfort one another (I had learnt that the hard way). Occasionally, though, the veneer would crack, and one night, I felt sure, *someone* had snapped the thin piece of metal off the bronze statue deliberately and stolen it away to God only knew where.

They brought Mary, finally, in a large black Ford. It pulled into the driveway and I stepped out of its way onto the grass, the dew having dried in the morning sun, pulled my gloves on, and folded my arms in an attempt to look stern, to hold myself together.

Father Benjamin turned off the engine of the car and pushed open his door. His thin, rat-like face with ridiculous saucer-shaped ears, appeared, in contrast to my

agitation, serene. I couldn't see the girl. A hard-nosed woman blocked my view and, through the window, I heard this woman bark at the girl to get out of the car. I waited as she made her way round the bonnet.

Father Benjamin greeted me and, somehow, I replied civilly, although my whole being was centred on this child, walking around the black metal to stand next to the front wheel.

Mary.

She looked to be about eight years of age, though I knew her to be twelve. Her hair was long and black and she held her arms in front of her, fingers knotted together. She wore scuffed brown leather Mary Janes much too big for her, in contrast to a frilled blue dress that was several sizes too small. The dress seemed to pinch at her and there were stains on it. It was a hand-me-down, used by one ward after another, sent out into the world and returned again when the inevitable happened. I knew such dresses.

The smallness of the dress showed off most of Mary's skin and I was shocked to see how dark it truly was. When I asked – and I had asked – Father Benjamin had assured me the only ones deemed suitable were those who could pass for a white. What kind of white? Their white obviously was not the same as my white. My white was the white of sheets in sunlight or crisp blank pieces of paper not yet marked with the scribbles of my students. My white brought light into a room, not the sullen expression this girl wore. Her eyes were lowered, her head turned slightly to the side, as if checking for someone standing behind her.

I had imagined something completely different. As a widow I could not be particularly fussy – the adoption of a white child would have been almost impossible – and here was Father Benjamin handing me what I had longed for, with barely a piece of paper signed. Yet how could this be fulfilment? She was so, so black.

‘She shouldn’t be any problem,’ Father Benjamin said to me, as if reading my hesitation. ‘It is wonderful to have someone like you involved in this.’

Ah, flattery. Father Benjamin knew where to catch at me. I tried to smile modestly but I was gratified. The hard-nosed woman, who now stood with her hands on her hips in-between Father Benjamin and the girl, turning the three of them into a grotesque little family, smiled back and it was as if I had been allowed into a secret club. A little spark ran through me.

‘Shoulders back,’ the woman hissed into the girl’s ear and I saw her attempt to roll back her hunched self.

She was a mess. Stirrings of pity came to me that would have to be suppressed. Soft mothering did no one any good. I had seen my fellow teachers taken down by girls who suspected weakness underneath and I could still hear Sister Clare: *Little vipers children are, they nip at your soul until you bleed.*

‘Hello Mary,’ I said and unfolded my arms. ‘I’m Mrs. Smith.’

She drew her head up.

‘Hello.’

It was the first time I saw her eyes. They seemed enormous, honey-brown rimmed with black, taking over all her face. I had dreamt of those kinds of eyes, looking up at me from my own arms, staring out from a bundle of soft, lamb’s wool blankets. Mary’s eyes made me forget the rest of her – the broad nose, the thin legs – and any thoughts of sending her back disappeared for the moment.

‘Get your things,’ I said and immediately she lowered her eyes again. Without her gaze, I had lost something. My voice turned hard. ‘Go inside.’

‘She doesn’t have any things, Mrs. Smith.’ The hard-nosed woman, who Father Benjamin had failed to introduce, said this with a sneer and I could imagine a room full

of confiscated possessions, picked over when the mood took them. No one, after all, has nothing.

‘Well . . . off you go then,’ I repeated.

I watched as Mary walked up the driveway, struggling to keep her shoulders back, her feet sliding about in those cavernous shoes.

‘I will do my best with her,’ I said to Father Benjamin and he nodded. The hardened woman already had the passenger door of the car open, keen to get back to her other projects, more wards to distribute, more suitcases to plunder. Father Benjamin hovered in front of me, taking my covered hand with both of his in a gesture that reminded me of a blessing.

‘You are truly a good woman,’ he said, squeezing my fingers between his two palms. I could feel the hotness of his skin through the thin cotton of my glove and was relieved he was not directly touching the dampness of my own hand. ‘She . . . well, she is lucky.’

Father Benjamin dropped my hand and slipped back into the driver’s seat. The car drove away. The sound of the engine faded and I became aware, once again, of the clipping at number 22. My neighbour had witnessed the arrival and would spread the news covertly.

I stood for a moment, thinking of how Father Benjamin could have been more effusive, could have called me more than just a good woman. *You are truly a saint*, he might have said. This would have had a clearer sound to it, a bell ringing out into the ticking street, the hot summer sky blasted by my decision to do good.

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Two months before I had been reading the *Sun Herald* on a day in late November. The afternoon had turned grey after a week of temperatures in the 90s and I sat in the front room, the ‘sun’ room Fred used to call it though I preferred ‘front’ because its position could never change, even if the weather could.

The front room, then, on that day, had no sun and the one open window finally brought in a breeze, a south westerly probably, although I’ve never really been able to tell from where the wind is blowing. Fred would have declared with assurance what kind of wind it was – ‘coming in from the east’ – his voice tripping softly into the silence.

I read the paper and there was no Fred to interpret the nature of the air, my newspaper simply rustling between my fingertips. Perhaps it was a wind from God because I happened to notice an article with the headline: ‘Homes Are Sought For These Children’. As I read, my heart swelled with pride from the description of good work being done. My countrymen, the strong and the brave, having survived two major wars, were creating the ideal world. Far enough away now from all that European death, here they were, helping those who could add to the utopia and easing the suffering of those who could not.

Printed below the article was a photo of a group of young girls, each dressed in a lace-collared smock. The caption read: *These octoroons and quadroons have been rescued from shameful circumstances and generously taken into the homes of Christian families.* The border of the photo cut off the tops of their heads and finished just below the hem of their garments, so that they looked slightly incomplete. The one in the centre clutched a stuffed rabbit to her chest and the newsprint had washed out most of her blackness. She, and at least two of the other girls, looked as pale as me.

That such children existed, I had barely been aware. Yes, I knew of the refugee children; I heard them screeching in their foreign tongues at their impatient, foreign mothers who, I could only assume, wanted them home for tea. Though, thankfully, they were not yet living in my street, they were close enough that I saw them sometimes on my evening walk, heard their high-pitched laughter, mirth that had very little childishness about it. Once, I had encountered a swarm of them down near the bay entrance, their black-haired heads lined up along the metal fence, spitting into the harbour. It did not even seem to be a game to spit the furthest, they were simply tossing their contempt for this country into the water below.

I had no time for such children and had no thought of rescue until I read the newspaper article. What was I doing, after all, to help this land move towards its enlightenment? What contribution was I making? There had been Fred. Yes, that'd been a certain kind of sacrifice. But myself? I could only just bring myself to eat the piece of lemon sponge I had cut, sitting on a plate next to my favourite teacup. I ran my fingers over the delicate four-leaf clovers painted on the teacup's cream surface.

In the past it had been my voice making announcements over the Tannoy, the sound of my footsteps stopping the girls from giggling, my ticks and crosses on their tests, leading them from ignorance to knowledge. I had taught and cajoled for nineteen years, until the unpleasantness.

I picked up the piece of lemon sponge and put it in my mouth, a bridge of mock cream helped to counteract the crumbling of the cake itself. It was, to be truthful, a little dry and I suddenly felt sure that the baker had chosen this inferior sponge for me because I no longer held the position of English Mistress. He knew, as did the butcher and the milkman, that I was making no contribution at all to the re-building and, without

a husband by my side, I could be fed low quality cakes, mediocre lamb shanks and soured milk, without anyone raising protest or demanding redress.

I washed the crumbs down with tea tired from my small sips and the wind coming in from who knew where. The newspaper still lay on my knees. There it sat, the possibility of entering that space again. The article was a window into a place I had once been, where my gestures would make a difference, where my actions were contributing to the new world and where young eyes would once again watch closely the tension of my muscles, the weather of my moods.

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I found Mary in the front hall. She had only allowed herself to take a couple of steps inside and then stopped opposite the hallway hatstand where an oval mirror hung below the hat hooks. The mirror was too high to give her a full vision of her face, yet it could have given her some portion of her reflection. The girl wasn't even trying to see herself. Instead, she stared at the floor, my green plush carpet. I wondered why she wasn't at all curious about the state of herself.

'We'll have to get you better shoes,' I said.

Her hands twitched.

'Come into the kitchen.'

I walked past her, along the hall. On the carpet, I could not hear her moving behind me and it was only once we crossed onto the linoleum floor that her clapping became noisy and clear. I turned to see her standing just past the doorway, her arms hanging down by her sides as if they were too heavy for her. Again, her gaze was fixed on the floor. I could think of nothing to say except to focus on what she seemed so intent on.

'There isn't a scratch on this floor, do you see?' I pointed to the yellow pattern made to look like tiles. Fred had never seen this flooring. It was still wooden boards when he went away and, although I had written to him about the change, I was sure he could never really picture it.

'I would like it to be kept scratch-less, do you understand? Be careful with your chair.' I demonstrated by picking up one of the kitchen chairs and moving it out from the table by lifting it, rather than dragging. Twice I repeated the action.

'Do you understand Mary?'

She gave a murmur. It reminded me of the kind of mumble I would have given the Sisters when they demanded proof of my obedience.

‘In this house, Mary, we reply ‘yes’ or ‘no’ when asked a question.’

This was what the Sisters would have said.

‘Yes.’

‘And we say the person’s name.’

‘Yes, Mrs. Smith.’

Should she call me this? I could not think of having her call me ‘mother’ nor could I give her licence to gather up my first name and use it at will. But ‘Mrs. Smith’? It sounded too distant, like the echo of who I was.

‘I think you should call me Auntie Grace.’

There had been one Auntie in my childhood, a woman who was not at all related to my mother but who tried to provide a few good memories for me. It seemed the best compromise.

‘Yes, Auntie Grace,’ Mary replied.

Her tone was flat. The words had the same feeling of dull repetition that responses in Mass have. This did not bother me. I had spent so many years insisting on the fervent passion of ‘Amen’ to Fred that I had little doubt I would succeed in doing the same with Mary. She was just a young child and I had all the world to give her.

The next morning we went to buy new shoes. We caught the tram into the city because I was still reluctant to drive Fred’s father’s Holden. I kept it sheltered in the carport, away from envious, disapproving eyes. Although petrol rationing was over, it was still seen by many in Wayville Street as an extravagance.

I was uncomfortable, too, with the threads the car held of my father-in-law, a small-town wool-classer. He had come to the city on the insistence of his wife, was given a house by that wife's over-friendly uncle – the house that I now lived in – and sunk into unemployment and The Depression. The car contained samples of dirty grey wool: covering the rear window shelf, the dashboard and deliberately twined around the steering wheel. Fred had laughed about it when he inherited the vehicle but I'd seen it as rather pathetic, a man clinging to the remnants of a job he could no longer do. Yet neither of us had been willing to throw the wool away and so it stayed, giving the interior a greasy patina.

For once, I would have liked the cocoon of the car. At every moment, I noticed the looks Mary and I received. The neighbourhood glances as we made our way to the tram had been bad enough but walking down Elizabeth Street with her hand in mine, it seemed the world was made of sideward glares, of thin-lipped disapproval, of openly hostile stares.

Mary wore the blue dress she had arrived in, the stains slightly less prominent from the sponging I had given it, but it still showed off her dark limbs and there was no disguising her difference from the primly hatted children I saw following their mothers, all blonde curls and sweet eyes. How black Mary's hand was next to my skin. It implied a certain kind of dirtiness, even though I had washed her myself in the bath the night before, scrubbing hard with the pumice stone to ensure no layers of the Girls' Home remained. She had raised no objection, sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees, tipping her head back when told to, perhaps grateful for the chance to be truly clean. She would have to be kept out of the sun, try to get her to fade a little.

As we walked, I worried that we would run into someone I knew. Would Mr. Roper materialise to add his look of disbelief to the female strangers who marched past

us? I kept my eyes down, mimicking Mary. I felt a burning in my cheeks. It had been a long time since I had received such attention.

I had never been the kind of woman who men fall madly in love with, who they long for, who they cannot imagine ever losing. Not ugly, but not beautiful. Just a middling woman, sitting straight backed in the chairs on the edge of the dance floor while all the true beauties were escorted away by the dashing, handsome young men. At the very least, I was not often left to last; some plump young man would eventually ask me, as clumsy in his words as he would prove to be in dancing. I offered an alternative to the fat girls or ones with glasses. My face was described by one of the Sisters as 'angelic' but I knew from an early age that angels would have ensured themselves more striking cheekbones, less insipid eyes and a nose smaller and much straighter.

Fred had not been one of the boys who asked me to dance, though we met for the first time at a local ball not long after I came to the city to begin teaching at Our Lady of Perpetual Hope High School. Fred did not recall meeting me when, seven years later, he returned to the neighbourhood after attending Oxford. I saw him at church. I would like to have a romantic story of us moving, that very first time, to the centre of the dance floor and knowing we would twirl together for the rest of our lives. The fact was he had failed university and was a bundle of disappointment and desperation. Perhaps he would not have looked twice at me if he had become a successful academic don. I was what he needed: an acolyte who confirmed his superiority to the rest of mankind. And at twenty-eight, I was staring down the barrel of spinsterhood and adored him enough to help him reclaim his confidence. We needed one another to survive.

I held my head up again. How silly to be walking with Mary like some ashamed sheep. Wasn't this tiny thing next to me, gripping my hand in terror at losing hold, the epitome of my goodness, the difference I was making to the bustling boulevard, an

affirmation of all that could be done, even without beauty? How dare these other women judge me? I had always been separate from them and I would remain so now. Not only would I buy Mary new shoes, I would buy her a new dress and show off my benevolence in something pink, ostentatious and lacy.

Inside the department store Mary forgot her timidity and gazed in amazement at the glass counters glistening with perfume bottles, the rows of polished heads showing off the latest fashion in hats, the suited man at the grand piano smoothly playing 'Greensleeves'. She stood uncertainly at the bottom of the escalators and I had to pull her hand to ensure she got on the moving, wooden step.

How miraculous the escalator had seemed to me at first, the way you were moving without moving, like floating upward towards God. Sacrilegious, really, to think of one's soul needing such man-made help but still, it appealed to me and I would have shared the thought with Mary except that we were already at the top. I stepped confidently onto the solid floor and Mary jumped nervously off beside me, her hand breaking apart from mine. She did not attempt to regain my grip, following a little way behind.

The shoe department smelt of leather, the vinyl floor dented with the heels that had strolled back and forth on it, testing for comfort and size. Behind the counter a saleswoman with charcoal hair, pulled back in a low-neck bun the same shape as mine, stared openly at Mary. 'Can I help you?' The woman's voice had little help in it.

'I need to buy my . . .' How to describe what Mary was to me? 'I need to buy her new shoes. You can see these ones are too big.' I was trying to be friendly.

'What size is she?' the saleswoman asked, no longer looking at Mary.

'What size are you Mary?' I asked.

'Don't know.'

‘What was that, Mary?’ I admonished.

‘Don’t know, Auntie Grace. Never had shoes bought for me.’

‘How can she not know?’ the saleswoman asked me, as if the girl was not there, as if she hadn’t heard Mary’s answer herself.

‘You’ll have to measure her,’ I insisted and the saleswoman looked at me sharply, eyes narrowed. I held her gaze.

‘Of course.’ Her tone spoke of her completely opposite inclination. ‘Mary-Janes?’

I nodded and she disappeared into a backroom without having gone anywhere near Mary’s feet.

We waited. I felt hot and strangely conspicuous, as if our presence in the store was being reported via clandestine whispers.

Mary moved over to stand near a large brown, box-shaped machine. Three long metal tubes stuck out of its top like tentacles.

‘What’s this, Auntie Grace?’

‘I don’t know, Mary.’

‘That,’ said the saleswoman, who had reappeared with two shoe boxes in her hand, ‘is the latest thing.’

Her enthusiasm for her job had returned with the focus shifted to this ‘latest thing’. It was a fluoroscope, she explained, and all one had to do was place one’s foot inside to see whether the shoe fitted. I had no idea what she was talking about.

‘It makes an x-ray,’ the saleswoman continued in a patronising tone. This did not help.

‘Put on the shoes and place your foot in here.’ She pointed to a hole in the bottom of the box that appeared to have a metal plate with a rubber imprint of a foot glued onto it. Mary did not move.

‘Do as she says,’ I said. I was aware of an elderly couple, shoulders hunched together, not too far from us, watching closely.

Mary slipped off her old shoes, easy enough given their misfit, and put on the brown leather pair the woman had brought out. She placed her foot inside the machine.

The saleswoman bent over the left of the three tubes.

‘Do you want to see?’ she asked, pointing to the right tube. The centre one was, I assumed, for the customer. Mary did not lower her head to look.

I bent over and, for a minute, saw only blackness. I shifted the position of my face and suddenly stared at the illuminated lines of Mary’s foot. Here were her bones, glowing a greenish white. I only just managed not to gasp at the skeleton before me, though I let out a soft ‘Oh!’ To see straight through her, to the core, all the way through the skin, it seemed almost obscene.

I lifted my head up without checking whether the shoes were or were not crushing the bones.

‘Too small,’ the charcoaled woman declared and bustled over to one of the other shoeboxes.

We went through a number of pairs of shoes using this method. After the first time, I did not look into the machine again, leaving the saleswoman to make the decisions. The glow of Mary’s foot was imprinted on my mind’s eye.

I decided the new dress I’d planned to buy would have to wait. The shoe department had almost done me in, with its fancy gadget and tiresome saleswoman. I needed a cup of tea but could only imagine the looks Mary would get in the cafeteria.

Even without the girl, I had only ever gone there surrounded by the confident War Widows group under the control and guidance of Marjorie Bishop whose military-like instructions tended to make the snobbish waitresses cower and ensured our receipt of the best chocolate éclairs. Alone, I had no such power. We walked, instead, to Hyde Park.

I sat on one of the benches opposite the fountain. The sun was out and Mary sat beside me, her legs swinging in their new, snug-fitting shoes. It had taken some convincing Mary that they were really hers, though I hadn't really seen gratitude on her face, only suspicion. Now the trickling of the fountain's water and the calls and laughter and cries of families having lunch were a relief after the struggles and muffled obsequiousness inside the store. I was struck by the sweetness of the moment and dug into my purse to find a penny.

'Here, Mary, go and make a wish in the fountain.'

She held the penny in the palm of her hand and frowned.

'Make a wish, Auntie Grace?'

'Yes, you throw it into the water and make a wish.'

'Throw the money into the water, Auntie Grace?'

'Yes.'

'But why, Auntie Grace?'

The sweetness of the moment was leaking away.

'Because I said you could.'

'But wish for what, Auntie Grace?'

'Anything you want.'

'Anything, Auntie Grace?'

I held in my sigh of exasperation, reminding myself that she would, of course, be ignorant of such matters.

‘Give the penny back to me if you don’t want it.’

Her palm closed and she walked toward the fountain. She stood at the lip of the six-sided pond with a statue of Apollo in its centre, turtles spurting water up to his face. Two young boys were throwing rocks into these arcs, trying to hit the water to change the direction their pebbles flew. Mary watched them for a moment and I wondered what she would wish for.

The night before Fred left I made a wish on a shooting star. I shouldn’t have, such beliefs are paganish, but I clung to every superstition after Fred and I were married, the year the war began. I insisted he throw salt over his shoulder and leave his boots outside the house, mainly because I could not believe my luck, that he would agree to have me.

We had known each other for two years and been married for four before he was posted overseas. It was not one of these fly-by-night marriages that were happening all around us, couples thrown together by their fear of death. We knew one another well, had found the crook in each other’s arms perfect for being held. I had got used to his coughing at night – he smoked a packet of cigarettes a day – and the strong, masculine smell that took over the bathroom after he urinated. He called me Gracie.

‘Make sure he comes home,’ I had said to the shooting star, with the night-time stillness all around me. Fred had been asleep in the living room after promising we would stay up on our last night together and dance until dawn. I had stood on the back step and, with so many lights extinguished from the blackouts, the sky was alive with stars. I could believe, after all, that there was an element of God in those twinkling,

falling pieces of fire, and I had sealed a deal by putting my faith in those wondrous creations of His. As naïve as a little girl.

‘Mary! Come away from there now,’ I called.

I had left her standing next to the fountain, in full sunlight and with no hat to protect her, the rays bouncing off the water straight into her face; she had probably already gone a shade darker.

She turned and walked back towards me. Her head was tilted slightly to the left, her pupils in the sides of her eyes. I followed her line of sight and saw, over on the grass, a group of drifters sitting cross-legged. There were four of them, in grubby checked shirts and torn trousers, barefoot, grey blankets rolled into swags sitting beside them. They were smoking, one with a pipe, and all were as black as the ace of spades.

‘Hurry up Mary,’ I said, although she was already next to me. I gave her the box with her old pair of shoes inside. She held it against her chest, both arms wrapped around it. Her hands were wet.

‘What did you wish for?’

I knew I should not ask, that she wouldn’t know not to tell me but I found the words coming out of my mouth before I could help it.

‘To stay with you, Auntie Grace,’ she replied.

I did not reply. Her wish was a lie. The inflection of it was as false as the schoolgirls’ whispers about ‘female problems’ in order to escape morning callisthenics. ‘You understand don’t you, Mrs Smith?’ they used to say, as if I would be happy to share their menstruation secrets.

We walked down the path towards the ANZAC memorial. The Hill’s figs along the avenue were not tall enough to block out the harsh midday sun and I pulled my hat

down lower to protect myself from the light. I strolled without acknowledging Mary whose hands were slipping on the shoebox.

We approached the huge granite cenotaph along the rectangular pool that lay at its steps. The poplars that lined the pool were reflected in the water with ripples like the names of the dead inscribed on its surface. I had come here often over the years, drawn to the bronze memorial statue inside its walls. This statue was intact, a fallen soldier held up on a shield by three women: his mother, his sister, and his wife. I would not take Mary to see that, though. The sculptor had chosen for the soldier to be naked, and while I had grown used to the detailed flesh of the fallen youth, it was not suitable for a young girl, no matter what her upbringing might have been up to that point. Instead, I stopped at the corner of the pool, gazing at the reflection of tree trunks and stone columns. No one had thrown coins into this body of water.

‘This is for the men who died in the war, Mary,’ I said.

She was staring at the steps leading up into the tomb as if she knew there was something inside she should not see.

‘They brought the poplar seeds all the way from France. To commemorate the soldiers, the men who went off to fight. Men who died for their country.’

It had such force when spoken out loud: ‘died for their country’. Was Mary able to feel the pride, the honour of their sacrifice? Where was she living during the war?

The beginning of one of Fred’s poems came to me:

The war awaits, as do I
The fevered pitch, the savage cry
I stand upon the glorious brink
And try most vainly, not to think.

Clumsy rhymes. I did not speak it out loud.

‘We should be heading home,’ I said. The shoebox, wet through by Mary’s hands, had dissolved so much that her old shoes slipped out, falling with a loud thud onto the pathway.

†

My dear Gracie,

I am finally able to send word, although I am not sure when this letter will get to you. The boat trip was, as expected, awful but I will not offend you with revolting details, my sweetness. I have arrived safely in Port Moresby, that is all you probably want to know and I cannot give you any particulars of the plans ahead. If I did, you would find your letter blackened with the censor's pen. I am as well as I can be and I think of you often.

My time at Randwick has me used to all the waiting, the drills and the tedium of army life. I am not impatient to get to the real fighting. Some of the younger boys keep talking of the adventure ahead. I am not so naïve as to see it like that. I remember Dad's tales of the Great War, they were enough to make me understand what battle will be really like and I am not sorry Dad passed away before this new threat, nor that he never heard of the Japs on our door-step. 'We'll show 'em' the boys keep saying and make me feel like an alien. They are so sure of their bravery.

Often, I feel guilty about the years I sat on home soil, still so often able to see you, when now I am reminded that men were dying for the Empire every one of those moments. (I talk of guilt and wonder what really made me transfer to active duty? Not love of Empire, or the chance to defend my homeland, but the simple fact that I would not be able to look the Church congregation in the eye, for fear they would see my cowardice. Perhaps us cowards will go to any lengths to prove we are not.)

I pass the time writing poems again like I did during my "education" in England. I never showed you them because I was afraid of their mediocrity. Maybe I will send you some in the days ahead. I am terrified, of course, of the other men finding out. Already I have erased my university days from my history and have demoted myself from Bank Manager to Clerk for the sake of much needed camaraderie. Thankfully, I

am not the only religious man here, besides the Chaplain, and I have a few men with whom to discuss the moral dilemma of taking life. Many times Private L. has quoted a headline from the Catholic Weekly at me: 'Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God'. It has become somewhat of a personal mantra for him – to the point, I have to say, of driving me a little mad – but I suppose it gives him solace.

I have got to believe that the defence of my family is a Christian duty though there are some here who would not agree with my leaving you in your condition. The boys tell stories of their brothers and uncles who have stayed at home for the sake of their expecting wives. They do not seem to be resentful. Sometimes they even appear to be grateful that they can give themselves up to the war with the reassurance that there is someone at home to continue their line. It is a comfort to me to know that if I do not return, I will leave my trace upon the earth. Coming from no family tradition yourself, Gracie, you might not understand this but to know my home will continue in the hands of my son, or daughter, means a great deal.

My immediate family has given me so little of the harmony I see in other people's homes. You have become my family, Gracie, and we will make ourselves a haven. I think of my mother and see only her back turned to me as she embarked for London, still in her black widow's weeds, and my brother lost to me in the skies above France. (When I told the boys here that I have a brother in the air force they looked at me with new respect, although their admiration was followed, soon after, by suspicion as to why I had not been able to follow in his footsteps).

When you think of me, then, do not imagine me in these foreign places. Remember me sitting in the shade of the jacaranda tree with you, talking of small things, like our plan to plant tubs and tubs of geraniums because they are strong and

hardy and colourful. Remember a man who always arranged his books 'just so', with a pedantry that made you laugh. Remember a man who remains

Your Fred

On Mary's first night, she had had to make do with sleeping on the lounge, as the single bed was yet to be delivered. I would be installing it, and Mary, in 'Fred's study', a room that should have been transformed into something much softer. The bed was due at three o'clock and we returned from our shoe-buying expedition an hour before this.

When the two deliverymen arrived with the steel frame and wooden bed-heads we discovered that, due to the narrowness of the room, the bed met up with the long edge of Fred's roll-top desk, cutting off any side access to the mattress.

'She will just have to get into bed by the end,' I reasoned and the men eyed me strangely.

'Didn't ya think to measure it before-hand?' one of them muttered.

'Can't ya move the desk some place else?' the other added.

I could not explain that I would not move Fred's desk an inch, or that I was incapable of seeing the exact size of things. Time and time again it had happened to me. My new electric washing machine, for example, had seemed, from the beautiful sketch in *Women's Weekly*, to be the ideal shape for my backyard laundry. It had turned out not to fit through the wooden doorway. Mr. Roper had shaken his head at me when he came round to erect a makeshift tarpaulin to protect the machine from the elements, until the company could arrange for its removal. He never approved of my attempts to modernise, or my seeming unwillingness to measure out the possible consequences of my actions.

'It will be fine, thank you,' I told the deliverymen in a voice that held the authority I'd once enjoyed in the schoolyard.

'Yes, m'aam,' they both replied meekly, filing out past the awe-struck Mary.

'This is your room, Mary.'

I spread my arms out as much as I was able; admittedly the wardrobe behind the doorway did not leave a great deal of space to display the splendour. Once again, Mary hung back in the corridor and I wanted to grab and shake her into some kind of reaction. I did not, of course, and could only watch as she slowly made her way into the room, edging past me, coming to stand near Fred's desk. She drew in her nostrils, like she was sniffing the air. The two windows at the end of the room were closed and I could only smell lavender, wafting up from the bathroom. Whatever it was she detected, it seemed to make her content, her shoulders dropped. It was unfortunate then, at that moment, she placed her hand on the curve of the desk's roller.

'Stay away from the desk!' I shouted. I could not help myself. The desk's shutter was locked tight but still I had fears of someone finding their way into it. I had allowed a layer of dust to cover the oak, to provide evidence of any prying fingers and the key to the desk sat inside the ring box that lived on my dresser. I checked it every morning.

The girl remained ramrod still, her back still turned to me. I wanted to move over to the windows to draw the curtains against the evening but there was no room, I would have to stand on the bed. There seemed no path back to any kind of excitement.

I walked out to the kitchen to begin making dinner. Perhaps my absence would allow Mary to explore and enjoy her new bedroom.

What I wouldn't have given to have even that amount of space when I was a child. At the convent we may have had vistas of mountains from the dormitory windows but inside there was nothing to separate one bed from the next, nothing with which to distinguish one's self from all the other girls. On the southern side of the convent house there was a plantation of arum lilies. Originally each white blossom had stood for one of us girls, until the flowers took germination into their own hands and the Sisters had had

to weed them back for fear they would take over the entire orchard. I had never liked those lilies, whenever I'd been forced to pick them they had made my skin itchy.

Mary would wake up to a different kind of vista: the jacaranda tree that dominated the back garden. The legend went that when Fred's parents moved in this tree was almost dead, attacked to the roots by some kind of botanical disease. It was Fred's father who had saved it. This victory counted as one of the few triumphs of his lacklustre life in the city. The jacaranda was magnificent. I looked forward to spring – 'the falling of the purple', as Fred called it – when the grass was almost completely covered with the tree's violet blossoms.

What Mary would not see was the tubs of geraniums I had planted on my own, anticipating Fred's joy in every gaudy combination of pink and red and orange. Once they had been lined along the wall of the outhouse-come-laundry, opposite the jacaranda, but I had moved them to either side of the carport, out of immediate view, not long after the war had ended.

†

The next day, a Friday, I took Mary down to the end of the street, past the broken bayonet, to the park and the tiny stretch of sand that might've been called a beach by an optimist. At one end it was bordered by a private jetty, at the other the boating club Fred had once talked of joining, though he had never found time, only ever fishing off the sand-bar, watching other men go out into the harbour.

Whenever I came down to the beach, I sat on the third bench along, set into the sandstone wall and surrounded by a rose bush with one yellow blossom that always promised more to come. I would bring my knitting and keep my head down, only there for a change of scene, aware of the need for the accompaniment of children or dogs to be really valid in such a place. With Mary, it was entirely different.

She broke away from me almost as soon as she saw the sand and sat down with a thud to pull off her shoes and socks. She moved as fast as the seagulls and, before I could tell her not to, she had her bare feet at the water's edge and was running back and forth to the small lapping waves, daring them to catch her. I did not immediately move to my bench. For once, I was permitted to watch. Unfortunately, we were the only ones there and I had no one to show off my pride to.

Mary picked up a scrap of seaweed and placed a fragment of it on her tongue.

'Salty,' she said simply.

Behind her, the boats bobbed without any care for what others might think and a dark, snake-necked bird – a cormorant? – traced itself along the edge of the shore, disappearing and reappearing sporadically. Mary turned and, in turn, watched the bird, her torso swelling up. For a moment, I thought she was having difficulty breathing until I realised she was holding her breath to the timing of the submerged bird.

I moved up to my bench and sat. Mary stayed on the beach, hop-scotching on the imprints of dog-paws and webbed feet. I knitted, a lady-bug rug I was making for the Church fundraising stall, and her occasional looks up toward me, to ensure I was still there, kept the afternoon long. I managed very few rows, losing the strict rhythm of knit one, purl one because of my constant checking on Mary. The same cormorant – if that was what it was called – hung itself out to dry on the jetty, spreading its wings to catch the dusk sun while putrid smells of rotting fish wafted up from one of the boathouses. Mary dug a hole in the sand with her hands. As the sun set, I did not want to break the spell of my own possession of this little girl. To be tied to one creature, without the possibility of loss. How sweet it was.

†

That Sunday, Mary and I went to the church where I'd seen Fred again, the thin, moustached man who would become my husband. St Aloysius as a building had always soothed me; every door was an arch, pointing to God.

I knew as we walked up the path that this was not going to be like my usual Sundays. Whispers began as soon as we were properly noticed. This time, though, unlike on the streets of the city, the looks did not hold contempt. Instead, there was awe in the stares we received and it was all I could do to stop myself beaming. I kept my lips tightly pressed together and gave the normal nods and brief smiles to the widows and assorted couples I knew. They nodded back, careful to keep their eyes from fixing on the treasure beside me, though careful not to ignore her either. Some of the men clucked at Mary, as if she was a bird, their own particular way of acknowledging her presence.

We took our place in the third pew from the front, Mary pressed up against the end of the row so my body could provide a barrier between her and the young Ronny Thompson who kept leaning forward to 'cop a look', as he would, no doubt, tell his friends later. Mary started to cough. I could not tell if it was from the beginnings of a cold or the musty smell of the knee cushions' cloth. I had never really noticed how much the cushions stank. Being there with her made me examine everything anew, trying to see it through her own bewildered eyes. She had been to church before, since it was Father Benjamin who helped her come into my care, but the institution's church was probably some ratty old converted hall, not imbued with the ancient traditions of a place like Saint Aloysius. For fifty years the church had stood, soaking up the religiosity of at least two generations. The plaster of Paris statues of Jesus, Mary and Joseph standing around the altar still held their paints brightly enough to attract the childish eye, yet were worn enough to speak of wisdom.

‘There is the Virgin,’ I whispered to Mary who seemed to be focussing on the people closely packed in around us. I wanted her mind to be on the less tangible, the less physical. She turned her gaze towards the statue, the Holy mother holding the baby Christ, with an angel on either side of her. She might have said something but at that moment the organ started up and we stood for the priest’s entrance.

Father Benjamin’s back wore the gold cross like it was the real burden of Christ, leaning forward toward the altar, his arms spreading the vestment out. In contrast, the pew back, so short and uncomfortable, was cutting into my shoulder blade. I tried not to be distracted by the depictions of the saints in stained glass, a stream of red light fell through the pane of Saint Bridget, catching at the altar boys. It might’ve been better if all the decorations were like the wooden Stations of the Cross, their dark brown scenes barely perceptible.

‘Are we going up Auntie Grace?’ Mary asked.

I blushed to realise how far my thoughts had gone away from the service. The whole row was waiting for me to stand up and join the line for Communion.

‘Of course,’ I said.

I knelt before Father Benjamin who placed the round thin host onto my tongue. ‘Corpus Domini nostri Jesu, Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam,’ he rattled off with his usual lack of enthusiasm. *May the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ keep your soul unto life everlasting.*

‘Amen,’ I replied loudly and clearly, with the distinct disadvantage of being lower than him. This was the converted essence of Jesus and I did believe and remember Him. I felt that old tingling, maybe the renewal of feeling, or another reminder to keep the feelings away, pushed under the surface, only allowed in small doses. This was the problem, always. How did you distinguish between the joy of God’s

love and less exulted sensations? There was so much talk of flesh. *For this is my body. For this is my blood.* One of my namesakes, Saint Teresa, swooned from ecstasy as the angel plunged into her with an arrow of fire. And Saint Bridget, up there in her harlot colours, embraced ugliness in order to avoid marriage only to be returned to physical glory the moment she committed herself to God.

I saw Mary smile at Father Benjamin after receiving her communion bread. Not a big smile but a smile nonetheless, more of a smile than I had received from her. We went back to the pew and knelt on the mouldy, thin cushions. I could feel the narrow strip of wood with my knee bones. This new uncomfortableness interrupted my prayers – why had I never noticed before? Not to mention the memory of Mary’s smile.

‘She is such a beautiful child,’ I heard Mrs. Thompson say and I had to hide my surprise. Standing in the shadow of the church after the service I could only guess that she could not see Mary well enough.

‘Really, you wouldn’t even know she was . . . well . . .’ Mrs. Thompson continued, her husband gurgling down at the girl as if she did not speak English.

‘We think you are very brave.’ Mrs. and Mr. Mavis nodded together as she spoke, grim worry-lines cut into their faces at almost the same points.

‘I think it is appalling,’ I heard someone whisper behind me but when I turned I only saw Father Benjamin.

‘Everything is going well?’ he asked me with an excessive smile.

I could only nod. The chatter focussed on me was overwhelming after the quiet of the service. Disorientated, I had somehow lost hold of Mary.

‘Well, where is she?’ I asked no one in particular.

‘Are you all right Mrs. Smith?’ one of the ladies from the Widows’ Group spoke to me. I had completely forgotten her name.

‘Yes, thank you,’ I heard myself saying and wondered how rude it really sounded.

‘I think you need to sit down.’

To my relief, it was Mr. Roper whose blonde head I had seen in the front row pew. He put his hand on the small of my back and guided me over to the chairs they always put out on the grass to cater for the elderly who wanted to participate in the after-service socialising but whose legs could not cope with the strain. One of the dear old men stood up for me.

‘Thank you.’ I was making a spectacle of myself and could just imagine the whisperings about how it was ‘all too much for her’. For years, they had tiptoed around me, without knowing the real reason for my troubles.

‘I am fine,’ I said to Mr. Roper. Unfortunately, he was no longer by my side and I remembered he had gone to fetch me a glass of water. He had muttered something about the heat getting to me but I was not going to faint. I had become confused about where I was, about what life I was leading today.

I spotted Mary in a group of children near the saint’s grotto: a half-egg stone construct with an effigy of what I could only assume was Aloysius although the plaster of his youthful face was too eaten away for positive identification. At least the lily he always carried still survived. Mary was standing next to Ronny Thompson who seemed to be holding court over the other two girls and one boy in the cluster. The noise and distance made it impossible for me to hear what he was saying but when he stopped they all laughed, even Mary. I knew it was about me.

‘Here you are.’ Mr. Roper handed me a glass of lukewarm water, probably drawn from the garden tap of the presbytery. The glass itself had a pattern of love hearts etched into it.

‘Could you fetch Mary for me, Mr. Roper?’ I asked.

‘Mary? That’s her name is it?’ He glanced over to the group of children with an interested expression. Once again, I had the thought of how much better his hair would look if he left it natural, instead of running a blonde rinse through it so it shone like a beacon in the sun. If anything, this vanity made him seem older than he was. What would a few grey hairs matter around a face almost free of wrinkles?

‘How long is the trial for, Mrs. Smith?’ Mr. Roper asked.

‘Trial?’

‘You haven’t agreed to have this . . . child . . . living in your house for good?’

‘The terms of her stay have not been formerly determined,’ I said to him in that voice I recognised from my working days.

He replied with a rather grotesque snort and strode off to get Mary. The children scattered as he approached, leaving Mary to stand alone with only the crumbling saint behind her shoulder.

Again, I could not hear what was being said and now Mr. Roper’s back blocked me from a view of Mary. I realised that for last five days she had barely been out of my sight. Perhaps the church people were right. Maybe this was too much for me. Waiting for Mr. Roper to come back with her, I thought how foolish I’d been, not thinking of the possible consequences, of the true size of things.

I would have named my own baby Mary if I had been given the time but they did not tell me whether it was a boy or a girl that I had lost. Still, I knew, as surely as anyone could know, that it had been a little Mary forming inside me, with full eyelashes and her father’s nose. She would have loved me as no one had ever bothered to love me before, with the fierceness that only a newborn can have.

They did not even let me see her; all I remember was a great deal of blood and one of the nurses whispering in a vicious tone how sad it was that my husband was not able to be there. In the week they made me stay in the hospital I saw that nurse again, a thin old woman with the stink of spinsterhood upon her and the well meaning smile of the secretly bitter.

‘You are looking better,’ she said to me, touching the bulge of pillow beside my head. ‘You will be as good as new before you know it.’

I smiled back at her, as I was obliged to do, knowing I was never going to be ‘new’, no matter how hard I tried. I had never been ‘new’. For four years I had been trying to conceive and, at thirty-four, it now seemed an absurdity. Nothing about me was fresh or promising. Like Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, my ‘bloom had vanished early’.

How false it was to try to pretend it was simply a matter of time. How could I know when, or if, the war would end? Time was my greatest enemy and, there he was, away from me for who knew how long. Everything shrivelling up inside me while he wrote poetry and turned into a man I did not know.

I wanted to leave the hospital as soon as possible but the doctor insisted on keeping me there day after day, for ‘recovery time’, as if I had lost a limb. I had no visible wound, though, and saw the tiny frowns of other patients’ visitors wondering why I lay there amongst the truly ill, seemingly whole. All my tears were left for the night hours when none of these hard, cold faces were visible, when it was just the lost Mary and I. I had no flowers beside my bed to offer the consolation of their scent and had only to be grateful that they put me far away enough from the maternity ward that I did not have to hear the crying and suckling of babies who wanted to stay.

Returning home empty was not the hardest part. It was the avoidance of the neighbours, their heads ducking out of sight as the cab pulled in, and the frozen silence of the church lot who acted as if I had been on a holiday, at a featureless destination, for a time unspecified.

‘Good to see you back,’ they said, ‘safe and sound.’

I did not receive one word of sympathy. Rationally, I could not blame them. A veil of stern silence had always been drawn over such moments: when the Mavis boy was arrested for indecent exposure or the Thompson’s girl was sent off to Tasmania for her nine months. The body was always in revolt; speaking of it only exposed you to the filth.

But, then, I wondered, could I be blamed for the dreams that came to me? For all the rumours that flew around, you would’ve thought I’d turned into one of those mad old women who shuffle along the footpaths muttering or singing invented, tuneless hymns. I had not come even close to that. Yes, I did not leave the house for a period, letting letters accumulate in the box and only finally taking them when the postman clamoured at my door as if it was doomsday. My appearance when I opened the door was quite disheveled I’m sure (‘looking like the Wild Woman of Borneo’ I heard the postman’s wife saying at the next church gathering) but none of this – not the collection of milk bottles nor the garden of weeds – added up to the ‘breakdown’ I was labeled with.

I would not have it resurface now, to threaten the new Mary in my life.

‘Mrs. Smith?’ Mr. Roper had Mary’s hand in his and was looking to give it to me. Mary was, once again, directing her gaze someplace else but this time I followed her line of sight towards nothing more threatening than a line of baby poplar trees over next to the front brick fence, a mimic of the line at the ANZAC memorial. They were

saplings waiting to grow up, to become a shield between the church and the nosey streets beyond.

I stood and took Mary's hand. Was it my imagination or did the colour of it seem less startling?

'Time to go back home Mary,' I said to her in a louder voice than I intended. I felt I had not spoken in so long, as if church and the subsequent dizzy spell had taken away my ability to communicate with the here and now.

I took a step towards the car but felt Mary's hand tug at me.

'Why, Auntie Grace? What did I do wrong?' Her voice had panic in it and she was suddenly unwilling to move.

'Come on girl.' I tried to keep my temper. I had already had enough unwanted attention today and could feel the hidden buzz around me.

'Please, Auntie Grace.' To my astonishment I turned my head to see that Mary had tears in her eyes. Her legs remained stiff, as surely as if she was rock.

'Church is over, we have to go home,' I hissed through my teeth.

'Home?'

'Of course, home.'

'Your house, Auntie Grace?'

'Yes, Mary.'

As quickly as the tears had come, they retreated back into her eyes and she started to walk, her hand now pulling ahead of me. I picked up my pace to match her now eager strides.

'Goodbye Mr. Roper,' I called over my shoulder. I caught a glimpse of his sombre face with all my fellow parishioners seemingly crowded behind him, sharing his disbelief and wonder. Or was it disapproval?

Mary thought I meant to send her back to the Girls' Home, I realised during the return walk from church. She had misheard somehow or the word 'home' simply no longer held the connotations it used to. What a place that institution must have been, to elicit such a response from her. I should have guessed by the state of her on arrival. It was a powerful weapon. I could hear Sister Clare again: *A child's fear can be your greatest friend.* There would, no doubt, be times in which the prospect of being sent back would have its effect.

'Here we are,' I said, as we arrived at the driveway. Would I add the unwanted word, let her know I now knew the reason for her temporary rebellion? 'Home.'

Mary ran to the front door to open it for me. I had not asked her to do this.

'Thank you, Mary.' This was her way to ingratiate herself, not a sincere movement. I was willing to let her try to do this, willing to pretend I didn't know where this new-found courtesy came from but it would not last long. She was not the kind of girl to be cowed by phantom notions. Only when she believed I was sending her back there, on the spot, in front of the gaping doors of St Aloysius, did she remember the past.

'Do you want a cup of tea, Auntie Grace?' she asked with such polite fervour that it almost took my breath away. I nodded my 'yes'.

In the living room I sat in the green velvet armchair once moulded by Fred and listened to the sounds of Mary lighting the stove, filling the kettle, feeding the pot. Had these sounds ever been made in this house except by me? It was unusual to hear them from a distance. I could not recall a time when Fred had made anything, not so much as a drop of tea.

I contemplated his photo up on the mantelpiece, as I had so many times over the seven years since his departure. The glass of the picture frame was free of fingerprints. It had been a long while since I had picked it up; his dark eyes, black hair and meticulously trimmed moustache were preserved in a silver oval. The three-quarter profile in his uniform was so admired by the women of the Widows' Group – Mrs Chilsom, of course, that was her name. I remembered her telling the story of the loss of her husband at the battle of El Alamein, a handkerchief pressed up against her nose. The rest of the widows had all fumbled into their handbags to bring out their own miniature flags of grief. I had had to excuse myself, retreating into my bedroom to give the necessary appearance of sorrow.

Mary placed the cup of tea quietly on the side table, a column of steam rising off it. She was astute enough to know that I did not want to be disturbed and she sat down softly on the leather footrest she had adopted as her own.

'What is your real name, Mary?' I asked, the question sounding loudly into the thick ticking of the glass-domed timepiece sitting next to Fred's photo. There had been no papers, no certificates, no signatures, no suitcase accompanying Mary's arrival. It struck me that she had come to me with only her name.

Mary did not jump or look startled at my question. It seemed beyond my ability to surprise her.

'I didn't lie, Auntie Grace,' she said with something like a smirk in her voice. 'It really is Mary.'

'I know you did not lie.' She was irritating me again. 'I meant your tribal name, or whatever it is you call it.'

Immediately she was wary.

'I don't know what you're talkin' 'bout, Auntie Grace.'

Ironic that she had reverted to the accent of her people in her very denial of them. Part of me should have been pleased. After all, she was going to have to take this stance in the future if she wanted to get anywhere. Take inside what was undeniable from the outside. Maintaining the illusion of a lie is easier when you forget it is a lie.

Sipping my newly made tea, still warm and mixed with just the right amount of milk, I felt more content than I had a right to be, given the spectacle I had just made of myself at church. Would they be talking about me now, in their married homes, raising their eyebrows at lonely Mrs. Smith and her sorry little ward? Would they remember those rumours and wonder if I had retreated into the same state? Would they talk over their Sunday lunches about whether it was really fair to leave the child in the care of someone whose life had been so marked by tragedy?

‘I am the best one for her,’ I found myself saying out loud. Mary looked over at me with confusion on her face. She could not know that I was defending myself, and her, from all the do-gooders who never did any good, who talked piously but acted slovenly, who wanted to deny the problem, forget the men in the park with their bare, dirt encrusted feet or girls like Mary on their doorstep, a child of twelve who looked more like an eight year old with arms as thin as rope.

Not the done thing, to make them visible. It should have occurred to me when I read the newspaper article that *their* idea of the proper way to make a difference was to simply give more, to increase the weekly donation dropped into the padded green velvet of the church collection plate. No one really wanted to see Mary there, to be reminded of a problem, which, if left well enough alone, would sort itself out. The Aborigines were dying off after all. Or so they kept saying.

‘Do you want a piece of cake, Auntie Grace?’ Mary asked with a tone that reminded me of a healthy person talking to the sick.

She stayed on the footstool, reasonably still. She seemed strong although the incident after church had shown me the layer of fear underneath her strength. I had read that her people left their old behind when they moved on. Left to die, apparently. Like all primitives, they had no room for the un-productive, for those who could not contribute to the tribe. But what was considered old in their world? Would I have been deemed useless, a forty-year-old with no progeny? Would I have been left to wither under the desert sun? At least, now, I had made myself useful. I had rescued one of their half-caste babies, otherwise rejected, and smuggled her away to succour in secret.

I smiled.

Mary continued to watch me.

†

The next time at church, less attention was paid to us. I could not say that there was a real acceptance of one black face amongst the congregation only that the disapproval had become stale, a faint buzz under other, newer waves of gossip. Tongues wagged about more pressing news: Father Benjamin had some kind of tumour in an unspeakable place on his body and the Mavis boy had been missing for the week, leaving his mother to wring her hands in agitation while her husband stood by, looking faintly relieved.

It seemed no one told me of these events, and yet I knew. If I had been asked to testify as to how the knowledge came my way, I wouldn't have been able to say, to point out the person who'd first spoken of Father Benjamin's 'delicate problem'. I wondered if everyone else was thinking how his illness might have been caused by lack of use, though none of us would have talked out loud of celibacy as a cause for disease.

After the church service I let Mary again join the group of children who collected at the saint's grotto. I kept an eye on her and could only guess at what they talked about. I saw the strawberry-haired Gibson twins place their arms up against Mary's, their red freckles like angry flashes, compared to the uniform darkness of Mary. It made me feel slightly sick, this comparison. The three girls seemed to find it funny. Their giggles made heads turn.

I tried to pretend this did not affect me. Yet after so many years of having to take responsibility for only myself, I found my chest constricting over these possible transgressions. What were the rules? How close was she allowed to get? I suspected there were mothers who had forbidden their sons or daughters from speaking to Mary. I saw these children sulking under the church eaves and worried their wistful gazes would soon turn to resentful revenge. It was very strange to think Mary had created this exclusion.

For me, one of the hardest things was adjusting to the sound of someone else in the house. On the first night, the back door pulling open and the creak of the screen door pushing out, startled me from sleep and I jumped up to investigate. As I reached for the handle of my bedroom door I stopped, suddenly not sure if I had heard the noises or if I had dreamt them, as I used to do when I still believed Fred was coming home. The confusion of it made my head fuzzy and the shapes around me – the wardrobe, the dressing table – became larger than they were. It took me a moment to figure out where I was in time.

In the darkness, it seemed possible that I could turn around and find Fred lying in our bed, his massive body in the middle of the mattress, leaving me only a sliver of an edge to balance on. I stood, in my thick cotton nightgown like Lot's wife, trying hard not to turn and see the reality of a flat, featureless rectangle, trying hard not to crumble, once again, into the harsh space of abandonment. Even without turning around, though, I knew. Caught by the smell again or, rather, the lack of smell, the absence of anything male; that strange odour that would come out of his body when he wanted me, as if desire had seeped through his skin. It was different from the hard saltiness of his spent desire and even that was lost to me after the washing of our sheets. If I had known, I would not have been so hasty to clean them, to find myself left only with the residues of my own cheap perfumes.

Then I heard Mary cough, returning from the lavatory, and felt all the sadness, and relief, of knowing I was past the time of Fred. It did not matter which way I faced, he was not in my bed, he was not out there, making his way up the side fence, pulling open the screen door. How many times had I got out of bed to check? Imagining the wind, a cat, an over-turned garbage can, were his returning footsteps.

I had slipped back into bed and, despite the disturbance, was overwhelmingly grateful that Mary was in the house, that the noises had actually been real. Mary, unlike Fred, did not want to leave. Her mother was dead and she had no alternative except the Home, a place that obviously held no appeal. Father Benjamin had told me that some of them disappeared with dubious relatives into the North, returning to their bush ways.

For the rest of that first week, I listened for the squeaks and opening of the screen and back door. When Mary returned from the outhouse, I could not hear her feet on the kitchen lino, nor on the carpet, but I could just make out the sound of the mattress collapsing under her weight again.

She did not ask for a light for these night-time trips and I wouldn't have admitted to her that I never went to the outhouse after dark, that I made sure all my toiletries were done before the sun went down. Hardly worth dwelling on why a girl should not be afraid when a woman was. Mary did not have my memories, after all. Or perhaps her blood led her to communion with the night? Either way, it often made me shiver to think of her outside, tasting the natural world. I could not follow her. It was beyond me to enter the echoing stillness again.

†

Dear Grace,

I have entered the region of Death and I don't think I will ever come out of it. We've been marching for days and I write this without any expectation that it will find its way to you. All of the unit are desperately scrawling, as if we know this could be the only part of us left behind. The mud, the flies, the heat, these are beyond my description, but I accept them gratefully, knowing you are in the land of Life. You and my child are safe. I feel Death on my shoulder and I keep Him close, content in the knowledge that He cannot hurt you, so close is He to me. I hear Him breathing. The other men, the men from the country, they seem to understand this landscape better than me. Their eyes are quicker, their hearing clearer, they smell the enemy, alert to the movements of birds and animals, they are able to talk to the natives. I blunder along with them and can only suppose my escape from Death is blind luck. I have no belief that heaven is watching this mess. Take all that you have of me, Gracie, and keep it close. If I stood on the threshold of life, knowing what I now know, I think I would decline the offer to enter.

Out of the depths, I hear a cry,

Choked in a dry throat, as it begins to die.

My mind is struck blind, I do not want to hear,

I cannot conceive that God is near.

Fred

Toward the end of the third week after Mary's arrival we visited the local school. It was a short walk from my house although I had never had reason to pass through the sandstone pillars of its gateway before. I had often heard the bell ringing from my back garden, to call the children inside. My old teaching school had used the same tone of bell but it was a bus ride away, up and over the hill and, thankfully, out of earshot. Established in 1883 the main building of this school looked like an old convict's cottage with thin windows that did not encourage the sun. Father Benjamin had arranged the appointment for half past nine after the students had already been called inside so Mary and I entered a silent playground.

I held Mary's hand again, aware of its lightness and maybe the trace of a tremble. She wore her new dress (it seemed precipitous to purchase a uniform), yellow with white flowers, found for her by the eager women at St Vincent de Paul. I had taken her to the local charity shop, a more appropriate place for her to buy clothes after the exhaustion of the shoe expedition. The old ladies there, half of them half-blind, made it easy to buy several, less-than-perfect frocks. It did not matter if they were a little torn or frayed or splotched with dark, unidentifiable marks. Her new shoes, in contrast, were scuff-free and polished to an almost indecent shine.

'Which way, Auntie Grace?' Mary asked, not without a hint of impatience.

'I'm not sure,' I admitted and, at that moment, a small woman in a fawn dress appeared at the top of the steps of a building to our left. A sign above her declared it the Teacher's Hut.

'Mrs. Smith?' the woman enquired.

'Yes,' I answered.

'And Mary?'

‘Yes.’

Her eyes, which matched her washed-out dress, raked over Mary, her mouth staying closed after our exchange. I could not read any change in her expression, but she was better educated than the woman in the shoe department and, thus, better able to disguise either her approval or her revulsion.

‘Come in,’ she spoke finally and I was grateful that, at the very least, we were not going to be turned away at the doorstep.

She turned and I followed, Mary next to me, down a carpeted hall and to a closed frosted-glass door with another sign ‘School Principal’ nailed to the cross beam. The fawn lady, to my surprise, knocked and I realised we had only passed the preliminary barrier. She did not wait for a response from within the room, opening the door and striding in with the confidence of a trusted employee.

Behind the desk sat a bald man in a dark suit. He did not stand up on our entrance, only moving his head to stare at me with watery blue eyes.

‘Forgive me for not standing, Mrs. Smith,’ he said and his gaze invited me to follow him to a walking stick that sat under the window. ‘I am having a particularly bad day.’

I sat in the chair opposite the desk and Mary stood behind me while the fawn woman stood behind the Principal. We were uneven bookends, propping up the desk.

‘I’m Mr. Robertson,’ he announced.

His office smelt of cod liver oil and as I took in this rheumatic man, all joints and bones, I felt not the slightest tinge of empathy between the two of us. You can often tell with certain strangers that there’ll never be a time when you’ll mean more to one another.

‘Father Benjamin has told me about the unfortunate girl,’ Mr. Robertson continued. ‘And, though I am inclined toward good deeds, I have to constantly watch out for the reputation . . .’

‘. . . of the school,’ the fawn lady finished for him.

Unconsciously, I was listening for the school bell, as if I was back in the days of my own teaching when I would sit at the head of the room willing the minutes to pass more quickly.

‘I understand that, Mr. Robertson,’ I said, although I did not really understand this aching man. How much pain was he in right now? ‘Mary is, I believe, a good girl.’

I felt her shift behind me, perhaps, I hoped, standing up a little straighter.

‘Would you have her stand over there please?’ It was the fawn lady who was asking and I was yet to know who this woman was. The secretary? The Head Teacher? She seemed to have more self-assurance than I had encountered from my fellow female teachers. The brash young ones were soon beaten down by the stupefying effect of the classroom.

Mary moved to the spot the woman had indicated, near the window where the morning light was pouring through. She was not smiling and I was reminded of the sullen expression she had worn on the day of her arrival. Already I had grown used to not seeing it there, I had become used to a blander face. She had not transformed into something happy but she had taken off that mantle of sulkiness that did nothing for her dark features. To see it return, then, particularly in front of the people who could provide her with so much, was distressing. What could I say, however? *Brighten up?* I had already lectured her about the importance of education. It seemed she had not listened.

‘She really is quite ...’ Mr. Robertson began. His sentence trailed off but I knew what it contained.

‘I thought they were supposed to be half-castes, or even quadroons,’ the fawn woman said and she walked over to stand beside Mary. She reached across to place her hand under the girl’s chin and raised her head up as if to give Mr. Robertson a better view. She appeared to be a moment away from asking Mary to open her mouth so they could inspect her teeth. Mary did not flinch at the woman’s touch but her eyes had gone dead. Mrs. Thompson had said she was a beautiful child. *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.*

There had been moments like these in my own childhood when prospective parents would come to inspect us, walking along rows of brightly scrubbed girls, scanning from top to bottom for any flaws. Perhaps I wore the kind of expression that Mary now did, for I was almost entirely over-looked in the early years and the time came when I was too old to even be included in the rows. If it had not been for Auntie Iris I would never have had any trips outside of the convent.

‘I really don’t think . . .’ Mr. Robertson began and, again, trailed off. I wondered if he was capable of finishing a sentence.

‘I’m not sure she would be suitable,’ the fawn lady spoke for them both. Her hand dropped and she moved away from Mary. She returned to stand next to Mr. Robertson’s shoulder.

‘Although we don’t want you to think . . .’ said the Principal.

‘She’s a little too old, really. Can she read or write?’ the woman asked.

It felt as if the entire room was coated in cod liver oil, as slippery as these two were. To find a different problem when it was clear what the problem was.

‘She knows her letters,’ I answered. I had already quizzed Mary on this and discovered the patchy bits of learning she had gained during her two years at the Home. I had worried at the wisdom of giving her more education. Words had always given me such comfort but would they give her expectations beyond her abilities? She had come to me to be domestic, was there any point in introducing the academic? According to Mr. Robertson and his pale companion, the answer was no.

There was silence as, no doubt, Mr. Robertson was arranging the carefully chosen words of his rejection: ‘Not quite proper’ or ‘we’re looking for something different’ or ‘we’d like one much, much younger, with brighter eyes’.

I stood up. ‘I understand. Thank you for your time, Mr. Robertson,’ I said. The unexpected movement seemed to throw them, both mouthed ‘Oh’ like goldfish.

‘Come on, Mary.’

The girl moved out of the beam of sunlight she’d been forced to stand in and came to take my hand.

At the doorway, Mr. Robertson called a soft ‘Good day, Mrs. Smith’ to me. I did not turn back.

I had said that I understood and, in many ways, I did. The shape of a school-girl was fixed in their minds: her long brown, or blonde, plaits, her well rounded hips, her broad straw boater protecting her ivory face. There was nothing to be done about such preconception.

‘I’ll teach you to read, Mary,’ I said, as we passed through the stone pillars once more. On the top of each pillar I saw there was a lion with his paw holding a shield. The shields were carved with a cross and I had a brief image of a miniature Jesus sacrificed under the lion’s head.

Mary did not say anything as we walked home.

With the sting of the school rejection still raw, I discovered the penny in the lining of Mary's blue dress, the same penny that had supposedly been thrown into the fountain. It had found its way from a hole in the pocket to the hem of the skirt. I knew it was the same penny because I hadn't given her any other money. I remembered her wet hands and wondered why I had not thought it odd at the time. Had she thrown the coin in the water and then retrieved it when I wasn't looking?

I called to her. She was out in the yard, hanging out the washing. I had given her a wooden box to stand on so she could reach the line. She came and stood in the kitchen. I placed the penny on the table in front of her and she looked down at it.

'Another one, Auntie Grace?' she asked, as if I was going to magically produce a pond for her *not* to wish at, as if she didn't know exactly where I had found this one.

'I don't like liars, Mary.' The iron of my voice had terrified troublemakers of the past and I saw Mary's body go back into its shell. I had been too nice to her over these first few weeks and she had begun to relax, begun to believe that *she* had the upper hand. Oh, what she would not do if she thought I actually cared about her. How much she would take advantage. *Do not trust anyone, Auntie Iris had said, especially those you love.*

I grabbed her upper arm, my hand circling it with overlapping fingers. Pulling her towards her bedroom, I had no vision of what I would do, what punishment to administer. Real life did not have the school's boundaries, no set procedures. I was free to do as I wished.

'Auntie Grace,' she said quietly but nothing else. The tone had no reverence, just the continued flatness of the unbeliever.

‘Look what I have done for you,’ I said, still gripping the thin arm, making her look around.

The wardrobe door hung open and showed the crowd of outfits I had bought her, the two pairs of shoes: the ones from the Home she had stumbled in, scuffed, falling apart, and the shiny new ones, bright and full of promise. Where was her gratitude for this? Today she wore her new sandals, the brown leather straps matching her blasted skin.

I let go of her arm and she stood at the end of the bed with her eyes down.

‘Don’t lie to me again, Mary.’

‘Yes, Auntie Grace.’

The blandness of her tone pushed me. I found my hand rising up almost before I could think. I slapped her across the face, a blunt, quick hit.

She was not shocked. She stood there, holding her cheek, as if she had expected it.

‘You will stay in this room all day.’ I kept my voice level and calm despite the anger I felt. ‘You will not sit down. I will know if you have.’

She did not protest. Had the Home handed out similar punishments? Not enough of them obviously. Mary had lied to me, pretended compliance. She was not even clever enough to conceal it properly. I never would have found the penny if she had hidden it under her bed or somewhere else in the house. Why go to the trouble of stealing and then not even carry the crime through? Deception is an easy game to play, you just have to put in the effort.

I turned to look at her again before closing the door. The remnant of my slap was still there on her cheek, a slightly reddish tinge. I had used my right hand and there were no rings on those fingers, so it was simply flesh on flesh, hardly enough to raise a

bruise. With the mid-morning sun streaming in through the window, her black hair was all lit up, the acquired shine of my soapy ministrations. I would have to make her tie it back, with her hair loose and wild it was little wonder Mr Robertson had rejected her, she could be a Red Indian. I closed the door quickly on her deceptive face.

While Mary stood in her room, I sat shaking in the front room. My hand still stung from the slap. I had never hit the girls at my school in such a crude way. I used a cane, made for the purpose, across the palm of the hand mostly, only occasionally on the back of the thighs. But it was always prepared and measured, the reason for the punishment calmly articulated before the strike. Most of the girls cried out on the first thump and would be weeping by the last, so much so that I rarely saw the same girl twice. I remember hearing one of the teachers muttering that I liked dishing out the cane too much, as if I enjoyed it. She was wrong. I had met even harsher conditions in my own schooling. The Sisters had a love of suffering, tore the skin of our hands and buttocks to shreds in emulation of the lashes laid on Jesus' back before his crucifixion. In contrast to the Sisters, I never punished without due cause.

When I was ten I had eaten an entire teacake during a visit to Auntie Iris's and then lied about it, foolishly insisting it had not been me even though I was the only one in the house. Auntie Iris made me stand in the front entrance for six hours, a cold hall with a spiral staircase that lead to bedrooms I was never invited to stay in. Standing for those hours, my legs beginning to shake, I had ingested so much guilt I was sick with it.

In the front room, I took large, uneven breaths. I wanted a cup of tea and almost called out to Mary to make me one. No, she was not to be allowed out of her room, although it struck me that this meant I would have to finish hanging out the washing and put on the kettle myself.

I entered Mary's room after two hours and knew she had not sat down. The bed cover remained un-crumpled and Fred's desk still had its pure layer of dust upon it. Not surprisingly, she stood with her legs crossed.

'You can go to the bathroom,' I said and she rushed out without even a thank you. I should have punished her for that as well. I felt weary as if it had been me standing in this claustrophobic little room. Fred had often come in here to his books. He had taken the job at the bank and I wanted to believe he was content tallying up numbers, keeping the country balanced but, deep down, I knew he wanted more, that one day he hoped to return to the land of words. Despite what he wrote in his letters, I suspected he had always been writing his poetry.

'Do I have to keep standing, Auntie Grace?' Mary stood in the doorway, her tone stronger than I had heard it before, as if the punishment had had the opposite effect than my intention.

'Why did I make you stand, Mary?' I asked her, trying to get myself back on firmer ground.

'Because I didn't throw the penny in the water, Auntie Grace.'

'And why didn't you?'

She frowned, weighing up the best possible answer.

'I didn't want to wish.'

'It was not up to you, Mary. I gave you the penny for that reason. Not for you to hide away. Not for you to lie to me about. Do you have anything to say to me?'

She was still standing in the doorway, her hands behind her back in a stance that should have been submissive. 'I didn't want to wish,' she repeated.

I was stuck between anger and admiration. She held her shoulders back, somehow aware this would give her credence.

‘Go and make me tea,’ I ordered her. I had already finished hanging out the clothes.

‘Yes, Auntie Grace.’

She spun away and disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later, I heard the sound of her filling the kettle.

†

I dreamt that night that I was a girl once more trying to find my way through the dark dormitory to the outhouse. I was no one's pet, no older girl was taking my hand and shushing me, telling me not to be afraid. There was only someone hissing at me to be quiet as the floorboards squeaked beneath my feet. I was walking down the chilled corridor alone and when I found my way to the outside I was in the field of arum lilies, their flower heads taller than me. Instead of the snake path ahead, I saw Auntie Iris's sandstone wall and I began rubbing my palm against the wall, wishing it to take me down to the beach beyond, to the soft sand of Shelley's beach where real families would sit for hours and hours on end. I rubbed and rubbed and rubbed the wall and still no genie appeared.

'Auntie Grace?'

I was standing at the bottom of the back concrete steps with my feet bare, shivering in my nightgown, my hands in a ball. My fingers felt sore. I could not remember getting out of bed. My hair was loose, my hair net must have slipped off.

I turned around to see the girl in the doorway, holding open the screen door.

'You're cold,' she said.

Her eyes seemed to have caught all the moonlight, big tubs of knowing. What did she know?

'What are you?' I asked, for perhaps I had conjured her up.

'Come inside, Auntie Grace.'

My name brought me back to myself. It was a summer's night; I was not truly cold. I had simply been walking in my sleep and this creature had found me.

‘Come inside,’ she repeated. She was telling me what to do. In the moonlight, I could barely make out the skin that everyone abhorred, I could only see her eyes. They were almost separate from the rest of her and held something, some hope long lost to me.

I did not want to look at her. *Corpus Domini nostri Jesu, Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam. May the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ keep your soul unto life everlasting. His pure, white body. May Thy Body, O Lord, which I have received, and Thy Blood which I have drunk cleave to mine inmost parts: and do Thou grant that no stain of sin remain in me.*

She was an abo, a nigger, a darky. These were the other names I could call her. *Grant that no stain of skin remain in me.*

‘Get away from me! Go back to bed!’ I yelled.

Mary let go of the screen door and, as it slammed shut, she dissolved back to her bedroom. I stood alone on the concrete, flexing my hands. Had she detected those words in my face? Did she know I had seen right through to her bones? What had she brought to me? All these thoughts from the past, all this darkness.

The next morning when I went to wake her, her blanket was lying crumpled on the floor, her old blue dress was missing and the front door was unlocked. She was gone.

†

I would find Mary by myself. She could not have gone too far, I reasoned. She had no one to go to; she would be wandering out there, with no clear plan as to what to do. I didn't want to involve Father Benjamin. He wouldn't think I was such a good person if, after only two weeks, I had driven her away. Nor did I want the Church to bring in the police who would, no doubt, label her some kind of a fugitive and try to track her down with baying dogs.

I dressed quickly, in hat and gloves. It was hot out there, the end of March, with strange mixed up days, one clouded and windy, and the next still and clear, as if God kept changing His mind. I thought about going in the car but decided that would be too conspicuous, a slow drive down the street would arouse more comments than a quick walk around the block. I would take my shopping basket for the excuse of a longer, more winding route. How hard would it be to look for her without looking as if I was looking? And had Mary's presence been so noted that they would wonder about my solitude?

Sure enough, as I walked past the man at number 22, watering with the hose at a suggestive level of his hips, he called out 'Left the little darky at home today, have we?'

I replied with a nod and a smile and walked on. I headed toward the park and the little beach. It was a Saturday so the children were out on bicycles and scooters. I spotted the Thompson kid playing marbles with a group of boys near the broken bayonet statue. On the corner, still with the street between us, I hesitated. Was it ridiculous to think of walking over and asking them if he had seen Mary, if they knew where she was? Such a question would spread the news of her disappearance, the whispers shooting off like their cat's eyes and oxbloods. As I watched them play, a little girl trotted up with two ice-cream cones in her hands, a splash of white on her front. She

licked one of the cones around the edges, holding the other out to avoid any more drips. I saw her deliver the cone to one of the boys. I could see she received no thanks. Her brother turned back to the game immediately, devouring the top half of the ice cream in one gulp.

I strode on. Down at the beach Mary was nowhere to be seen so I took the path away from the water into the hilly, leafy suburbs. The houses I passed were on double blocks, sprawling with possible hiding places, large empty back gardens with sheds and chicken coops and vegetable patches kept since the war. I imagined Mary as so small she could lie under a pumpkin leaf and I would not spot her.

My head started to itch from the heat pounding down onto my hat. My feet, trapped in stockings and jammed into navy blue pumps, felt as if they were on fire, flames in the arches and heels. How much I wanted to sit down and throw the shoes off. How weak I was to already feel this way, after less than an hour's wandering.

I do not really believe in Fate – it seems sacrilegious – but it did seem to be Fate when I realised I was outside Mr. Roper's house. The neat brown brick fence with a green wire gate lower than my knees. An overwhelming smell of sweetness from the gardenia bushes lined along the path up to the door, their white petals only just beginning to brown and drop. The verandah front with a couple of wicker chairs I had not seen him use, both with detached ends of cane sticking out from their edges. All familiar enough from my occasional visits over the years; after-church lunches, with another couple of women invited along from the Widows' Group to make it proper.

Knocking on the door aroused Will, Mr. Roper's cockatoo, kept in a cage out in the back garden. The massive squawking overtook all other sounds so I could not hear whether Mr. Roper was coming or not. His abrupt appearance in the doorway caught me off guard.

‘Well . . . Mrs. Smith . . . ’

He wore a pair of beige trousers with no belt, a white short sleeved shirt and, most disconcerting of all, no shoes. Who had he expected me to be? I had taken my hat off and my hair was flattened against my head. I still had the shopping basket in the crook of my arm, pressed tight so it stuck out from my side like a third appendage.

‘Mr. Roper, I need some help.’ I had rehearsed what I was going to say on the way up the front path. ‘Mary . . . the little girl . . . my ward . . . seems to have gone . . . seems to have left the house . . . last night.’ This part of the narrative was not going quite as I had planned. How to describe the previous night? I certainly could not tell him of my transportation to the back steps, nor the words that flared up in my head at the sight of Mary. He was a gentle man, I was sure, his conscience clear of accusations.

‘Come on in Mrs. Smith.’ He moved back to let me through into the wooden floored corridor that ran all the way to the back of the house, the cream walls peppered with landscapes of snow covered forests and icy ponds. I had never asked why he had these pictures. I did not ask him on this occasion either.

‘Perhaps a cup of tea?’ Mr. Roper offered as we made our way to the kitchen.

‘I don’t know. I feel I should be searching.’ Even as I said this, I lowered myself onto one of his kitchen chairs, feeling the relief of letting my feet lighten. I would have liked to slip off my shoes but Mr. Roper’s own lack of footwear made the thought of it impossible.

‘I’ll just go and um . . . ’ he said after putting the kettle onto the stovetop and disappeared up the corridor again. While he was gone, I let my feet come out of my shoes, wiggling my toes as if I was a baby discovering them for the first time. I put my elbows on the table, breathing out the fatigue in loud, unpleasant exhalations.

I could hear Mr. Roper's newly clad feet coming back and quickly made myself presentable again.

'So, what is to be done?' he asked. He had put on a black leather belt and a pair of black shoes, both looked harsh and blunt against the lesser colours of his pants and shirt.

'I was hoping you could help me look.'

'But she could be anywhere. Gone on, what do they call it? Walkabout?'

'Dear Lord.'

'What did the police say?'

I hated the way he stared at me, as if he knew my answer would not be to his liking.

'I didn't think it was necessary to tell them, as yet.'

He turned away from me to check the kettle which had started a faint whistling, the beginning of the boil. I had expected him to show more exasperation, to berate me for my pride.

'We can take my car,' he said and it was settled.

'So nice to not have petrol rations,' I said and drank my tea without really tasting it.

Mr. Roper's Holden smelt of the thin brown cigars, or cigarillos, I often saw him smoking after church. His house seemed to have avoided the stale stench and it had compensated by ingraining itself into the tan upholstery of the car. I tried not to let it remind me of Fred, concentrating on the solid chin of Mr. Roper beside me.

We began driving slowly through the back streets, re-treading ground I had already walked along. I did not point this out to Mr. Roper. A man's search needed to be self-directed and any comments from me would sound like nagging. The boys were

still playing marbles near the statue although they had moved along slightly to catch the little shade cast by a hydrangea bush. I was struck by the absurdity of expecting Mary to be out here. She would be much further away by now. Could I really expect to see her strolling benignly past the sprinkler dotted lawns, past the rose beds, past the concrete effigies of her tribesmen, those plaster savages who stood on one leg in front gardens for eternity?

‘That one is in good shape.’ Mr. Roper nodded over to one of these black-man-gnomes as we crawled past. Its red loincloth was perfectly vermilion and even the tip of its spear was intact.

‘We could take him home,’ Mr. Roper said. ‘I’m sure no one would notice the difference.’

He laughed at his joke. I could only just manage to raise a smile.

I was not sure what drew me to Hyde Park. At first I was not even aware that my subtle directions were manipulating us that way. Perhaps there was also a part of Mr. Roper that was naturally drawn to the city. I had often seen his face animated with descriptions of the centre – ‘all that hustle and bustle’ – his voice longing for a life he could not find in the suburbs.

Whatever it was, we found ourselves driving down William Street, following the tram down the hill. I felt the sensation of being completely out of control as we dipped and then rose again along the avenue, so much so that I wanted to grab at the wheel just to have something to hold onto. To prevent this, I clung to the inside door handle. I saw Mr. Roper glance over and saw my grip but he did not say anything, nor did he reduce his acceleration. I could not determine if his thin smile was one of amusement or annoyance. How little I knew about this man who I had known for these past five years,

as if our lives travelled next to each other without ever truly joining, like raindrops on glass. His trilby shaded his face.

‘Where in the city? Do you think?’ he asked as if in reply to an unvoiced question. I told him to park on Elizabeth Street.

We walked along the footpath towards the southern entrance of the Park. At the kiosk in the corner families recovered from the heat with glasses of lemonade. Mr. Roper was not hurrying, nor was I. Our pace similar, side by side we moved. My rest in the car had revived my legs and feet, yet it was not just this that created the odd feeling of being there but somehow above it all. I was holding myself tall, at ease. With a strange awareness I saw a slender mother leaning into a pram to check her baby’s temperature, knowing that I would appear to be a wife too, out with my husband for an afternoon stroll. To have a man by my side again, that was it. What did it matter if he was not actually my spouse? What did it matter if the truth was different?

We pushed on through the humidity. As we got closer to the ANZAC memorial I was tempted to take Mr. Roper’s arm, to maintain the illusion for a little longer. By this point, however, there was no one around to see. The steps up to the cenotaph were deserted, their pink stone absorbing heat and throwing up an unwelcoming glare. I had to shade my eyes with my hand, negotiating the ascent through the slits of my fingers as Mr. Roper barrelled on ahead of me. I had told him that Mary might have wanted to see inside the Memorial, see what I had not shown her.

A young couple stood in the circular Hall of Memory, both their heads tilted reverently downwards into the Well of Contemplation, a circle cut into the floor with a wreath-like, waist-high balustrade surrounding it. I knew what they would see below them. The statue of the spread-eagled figure of a fallen soldier lying on his shield and sword, an emaciated body with not a skerrick of clothing on him, not even the loincloth

given to figures of Christ on the cross. From this level you could only see the boy, not the women who carried him.

Mr. Roper headed over to the winding stairs that lead to the Hall of Silence below. I didn't follow him. Down there he would see the figures of the mother, wife and sister draped in Romanesque clothing, as if to atone for their soldier's nakedness. Around their feet, a burst sun spread out in brass waves across the floor.

I walked quietly over to the round balustrade, now wondering if I had brought Mr. Roper to the wrong place. Surely, if a young girl were curled up beside the statue – for some reason I imagined her asleep, on the sun – the couple would not be looking so placid. Yet if Mr. Roper had found her, he would not be able to call out, unable to ignore the plea written in the floor entrance: 'Let silent contemplation be your offering'. In all my visits here, I had never heard a word spoken in the chamber below, nor were many words uttered in this hall. There was something that erased the ability to talk, the weight of death pushed down the air, making it difficult to breathe, let alone speak. I had often found myself staring at the domed ceiling above – 120,000 stars spotted it, one for each WWI volunteer, crowding together so that in the middle it looked like a blanket – only to realise I was holding my breath. The eternal flame that wafted gas throughout the edifice did not help either.

Re-entering had reminded me of the eerie quality of the place. Surely a twelve-year-old girl would not seek this? I loved the way the building was imbued with the reverence, the stateliness, the supremeness of the sacrifice. Taken up in glory. Here, in stone and bronze, lives made immortal and meaningful, the lives of their wives, sisters and daughters transformed from the ordinary into the godly. But Mary would not be able to see this. It was a magnificence some did not seek.

'She's not here,' Mr. Roper whispered into my ear. I had not heard him return.

‘We’ll look in the park,’ I whispered back. The young couple looked over at us disapprovingly as if we were whispering sweet nothings to one another. To be silently reprimanded by them! It was almost more than I could bear and I turned away from Mr. Roper, laying my hands on the top of the marble ledge. Mr. Roper coughed as if to signal his impatience and strode away across the Hall, disappearing down the stairs that lead to the park.

When I gazed down into the Well of Contemplation again, a shadow moved. A black shape scurried into the space under my feet, out of view. I heard a small hissing sound. There had never been anything like this before. Was it a rat? Then how did it manage to move like a person? I crossed my arms tightly and leaned over further, to try and catch another glimpse of it. The girl of the couple was staring at me. Had she seen it too? For a moment, leaning over the barrier, I was too scared to move, in case the creature scrambled up over the marble and found its way to me. I tried to breath slowly, to listen for another sound. Below me, I stared now at the gold floor, at the lines engraved in the flames that made them appear to be rippling. I was transfixed, holding myself so still that I could not imagine ever moving again. I had become one of the statues below – a wife, a sister or a mother? I was none of these.

The girl from the couple was standing next to me. She put her hand on my shoulder and gently lent me back from the edge. I let out a sigh, knowing I had not been breathing properly.

‘You need to be careful,’ the girl said. Her boyfriend stared at me from behind her shoulder, not comfortable with this touching of a stranger.

‘Thank you.’ I spoke too loudly. Two red-breasted starlings flew out from the alcove holding the eternal flame. The birds spiraled up into the dome for a moment

before shooting out the doorway to join the ibises and seagulls fighting on the surface of the reflection pool.

†

Dear Grace,

I am alive and that, in itself, is a miracle. How strange it feels to no longer be afraid, to sit in a chair on a verandah, and write to you, to be bathed in the sunset without always watching for those nasty little Nips coming to bomb us to hell.

Most of the men are jumping on board ships to go home but I have chosen to stay. I have volunteered to be part of the Occupation Forces heading to Japan.

They'll station us at a place not far from Hiroshima. You'll have heard of it, the city that took the force of the American's super bomb to "end" the war. You would think we'd done nothing, you would think our fighting meant nothing, the way the Yanks talk themselves up over here.

They speak of this place, this Hiroshima, as if it is the centre of a new world. An atomic world. Children turned to ashes in a blinding flash, human monsters created from something called radiation, dogs that breathe fire. A clearer vision of Hell I have never heard described. What a place to see in the flesh, then, what a place to be able to say I have walked. Maybe that's what this war was about: bringing damnation to the Earth so that we can fully appreciate how godless we truly are.

Some of the boys think I am mad to want to go there but they've always thought that. There are enough volunteers to make up more than a couple of battalions for the Occupation Forces, so I guess madness must be contagious.

I will write with more news as soon as I have some,

Fred

I had heard about Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the radio and, on the day of the surrender, went out to find Wayville Street awash with the jubilation of victory. I had stood in my front yard, smiling over the oleander bushes to my neighbours hugging each other and waving at me, laughing and crying. It was not a day to be inside and even if I had not forgiven them for their avoidance of me after my miscarriage, I still wanted to be part of the general joy, wanted to watch the children skipping about.

On that day, we tried to be oblivious to the deep grief. Every one of us knew someone who had been lost: Auntie Iris's son taken by the Japanese, Fred's brother buried in Europe somewhere. I had held my hands in prayer although (and I would never have admitted this out-loud) I had nothing to say to God. I should have been thanking Him for the end of it finally but I had felt too tired, still too alone, to give Him gratitude.

If I had been able to I would have lain down on the grass and wept. As it was, I had continued to stand, watching the late winter sky gradually darken. I could hear celebrations going on in houses all around, doors left open, lights spilling out as surely as the alcohol was. Radios blared in a way that never would have been acceptable on any other night; ABC voices mixed with 'God Save the King', competing with the raucous shouts of old men and shrilling laughter from giddy girls and too-young siblings fighting over a share of their mother's attention so sharply focused elsewhere – mothers thinking of the ones who were not home yet, wanting to hold them.

I had been separate from all of them, though I could still imagine my future within such rooms: surrounded by my own children, hopefully untouched by war, but still basking in the glow of domestic assurance that can only come from knowing that the world has been fought over and is terribly safe. I had looked up at the stars again,

wondering which of them would carry my Fred home, my still poetic-self believing I had control over fiery Fate.

†

I walked along the edge of the reflection pool, the strange shadow of the memorial still with me. Mr. Roper had forged on ahead, already crossing Park Street without a glance back to see how I was coming along. By now, the sun had almost gone. I felt as if I had lost more time than I should have inside the Hall of Memory, as if the day had disappeared while I stood in there, staring into nothingness. Surrounded by remembering, the lists of all the countries drawn into battle over the years, the fake stars above a reminder of all those lost. Perhaps I was remembering that I had no right to be there, that the shadow *should* hiss at me.

Ahead, yet another couple walked hand in hand. I watched their arms swing when a little girl ducked under their joined hands, her head just missing the edge of their fingers. If the couple had been her parents, rather than strangers, it might have been a game and she would have turned to run back under again and the pair would have laughed at her antics. She was not their child, however. Their arms were not cradles of protection; they might swoop lower and trip her up or, worse still, break apart and attempt to grab her. Still, the little girl kept on running, brushing past my hip.

The woman of the couple seemed to barely notice the girl ducking under her hands and, unlike her husband, did not turn her head to see where the child was going. He swiveled his head, like me, to watch the little girl run: her brown hair, cut at the shoulders, her pale green dress and her ankle white socks under sandals.

‘Mother!’ I heard her cry out and, in the distance, another woman turned around in a kind of heated daze as if she had forgotten her daughter existed.

I continued on to the fountain. No longer ahead of me on the path, Mr. Roper seemed to have plunged into the surrounding gardens, perhaps imagining himself an intrepid explorer fighting through the jungle to save the savage child.

The statue of Apollo in the fountain drew ever closer, more bronzed male flesh, as if every man had hardened in this city, turned cold and distant. Mary was there, sitting on the grass over to the right. I felt a surge of relief. She had not seen me and I stopped for a moment; a strange deliciousness, to be able to watch her without her knowledge. Her gaze followed the water as it spurted out of the turtles' mouths. Her sandals next to her on the ground, her bare legs crossed beneath her. People walked by and I saw that they didn't even look in her direction, as if she were invisible. She was a little girl, clearly on her own. Did they assume she had a mother waiting nearby whom she could call to when needed? Did her apparent calmness show them she was not lost or helpless? Or did a little black girl not deserve their attention?

I began to walk toward her, listening to the cascade of the water falling underneath the click of my heels against the stone. How slowly I seemed to be moving. 'Mary!' I called, as if to will myself to keep moving towards her.

She turned in my direction. I could read the emotions of hope, then fright, then disappointment running across her face as clearly as if she had written them down for me. Who was it she wanted?

'Hello, Auntie Grace.' She remained sitting, craning her neck up to me.

'You're in a great deal of trouble young lady,' I heard myself saying. The voice was stern and hard. Sister Clare spoke just like that, after I had run away for the first time, trying to get to Auntie Iris's house. What punishment would I give Mary for her transgression? More than a simple slap, more than seclusion in her bedroom? I did not want to remember what Sister Clare had done.

Mary's gaze went back to the fountain, staring through the leaping jets of water to some dream. She was looking at the spot where the black tramps had sat on our day buying shoes.

‘Your feet are filthy,’ I said.

‘Ah, so you’ve found her.’ Mr. Roper appeared by my side, again without my hearing his approach. He had an earthy smell about him.

I kept my focus on Mary, afraid she would disappear if I looked away. ‘Put your sandals on,’ I ordered. She uncrossed her legs and kneeed them up in front of her. As she fiddled with putting on her sandals, her knees broke apart for a moment, her dress riding up enough to show a glimpse of her underwear.

‘Hurry up,’ I said, hoping Mr. Roper would not see.

‘That’s good work,’ he said, sounding a little like Fred after he had skinned a fish. I glanced at Mr. Roper. He had a twig caught on the back rim of his hat.

‘Thank you for your help,’ I replied.

‘My pleasure.’

It hadn’t been pleasurable; the heat had made it stuffy and awkward between us and the shadow in the memorial had made me doubt my place in the world. And now, Mr. Roper’s white shirt was stained with dirt. And all of this was Mary’s fault.

‘Hurry up, you stupid girl.’ This was my own voice now, strong and powerful.

‘Stupid?’ Mr. Roper said. ‘Not so sure of that.’ He was staring at the girl, as if seeing her for the first time.

I didn’t reply. Mary stood and I took her hand in mine, gripping it in my soaking glove. I had to keep pulling at her, to keep her at my pace as we headed back to Mr. Roper’s car. She kept glancing over her shoulder, back toward the empty space left by her imagined kin.

I did not invite Mr. Roper in when he dropped us back to the house. I was sure he would have had enough of me for the day and was surprised when he seemed to hover in the driveway, the engine turning over like a conversation.

‘Keep an eye on her, Grace,’ he called out of the side window. He rarely used my Christian name. We had always adopted the formality of the Church group who insisted that the ‘Mister’ and ‘Missus’ remain, crying out our seemingly married state, even while so many of us lived alone. Did he really feel we had come closer together or was his use of my name a reminder of how far apart we were?

I turned and waved politely at him, a closed hand, Queen-like wave, trying to convey a composure I did not feel.

Once inside the house I immediately peeled off my gloves. My hat came off with a strange sucking sound and I kicked off my heels, lowering my feet back to the ground with a sigh. Mary had already broken free of my hand and ran through the kitchen to the outhouse. She had probably been holding on all day. Though there would have to be punishment I was grateful that I did not have to keep myself proper for Mary, even my most uncontrolled appearance was civilised compared to her. She had walked all that way . . . Tonight I would scrub her clean again though no soap could rid her of memories. What had she seen out there?

The mirror in the hallway threw back my punctured face, hot and deflated. I had found Mary, I told myself, brought her back. I should be proud and exhilarated. What had my motivation been if not to save her? Pluck her from a life of darkness? Watch over her?

A line from one of the Psalms came to me: *I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the housetop.*

‘Mary!’ I called, standing in the kitchen doorway. She must have been moving already, for she ran into me, her torso colliding with my stomach. She took a step back and her eyes, once again, stared up at me.

‘Sorry, Auntie Grace.’ She sounded genuine.

I held her by the shoulders, at arm's length. I could feel her bones through the dress. She had washed her hands after using the lavatory, the lemon soap smell drifting up to me, almost taking away the stink of the night.

'I am trying to help you, Mary. To save you from yourself. Do you understand?' I tried to adopt a somewhat priestly lilt, the smoothness of confession. 'You must work with me in this, not against me. If you run away again, I will call the police and you will be taken back to the Home.'

I was amazed at how even I was able to keep my tone, how little anger seemed to be stirring inside me. Perhaps she could sense this because instead of the acceptance or even fear I had expected, Mary began to cry.

I continued to hold her shoulders through their shaking, not willing to risk holding her any closer.

'I want my mum,' she said.

I released her as quickly as if she had caught on fire. Somehow my fingers did feel like they were burning. 'You haven't got a mother,' I replied. 'There is no point yearning for her.'

'I do, I do have a mum.'

'No, Mary, she is dead.'

'... not true,' she mumbled.

'Why do you think you were in the Home? Why do you think you are here with me?'

'They took me. They took me away from her.' She said it loudly, with the strength of a myth she had been cultivating, the fairytale of a perfect life to be found, just around the corner.

I remembered my own blindness to Fred's change. I did not want to see his true form. To me, his decision to stay away longer was simply more evidence of his fervour, his commitment to the Empire. His letters contained no tales of promotion, or fought-for honours or medals, yet I chose to see longevity as a sign of his courage, a covert promise of glories to come.

Here was Mary's reliance on her mother, clinging hopelessly to someone who had long since ceased to exist. How hard it would be to make her see. She continued to cry in the kitchen, making no effort to control her sobs. I wished I had removed my stockings before this confrontation. I was trapped inside the nylon as surely as I was trapped with Mary. The kitchen had become a whirling cauldron of emotion.

'For heaven's sake, girl,' I said, though her lack of restraint did not shock me. After all she was a baser creature, closer to the primal than me, more connected to dances of passion and hunger. It would take longer to turn her. The Sisters had had their work cut out with me when I was young and I was sure I had the blood of the pioneers flowing in me: strong, able-bodied men who slashed at the rugged terrain to make it their own, dynamited mountains as if they were foothills, dammed the rivers for more water than they could drink. Mary was behind such people by a thousand steps, her marrow tainted by those who had simply wandered the country, never settling, never taking control of their destinies. Was it any wonder she had no heart to stop in one place and make the most of the opportunity given to her by me? How many times had I wanted to strike out and find Fred? I had even booked myself on one of the ships not long after leaving my teaching post, determined to bring him back.

I was not angry anymore, my mind slipping into a barely contained tiredness. Without thinking, I knelt down and hugged Mary to me.

For a moment, her body was stiff as she held her breath. Then she relaxed, her head on my shoulder and, to her credit, she stopped crying, sniffing loudly next to my ear instead.

‘Your mother abandoned you, Mary.’ I spoke into the quietness. ‘Before she went off to kill herself with drink.’

This is what I had been told and I could not let Mary live in the fantasy of resurrection. It would only make things harder in the long run.

Mary did not push away from me, as I had half expected. She stayed in my embrace, her shoulders hunching every now and then as she continued to sniff.

‘You must know, Mary,’ I whispered, ‘I am your salvation.’

I held her, alight with a new knowledge inside me: saving her would be my redemption.

†

The next month passed with lessons of all kinds. In the midst of a heat wave that almost melted the city, I taught Mary to clean our clothes by hand in the copper (I had not yet ordered a smaller electric washing machine to replace my first, too-large order). I taught her to scrub the kitchen floor with just the right amount of vigour to ensure no scratches were added to the surface. I taught her to run the Hoover over the carpets, although her arms lacked the power to really exercise the machine to its full potential. I showed her the proper way to dust and how you could use newspaper to clean the windows without leaving a streak, even if the ink did come off on your fingers. Of course, with Mary this hardly mattered.

She had already mastered the art of making a good cup of tea so we went on to other cooking: a solid lamb stew, waves of mash on a shepherd's pie, the layers of a trifle, a properly baked roast. I could have sworn the quality of meat I got from the butcher was better when I had Mary by my side.

'She needs fattening up,' the butcher said as if she was being prepared for Abraham's slaughter.

Yet while Mary did eat a great deal, she did not 'fatten up'. She became more sinewy but her basic bulk did not increase. Even with the amount she ate we often had leftovers, stretching the Sunday meal across the week. My own stomach ballooned out with so much food. I stopped worrying about my figure, settling into the matronly rotundity I saw all around me, as if I too had rolls of fat left over from child-birth.

When the washing up was done, we sat in the front room and I read to Mary, as a step towards her own learning. I chose *Jane Eyre* because I had always loved orphan stories. Mary seemed to listen, obedient and polite but I suspected the seed of hope for her mother was still within her. How often had I created a fantasy family as a child? The

perfect mother, the steady father, the gaggle of brothers and sisters who would laugh with me as we made daisy chains or surround me in my birthday bed? Impossible to monitor the imagination. Even as she sat placidly on the leather footrest, she could be creating a whole other future for herself with a plethora of dark faces. I did not need to ask her why she had made her way to Hyde Park, nor did I have the desire to find out if the shadow in the war memorial had been her or not. Sometimes ignorance is a warmer place to inhabit.

Strangely enough, in this period of what should have been calm, I was on edge. I would jump at the postman's whistle, always for next door, never for me. I would wake in the middle of the night with vague recollections of distressing dreams and feel their residue haunting me even in daylight hours. I found it difficult to keep my fingers from knotting together into a tight ball.

Mr. Roper, who had begun to drop in at regular intervals, always with the excuse of a basket of excess fruit from his backyard trees, noticed my unease and asked one afternoon, quite directly, if anything was upsetting me. 'Is it the girl? Has she done something else you haven't told me about?'

Seated at the kitchen table, he had the eagerness of the gossip in his question and I wondered how much of our conversation would end up in pieces around the Church lawn. A great deal of my "information" came from this stoic man. At the same time, I knew almost nothing about him. I had only known him since after the war, always as a widower, his wife having died over ten years beforehand.

One night I had walked past his house and seen his porch light burning. I remembered his dishevelment at his front door, his haste to find out who was knocking unexpectedly. I recognised the wildness of hope. But hoping for what exactly? Waiting for whose love to come home?

‘It is nothing to do with Mary,’ I lied.

Mr. Roper bit into one of his brown apples. ‘Somethin’ else then,’ he spluttered through the juice coming from his mouth.

‘It’s nothing at all,’ I said, not even sounding convincing to myself. Mr. Roper’s question was a little too close to a level of intimacy between us that I couldn’t allow. Having Mary at my house meant his visits were not altogether inappropriate but they could still get church tongues wagging.

I saw him swallow with something like regret in his face. He knew what my lack of disclosure really meant; that we would only ever have conversations about the state of the fruit or the unpredictable weather. Safe, quiet discussions that did not intrude into the borders of our knowledge of each other. A part of me regretted this distance. I would not learn for whom his porch-light burned nor the reasons behind the frosty landscapes running down his hallway.

These were small prices to pay, though, to be left alone with my unease. To not have to explain that Mary had churned me up to the point where I no longer felt safe with myself. Me, who had succeeded in being so much to the world, who had managed to fool them all, sent into shivers of panic by a little black girl wearing shoes too big for her!

‘How much are you being paid for her?’ Mr. Roper asked with an abruptness not helped by his choosing to finish off the core of the apple directly after the question. It was a cold thing to enquire; perhaps he thought it was cold enough to be inoffensive.

‘One pound, five a week,’ I answered.

‘You think it’s worth it?’

‘It helps.’

‘Makes up for what she . . . uh . . . is?’

‘She is a child of God.’

I became aware of Mary’s shape on the other side of the back wire door. She had been out there, in her new Vinnies hat, digging up the bulbs. She could barely understand my instructions to coax them all out of the soil and rebury them in another part of the garden. ‘Why do they need to move, Auntie Grace?’ she had asked and I foresaw another conversation similar to our one about the penny. I’d told her to do as she was told.

I wondered how long she had been listening to my conversation with Mr. Roper. Not that it really mattered. Let her know the paltry sum I was given to cover her clothes and food and upkeep.

‘I’m done, Auntie Grace,’ she said through the wire.

‘“Finished” is the right word, Mary,’ I corrected.

‘Finished, Auntie Grace,’ she replied and her dropping of the pronoun made it sound even more grammatically incorrect.

‘You can rake the leaves now.’

The rake was technically too big for her and it would take twice as long to complete the task than if I did it myself. A small punishment for her semantic cheek.

She disappeared from the doorway. A few moments later we heard the scraping of the rake fork across the grass, as consistent as a heartbeat. There were not many leaves yet, and in many ways that made it harder, having to get the individual pieces without destroying the grass underneath. I had shown her how to do it but could not be sure she would not take her revenge by tearing into the soil.

‘I see she does have her uses,’ Mr. Roper said. There did not seem to be any snideness in his tone so I simply nodded in agreement.

We sat in silence. I couldn't tell if his visit had been long enough yet for me to make moves towards his departure. Strange to think how much I would have appreciated his presence during that most difficult time when the silence of the afternoon hours almost crushed me. Even recently I had longed to draw out those after-church lunches at Mr. Roper's house, always staying until the last of my fellow widows made to leave, regretting that I had to go to ensure the entire group knew I was not there alone with him. Now I had Mr. Roper in my house, with only a twelve year old as a chaperone, and all I could think about was getting rid of him. What was it that made me so uneasy? Perhaps his presence simply reminded me of absence. Perhaps the chair was better left empty than filled with a poor substitute for Fred.

†

In the third month after Mary's arrival a letter materialised, always a letter, to throw me into more of a spin. Shown to me by Father Benjamin, irresponsibly I thought afterwards. He should have measured the consequences a great deal more.

When I first read the letter I found myself concentrating on the bad grammar and spelling mistakes instead of the content. Force of habit, I suppose. I could almost feel my right hand twitching with the desire to mark the paper with corrections.

The force of what the words really meant took a little longer to register.

'How is this possible?' I finally asked Father Benjamin.

'I am afraid that it just . . . is.'

A limp reply, given the circumstances. Perhaps I should not have expected anything better. I had always thought of Father Benjamin as a weak kind of man and his frailty had only increased with his illness, his face even thinner and paler than it had previously been. I tried not to let it irritate me that God's supposed servant could not offer me comfort or, at least, reassurance. Father Benjamin handed me a teacup and looked neither apologetic nor horrified, as if his sickness had robbed him of the ability to react, a gradual numbing of some kind.

We were sitting in his living room, a small room with two hard lounge chairs facing the empty fire-grate. A desk and chair sat under the one window and there was a tapestry rug on the floor. The only decoration on the walls was a large wooden crucifix above the mantle. I noticed the lack of photos, no family members in sight, not even a long-dead mother, which brought me back to the letter.

'I would have thought that these things would have been checked and verified before the arrangements were made.'

'Well, yes.'

I took a sip of tea to stop myself biting back at him. He was my priest, after all, a man whom I had to address with some degree of respect. I was confused and angry, exactly the same as I felt when Fred's letter had arrived, a different kind of bomb from Hiroshima but a bomb all the same. I had to control the anger, as I had done then, as I had always done.

'What are we going to do?' I asked and my hand trembled, putting my teacup back into its saucer.

'I think the best thing to do would be to ignore it. The girl is much better off with you.'

These were the words I wanted to hear. Perhaps I had sold Father Benjamin short. Of course, Mary was better off with me. The improvements I had wrought, even in such a short time, were visible to everyone. She walked with a completely different stride now, had begun to shed herself of the ugly hunch of her race. To let her know the truth would be to undo all of that. What good could it do? A mother, yes, a mother alive and searching for her, but a mother as black as the night, a mother with so many deficiencies running in her veins. She had been drunk and weak enough to let her own child be taken away from her. What hope did she have of looking after her? Of creating the calm and ordered home I had provided for Mary?

I looked at the letter in my lap again, trying to ignore the appalling language use. A miracle she was able to write at all, although, more than likely, a relative or a friend wrote it for her. This consoled me. Mary's mother probably had a brood around her, a tribe of kids crawling over her. She could live with one less.

'Shall I keep the letter?' Father Benjamin asked. He was watching me intently, although he did not make a move to take the paper. Settled deep in his armchair, he appeared to have no energy to make such a gesture. He had not drunk any of his tea.

‘No,’ I replied, glancing towards the fireplace. ‘I’ll look after it.’

‘Whatever you feel is right,’ he said and closed his eyes like a benediction.

Relations. Mothers, aunties, appearing then disappearing. I decided that my own original abandonment was much better, with no conscious rejection, only the swift hand of Death snatching my parents away and the shelter of the Sisters until I was eighteen. Wasn’t it easier having no one left to blame? To accept you are a creature of your own devices, without a blood tie to tether you to a grubby line of ancestors who, in all likelihood, would not want you?

How fortuitous it was for Jane Eyre that, after running away from Thornfield, she stumbled out of the rain into a family that turned out to be her own relatives. What an amazing chance!

I can recall looking out the windows of the convent on wet days and wondering if I did the same, if I followed the wildness of my heart, whether I would also fall upon kindly strangers who would transform into my long-lost cousins. What I could never understand was Jane’s ability to forgive Mrs. Reed on her deathbed, the woman that had sent her out into the world without a word of warmth.

I returned home. I had left Mary alone while visiting Father Benjamin, something I had not done since she ran away. It was a test and as I pulled the car into the drive I felt a turning in my stomach with the possibility that she would not be there.

I switched the engine of the car off and sat with my hands on the steering wheel, bare hands for once. I’d forgotten my driving gloves and decided staining my white dress-gloves with leather was not worth the few people who might see my hands. There were no age-spots on my hands yet. I dreaded the day they would crop up and brand me

as old. For now, I still had beautiful smooth hands. For a brief time, they had stroked the hard skin of a man and ran through my freshly washed hair, the hair of a woman worth watching in the bathtub. Fred had insisted on invading my baths at night and, in the end, I had stopped protesting. After all, we were married and trying for a child. Even still, I worried about whether God would have approved, if He knew how strongly my heart was in it, how hard I found to be without it.

Now she that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusteth in God and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day. But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth.

A quote from the Bible read out at one of the Widows' Lunches. All the women in black nodded their heads in agreement as if they were more than willing to forgo everything, *everything* for these words of miserable consolation. How could this be enough? Supplication and prayers night and day? My hands gripped the steering wheel with the frustration of it. What I would not give to be allowed to yell and shout my disappointment.

It was the letter from Mary's mother that had brought this all back. Worlds created and torn apart by the words of careless people; people who never thought of what they were destroying, the hopes they were erasing.

I opened my front door with the letter inside my handbag. Mary would not look there and, even if she did, there was no reason for her to suspect the letter had anything to do with her. Despite this, I was strangely nervous of seeing her. The house was quiet and I knew immediately she was not in any of the rooms. I could not feel the presence which had become so familiar to me.

Holding back my panic I went to the back door, which was open and, with a feeling like ecstasy, heard the splashes coming from the laundry. She was doing the

washing in the tub, as I had asked her to, humming to herself something that sounded like a hymn.

My shoes were loud on the cement path. By the time I stood in the laundry doorway, she had stopped singing and ceased scrubbing to face me.

‘I am almost finished, Auntie Grace,’ she said.

‘That’s good, Mary.’

I could tell she was unsure whether to go on, which would mean having her back to me, or to wait for me to tell her to continue. I felt both the power and the sorrow of this. I turned and left her to it.

That night, I could not sleep again. I had snuck into Mary’s room while she was finishing the washing and added her mother’s letter to the pile of Fred’s letters under the locked roll top of his desk. It felt strange to be doing something clandestine in my own home and when I closed the desk I saw that my hands had disturbed the dust so it would be clear to Mary I had been inside.

I lay in bed trying to keep any image of Mary’s mother out of my head or, if she did come, I had to make her as ugly as possible, fat and yellow-eyed with missing teeth and sagging breasts. I did not really know what one of them would look like; I had only seen men in the parks and the photos in the papers were of children or missionary girls, all done up in proper dress. It was hard to imagine how they would get along in normal life, how they would do their hair, what kind of house they would keep. That is what I had to keep in my mind: she could not be as good for Mary as I was. The clothes I could give her, the way of speaking, the chance to read and write, domestic knowledge, the reining in of her baser instincts.

This was the problem. While I could not see Mary's mother, what I could easily picture was Mary herself, breaking open Fred's desk and rifling through those letters. Would her basic lessons let her understand them? No, even though I had given her a children's Bible and a *Girls' Own Annual*, she merely flicked through them, looking at the pictures. She did not have any control over words.

And what of those words I had almost shouted at her? Abo, nigger, darky? Did she know and count me as wicked already? Or was all that forgotten? I tried to remember the memory of youth; how long did you hold onto things? Not as long as when you grew up, surely. I would hate for any child to have the recall I did: scenes, feelings, the colour of a dress, the exact criss-cross patterning of Fred's newly grown moustache. In contrast, I had no image of the parents who raised me for two years, not even the barest flash, as if that dual beginning never existed. I had longed for those family legends, told with a rueful pride, a brother or sister chuckling in the background. Did Mary have such stories?

Her mother's letter was locked away, safe in the dark. I had not been able to bring myself to burn it. It was still summer, after all, and a fire would seem odd. Although this was not the real reason. Despite Father Benjamin's blessing, I had doubts.

I got up out of bed and went to my wardrobe to find my collection of holy cards. It was not a large pile, about twenty or so, kept tied with a ribbon on the top shelf, given to me as a child by a Sister Gabrielle.

In contrast to the dreaded Sister Clare, I believe Sister Gabrielle liked me. I cannot say she loved me. She was an ancient woman with a growing hump from scoliosis so I have no memories of caresses or physical affection. Her appearance – her deformity given more prominence by an ill-fitting habit – made many of the other girls

afraid of her but I remember her handing me those cards once a month in the years after Auntie Iris moved north, taking away my only outside excursions.

There are higher powers that love and judge us, Sister Gabrielle had said, giving me the miniature renditions of the Holy Family, the thinness of the cardboard a miracle in itself.

I rifled through to find my favourite amongst them: almost a pamphlet – a triptych on ‘How to Say the Rosary’. On the front panel, the sketched rosary beads had lines running off them at each appropriate point with directives on the repetition of the Our Father and the Hail Mary and the Glory Be. They surrounded a white and blue robed Holy Mother incased in an oval of gold leaf, her head further encircled by a halo of stars. I unfolded the cards. Each panel explained the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries, tying birth, death and resurrection to ten beads of polished rosewood. My own Rosary beads – I had replaced the standard issue we all received at First Holy Communion with a much more substantial set as soon as I first earned wages – sat on my dresser, next to the porcelain make-up set from Fred.

Whatever of the sentimental that lingered in me had been mainly eroded on leaving the Sisters, yet here were the tokens of clinging to a belief that, once upon a time, there was someone who had hope for me.

†

The next day I found an opportunity to re-check Fred's desk while Mary was in the bathroom. It had not been tampered with and I was pleased that I had begun to let the girl wash herself; it gave me these moments to inspect her room, and allowed her to take responsibility for her own appearance. She seemed to relish it, so much so that I had lain down a time limit, not only for the sake of the hot water but to ensure I was not encouraging vanity. A fine line was always to be walked: to take her away from the disadvantages of what she was, while never actually letting her forget exactly what she was.

On the bedside table was a collection of gum leaves and gum nuts. What the attraction of the gum nuts was I could not tell but each of the leaves had rust-coloured spots on them, as if she had picked out the ones most flawed. They did not seem to be laid out in any particular pattern and I would have swept them all away as debris, mess that was bringing dirt into the house. Even the day before perhaps I would have done so.

'I am finished, Auntie Grace.' Mary stood at the door, her hair still damp.

'Good,' I said, pulling myself tall to ensure she did not think I had to sneak around. I had every right to be in her room, every right to examine her possessions.

'What are these?' I asked, gesturing towards the bush collection.

'Just . . . bits I picked up,' she replied, tentatively.

'Well, clean them up, Mary. Put them in piles or rows or something.' I could not quite articulate what I wanted. 'They look like rubbish.'

She moved towards the table and I watched as she pushed the nuts into a heap and laid the leaves next to each other, one after the other. Tokens.

'Like this, Auntie Grace?' she asked.

'Yes,' I gently replied.

The morning sun had found its way into the room and, yet again, I noticed the gloss of Mary's hair. She stood in a block of light that spread over her bed, the quilt showing signs of ageing in its yellow patches, the dust in the room seeming to rise up and prance around her.

†

Dear Grace,

There is a matter I need to tell you about, though I do not really want to. Once a coward, always a coward. My only excuse for what I have to tell you is that, after hearing your news, after hearing that all this time I have been loving an imaginary child, I had to find some way to console myself. Perhaps you will already have guessed. I will try to explain, the best I can.

Japan is a country like no other I have ever been to. I expected to find a way to release all my anger here, to revenge all the dead on the weakest men of all, the survivors. But it is hard to hate the defeated. There is no arrogance here, only shame. Though I do not think it is shame for what they have been party to, but rather shame for not having succeeded, it still makes them pitiful. For some of the boys, hatred towards them still bubbles away, but the day-to-day life here, in burnt-out cities, the hardship they face with quiet dignity, for me, this makes it almost impossible to maintain animosity. And, despite all that has happened here, there is beauty. They say that some people are born in the wrong land and can spend their whole lives looking for their rightful birthplace. Until I arrived here, I did not know that was me. Japan has begun to feel like a home in a way that my own country no longer does.

How can I explain, Grace, except to say that the reflection and quiet grace of the Japanese women stands in such contrast to the loud brashness of my countrymen? Despite our victory, I feel more sorry for our boys who cavort and carry on as if they have inherited the earth. This consoles me when I feel any guilt about my growing love. It often feels like a betrayal of all the boys who I saw killed (I think of Private L. who was sent home with severe wounds and died not long after, swearing to God that there was no glory). It is hard, though, to reconcile the madness of Jap soldiers with the

elegance of Japanese civilians. I do not dream of the jungle days anymore, only months ago now but really a lifetime ago and I do not imagine being troubled by the past. The weeping trees here did not shoot my friends, the gardens and shrines that survived the bombings sing of peace, and the dark-eyed women reach out their gentle hands. Which brings me to the matter.

I must confess, at first, that their yellow skin was quite repulsive to me, with its look of foreignness and sickness. They are so small compared to us and littleness has not been attractive to me in the past. I tell you this, Gracie, because I want you to know that I did not go in search of her, nor did I want to feel the way I do about her.

Fraternalisation is not encouraged, of course, but I am certainly not the only one to find my way to such sources of solace. I will not offend you with the details. How separate our lives have become, with so many un-told stories, so many sentences blacked out. You did not even write when the baby was lost, or if you knew if it was a boy or a girl.

I can only apologise again and again for my inability to be the husband you deserve. How sorry I am cannot be conveyed in words. Still, I feel this is not only the best for me but, ultimately, the best for you. To return to you would be to engage in a falsehood I cannot countenance. Though your God would, no doubt, think it the right thing to do, I cannot see it as proper, or moral, or good.

I will continue to support you financially and I know that a legal divorce will not be an option for you. Our separation is, however, now official. I can only hope that your anger towards me will, eventually, be tempered by forgiveness and compassion.

Sincerely,

Fred

On my last day at Our Lady of Perpetual Hope High School there was a small ceremony to mark my departure. I was given a bunch of violets and a *Complete Works of Shakespeare* that smelt musty when I first received it and has since become almost untouchable. I wondered at the time if they had dragged it out of the library basement because I was not deemed worthy of the effort of purchasing a gift. For so many years I had worked at filling the heads of girls with no love of literature, girls who fell in love with the Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights* only because they dreamt of their own moody, silent man pledging live-time devotion. I had to point out to them that the downfall of Heathcliff stemmed from his origins, or lack of them: the orphan was forever tainted.

Nothing was said of the reasons why I was leaving; it was all ‘valuable contribution’, ‘sadly missed’ and ‘good luck in the future’. The speeches were addressed to ‘Mrs. Grace Smith’. My special girls had once called me ‘Mrs. Rosie’ because of the rosewater scent I used to wear. What the other ones called me – the not-so special girls – I never knew. I had evoked enough fear for them to be careful not to let any unfavourable nicknames slip out, though I don’t doubt they existed. The Physical Education teacher was known as ‘The Oak Tree’ and the mousy Maths instructor was ‘Mrs. Squeak’.

The farewell was held in the teachers’ room with only the Head Girl there to represent the students. Mrs. Gladwin, the librarian, had baked her traditional plate of lamingtons, presented on the same serving tray brought out when other teachers had left to get married or have children.

When I married Fred, there was a similar expectation that I too would leave and, in hindsight, it would have been a much better time to go. Fred had wanted me to stay, though, the war already bringing the threat of departure. He did not want me to be stuck

alone in the house without him. He brought no replacement family to me – his father dead, his mother moved to England, his brother also at war – and, like me, he had not managed to accumulate friends outside those who worked with him. This made it easier, of course, when it ultimately came to my decision to change the words of my own story, to change desertion to death.

You are dead to me, I wrote to Fred and tried desperately not to picture the slant-eyed woman who would receive the envelope. Always trying to keep the images out of my head. Always having to struggle with knowing the way he would look, the hurt inside him when he read of my plan to kill him off. That he agreed to it was a clear sign of his guilt, that the black haired vixen did not have him completely in her power. He had gone to see the land that has caused us so much misery, to find out what would breed such fierce hate and somehow the blossoms had softened him, the curving bridges had lead him to places I would not have thought possible. No matter how much I tried not to imagine, I could feel them arm in arm, hear her soft, broken English, see her kneeling at his feet with tea flavoured by spices that would turn my stomach.

Perhaps it was a kind of madness that overtook me then, determined to not look the fool, to be given some credit for my war effort. I had suffered through the possibility of death, hadn't I? What difference would it make if the death was not a complete one? Once someone is gone from your life, they may as well have no body, no soul, for nothing belongs to you anymore. They have become dust, a swirl of memories and half-lost truths and imagined knowledge and dreamed futures. They are gone, taken by a wind you cannot name.

I did not think of the real, glorious dead. I took my lie and I swallowed it, entering the school one day in black, telling the tragic news that my husband, formerly alive and well somewhere in the Pacific, was actually Missing in Action, presumed

dead. The faces that had been struggling with my bout of “problems” – the long, unexplained absences from classes when I simply could not stand the looks of expectation from the girls, wanting me to have all the answers when, after Fred’s letter, I could not explain anything – became suddenly sympathetic and the whispers that I was drinking stopped.

I continued on for a few weeks with the mantle of widowhood upon me. Mrs. Squeak and the others tiptoed around me. There were still days when I could not leave the house and I would assume that one of them would cover for me. It was on one of those housebound days that the Head Mistress came to the door and gently nudged me out of teaching.

‘With the men returning from the war, Grace, it seems a little unfair for a woman to take up a place that could help a veteran find his feet again,’ she said, sitting in my front room, taking a slice of a week old sponge cake I had quickly cut up. ‘You will have your war-widow pension now, won’t you? Why work when you don’t need to?’

She pushed the sponge cake around the plate. She was a fat woman and I was surprised to find her not willing to devour anything put in front of her.

‘You need a chance to recover, Grace, from your . . . loss.’

At the time, I thought the hesitation was out of respect. Looking back, perhaps it was suspicion.

‘You are looking a little thin these days.’

She did not mention the bags under my eyes nor the crookedness of my hair parting.

‘Perhaps it has all become too much for you,’ she said.

Consequently, it all became too little. Again, I was left alone in my time of trouble. My neighbours remained quiet upon hearing the news of Fred's death. I was never sure why, perhaps I had created the illusion of a woman who had no need for condolence.

It was spring and I remember I stood under the tree at the end of the street and watched the pollen spores floating across the road, knowing none of them would find fertile ground. The grass of the park was too densely packed together for their seed. I remember thinking the pollen was like flecks of snow, except there were too few of them to really be a blizzard. Too thin, too translucent for me to catch.

The Church congregation were slightly better. Father Benjamin included Fred in the Prayers of the Faithful and there were generous squeezes of my hand. Mrs. Parker came up and invited me not only to join the Widows' Group but also to call her 'Enid'. And Mr. Roper introduced himself to me for the first time.

After I joined the Widows' Group I was asked to provide a photo for the memorial booklet they planned to put together, one page dedicated to information about each of our husbands (the booklet was never made due to the high cost of the printing). I did not choose the same photograph that I had framed at home. Instead, I found a picture of him in his groom's outfit, a too-large chrysanthemum sticking out of his buttonhole, his face set hard and rigid because, after all, it was not technically our wedding day, but a week later when the photography studio was free.

On the actual day of my marriage, Fred's mother seemed determined for it to be a quiet and holy affair; a photo was deemed frivolous given the recent death of Fred's father, not to mention the general state of the world marching off to war. Our witnesses,

a couple from Fred's bank, were more ill at ease than us, throwing a scattering of rice on the church steps that did not land anywhere near me.

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The secret I held in Fred's desk could simply be added to the many secrets I had always held, from my vision of the Virgin to the invented ghost of my husband. While I was still angry that the mistake over Mary's mother had been made and wondered at the bureaucratic incompetence of the people in charge of distributing these children, I could live with another phantom – Mary's mother – and what would it matter to have another set of imagined eyes upon me? Let her join the long line of accusers, sitting smug and guilt-free in their unquestioned lives, placing their judgment on me.

Perhaps it could go on perfectly fine, perhaps I could make Mary a respectable citizen, a young woman to be applauded and celebrated for overcoming the disadvantages of her birth. It was not outside the realms of possibility, this rosy vision of the future. I could have thought it probable except for the nagging in my head, the shadow of doubt I had, to some extent, lived with all my life. The conviction, if it can be named as solidly as that, that there was to be no golden age for me, no period in which time would simply pass, without worry or fear, the clear fields most people walked through. I was almost always without faith that my life would lead down the path to happiness and, though this was not as God would have wanted it, suffering had its virtue.

I had only ever allowed myself to imagine two other travellers worthy of trying to coax me off my determined pilgrimage of expecting less: Auntie Iris and Fred. Auntie Iris had kept in contact with me, despite moving away and I had even thought of moving to her hometown after leaving the school. Subtly, though, she had implied I was better off staying where I was.

As for my time with Fred, it might have been my Golden Age except it had become so soured that I could no longer look back and see it without a bitter sting in my

eyes, my teeth clenching, not able to smile at the laughter and joy there once had been. All of it seemed false and hollow, tainted by its ending.

Yes, it was better to keep one's expectations low, to foresee always that God is saving the best for much, much later.

At church on the Sunday of the week of Mary's mother's letter, the service seemed to drag even before our sickly priest began to pause longer and longer between words, often losing his focus and having to repeat them, so much so that we could not say the last prayers with him, the third Hail Mary falling away to his whispered, solitary voice.

'Ave Maria . . . Ave Maria . . . gratia plena, Dominus tecum . . .' Father Benjamin stopped. I was grateful he had his back to us, I did not want to see the confusion on his face. I wondered if he had forgotten the prayer altogether. His shoulders sagged.

I saw some of the children glance at one another, holding in their giggles. Mary was stony faced, however, with neither pity nor ridicule in her features. She had smiled at this man once, as if he was a friend, but now I could see no evidence of this past trust and had to wonder if I had imagined it.

'Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus,' Father Benjamin spoke again, in a rush now, as if catching the words before they left him again. *'Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.'*

When we were finally released from the increasingly damp church, the autumn winds were beginning to creep in to moisten the pews. Mary ran off, as usual, to join the group of youngsters she was permitted to talk to. Standing on the lawn, Mrs. Mavis gripped me by the arm and whispered that her son was back and being 'attended to' by

her husband, which explained his absence from Mass. I did not know this small, bird-like woman particularly well and could not understand her desire to tell me the fortunes of her unfortunate boy. She motioned over in the direction of the children near the grotto.

‘I hear she has been quite a handful,’ Mrs. Mavis said. ‘She actually ran away, I hear? It is a shame, a real shame.’

‘Yes it is,’ I replied, without really knowing what I was agreeing to. Whose shame? My shame, for not being able to control the girl? Mary’s shame, for being what she was? Our shared shame, for even attempting to exist together? Not that it really mattered. It was just Mrs. Mavis consoling herself by placing Mary and I higher in the scale of shameful behaviour than her own Prodigal son.

The scent of the poplars was strong, as if it were streaming over from the pathway or perhaps it was that my senses were heightened. I was determined to seem as normal as I possibly could and continued to chat with Mrs. Mavis about the approach of the colder weather; the difficulty of airing winter clothes when the days were so damp. Mrs. Bishop joined us, wearing a strange woollen hat, and talked loudly about the next Widows’ lunch: whose turn it was to host and whether she would make her infamously brittle ANZAC biscuits, regardless of the choice of house.

‘I know there are some women who do not like anyone else to bring food,’ she said in a low voice, the woman in question must have been nearby.

Father Benjamin came out, still in his vestments, but only nodded at us three women and moved on to a gathering of men standing next to the church corner, Mr. Roper amongst them, leaning against the brick.

Gradually the crowd began to leave, couples tripping off with plans for the day or older ones limping away to cups of tea and empty afternoons. I stayed longer than

was usual because I did not want it to appear as if I had anything to run away from, certainly not the implications of Mrs. Mavis.

I had lost sight of Mary with my back to the grotto, although I had seen the Thompson boy leave with his parents and wondered who would be holding court now. I focused on the sounds issuing from Mrs. Bishop's lips. She was one of those women who simply barrelled on, regardless of the obvious dislike emanating from others around her. My teeth were already aching at the thought of her biscuits and, for the first time, I considered making an excuse to not go to the Widows' lunch. No one would notice my absence. If they did, it would be put down to the 'handful' or 'shame' that was Mary. This made me stop and pause. I had to keep going to the lunches or else it would look like Mary had driven me away from them.

'Well, I'm off,' Mrs. Mavis chirped, 'Sunday roast to rustle up.'

'I don't know how she can keep a smile on her face,' Mrs. Bishop said after Mrs. Mavis left. 'Honestly, the sheer courage of it.'

She didn't really think it was courage but audacity, as if the creature should be hanging her head, as if Mrs. Mavis had no right to be there amongst us, with a son like that. It had become clear that *he* had vandalised the statue's bayonet, having turned up in the middle of the night threatening to kill 'them all' with the dull grey metal blade. I couldn't imagine that the broken bayonet would have been very sharp but the police were called and Mr. Mavis had spent hours down at the station trying to reassure them of his son's harmlessness.

'I'm very glad that she still feels welcome here,' Mrs. Bishop continued.

I thought of the German couple who had been welcomed into the congregation after someone had whispered that they'd kept a Jewish family safe in their basement. We found out later this was just a silly story, spread by who knew who, and the German

couple had, in fact, done nothing to save anyone, except themselves. Everyone was indignant and shunned them to the extent that they stopped coming to church and eventually moved away. I remember feeling sorry for them, given that they had not made up the lie and, so, had no way of protecting themselves from the truth.

‘Wouldn’t anyone want to run away from that tiny weatherboard?’ Mrs Bishop asked and I had no idea to whom she was referring. Most of the church attendees had gone.

‘It all goes back to his grandfather’s love of gambling,’ Mrs Bishop went on and I was saved the embarrassment of having to admit that I had not been listening. ‘Mr. Mavis’s father lost the family home, you see, and, ever since, the memory of that lost grandeur haunts them, stuck like a thorn in their side. Oh, and I suppose the war didn’t do the boy much good either.’

I hoped Mrs. Bishop would stop talking at me very soon. My desire to be extra courteous meant I should not be the one to end the conversation. I managed to move myself around to see the grotto. Looking over Mrs. Bishop’s shoulder I still could not spot Mary.

‘I really have to be off myself, Mrs. Bishop,’ I addressed her slowly and deliberately, ‘please let me know where the next lunch is going to be.’

‘Well, I was meaning to say, we haven’t had it at your house for a while. Wouldn’t it be lovely for all of us to meet your little . . . girl properly?’

My focus shifted back to Mrs. Bishop like a pendulum swinging back to its centre. The thought of it – them – scrutinising Mary, scrutinising me. Bad enough the first time when I had still been new at the widow charade, afraid my gestures were not right, terrified they would see right through me to the deserted wife, the Japanese replacement, the self-satisfied husband sitting cross-legged in the land of the Emperor. I

had survived it, yes, all their fluttering and reminiscences, their heavily worn perfume, their retreat to the wonders of widowhood. In the last few years, I had held enough of the lunches that I was almost immune. But could I do it with Mary there?

‘Of course, of course,’ I said. There was nothing else to say. ‘I would be delighted.’

I moved past Mrs. Bishop, trying not to see her victorious smile. Perhaps she had planned it all along, that was why she went on about making her biscuits, knowing I was one of the women who never raised a murmur about others bringing additional food along.

I neared the statue of Aloysius, the sugary smell of the jasmine bush that surrounded it was fading. Up close, Aloysius’s mouth was slightly green with scratched moss, a sign that someone had tried to scrub it clean. They had let him get into such a state, though, it was unlikely he could be rescued.

I heard voices from behind the hollow, amongst the oleander bushes that completed this corner of the churchyard. A few stepping-stones had been laid to the left of the grotto, as if to lead to some earthly paradise, but they stopped after only three. I stood on the second stone watching Mr. Roper talk to Mary. He was on one knee, which explained why I had not seen him immediately, hidden as he was amongst the low shadows. How close they were but how far away they seemed. Like a vision, receding into the distance, as if God was toying with me. The different voices I thought I’d heard were only his.

‘You’re just . . . just . . . You remind me so much . . .’

The breaks between each sentence made it sound like a conversation. They were both still unaware of my presence.

‘It will all be good. You come find me. I’ll be waiting.’

Mary said nothing, just kept still with that expression on her face I had previously seen. I had called it 'blank' in the past but now I looked at her and saw so many things: how could one girl hold so much?

'Mary!' I called.

They jumped with surprise.

'Ah, there you are, Mrs. Smith,' Mr. Roper said. 'I was just rounding up Mary for you.'

He pushed up from his one knee with an ease I could not fathom.

'Bit of a slow service today, eh?' he continued in the same jovial way. He rubbed his hands on the top of his thighs.

Mary made her way over to me. She took my hand. I could not decide what to do, what to say to Mr. Roper. The possibilities were either anger and accusation or politeness and denial. What could I say that he had done? What could I *imagine* that he had done? He stood now amongst the threatening branches with his ridiculously blond hair buffeted by the wind. The front of his hair stuck up at an odd angle and I suspected, for the first time, that it might be a toupee.

'Thank you Mr. Roper,' I said. I felt Mary's hand go slack inside my own, no longer gripping me. Yes, yes, she expected more. She could not understand the quiet that I had to inhabit, the fear that kept me silent. It would not do to stir anything up.

'I will see you next Sunday, Mr. Roper.'

I turned my back on him.

'Or maybe sooner?' he called to me. There was desperation in his voice.

Grateful to have driven to church for once, I drove Mary home in silence. I had always maintained this quiet before because I believed it helped to instill the joy of the Mass

inside her, hoping she would gain the sense of peace I had once been able to extract from the service. It used to be my one solace, the Latin words murmuring over my tongue, following the Priest's back as the whole congregation directed itself towards the great crucifix. The words did not need to be translated, their underlying meaning could become clear to the right mind. In fact, I preferred to ignore the English lines running alongside the missal, letting the language of the ancients wash over me. The ritual of church was like a balm, soothing, unchanging. There was a time when I went every day, my heart leapt into my prayers so they felt like a direct link to God and all His love. And I would return home and say the Rosary over and over again.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Of course, on this trip home from church, my mind was far from God's love. I thought, instead, of Mr. Roper's visits. The times and days, the moments he may have been alone with Mary. I could not find any such moments in my memory. There were only piles of pears, lemons, limes, and apples, too many in my mind's eye to have ever been delivered, let alone eaten. I had made pies and flans with some of the fruit, most of them turned out well, the sweetness of a homegrown crop combining with sugar and pastry to create indulgent desserts. Mary had never shown any disinclination to eat them. What had I really seen behind the grotto?

Mary sat in the passenger seat, the faint odour of earth coming off her. Her shoes had a layer of mud on their edges I hadn't noticed when we got into the car. She seemed to have shrunk into the leather, becoming small again when, so recently, I had been proud of the fact that she had finally begun to appear her twelve years of age. We were

slowing down along familiar streets and I avoided the potholes by driving almost directly at them. Mary kept her gaze straight ahead.

I drove the car into the driveway. My pots of geraniums sat on either side of the carport entrance, as they always did, their waxy pink and purple flowers adding a splash of colour to the grey pebbles, struts and galvanised iron; a small show of the artistic care I had once put into the house. It reminded me of other efforts, like the landscapes I had seen lined along Mr. Roper's hallway. I realised those paintings all contained children: urchins playing in the snow, boys skating on ice, a little girl wandering in a white forest.

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Preparations for the Widows' lunch began immediately. Every room had to be dusted from top to bottom and I took over the hoovering, driving the machine with all its force into the corners. Mary followed me with a rag, wiping the top of the skirting boards, although the small amount of grime removed by these ministrations was testimony to our good housekeeping.

The cleaning was but a fraction of what needed to be done. Most important was the food. Some women had large enough dining tables to cater for the seven or so attendees, preparing a meal that would have them scurrying back and forth to the kitchen with harassed, hot faces. I couldn't understand why any single woman would have such over-sized furniture, a constant sign of her aloneness with its empty chairs and un-marked surface. I only had the kitchen table, which comfortably sat four. At the previous lunches, I had served sandwiches in the living room, moving the two wicker chairs from the sunroom, in addition to the lounge and two armchairs. It was cramped, to say the least.

My discussion of the weather with Mrs. Bishop had raised the possibility of doing this lunch outdoors. The days were still warm and the dampness in the air, if anything, made it more pleasant. I had a patio setting stored in the back of the carport. Fred and I had bought it not long after we were married, in expectation of summer afternoons with our children. The white cast-iron table had six chairs to accompany it.

Mary and I had to lift each chair together, they were so heavy, and cobwebs clung to every space of the filigree so by the time we had moved the six, both of us were smudged and sticky. All that remained was the table itself.

'I don't think we are going to be able to lift it, Mary,' I said. 'It's too big.'

We stood in front of the oval structure. I had moved the car further down the driveway to allow for manoeuvring. Even so, I could not see how we could move this heavy thing alone.

‘Perhaps,’ I said, ‘we will have to wait for ... for ... Yes, perhaps we will.’ Stupidly, I could not say his name. Mary knew whom I was referring to. Mr. Roper was the man I turned to for any household chores that were beyond me.

She moved to the table and with her thin, but now strong arms, she began to pull at it. For a moment, it looked as if it would not be dragged, standing firm on the gravelled ground. Then, with a sound like a wave breaking, the legs inched from their eternal spot, throwing up a splash of gravel. The surprise of it threw Mary’s torso forward over the top of the table and everything was still again.

Lying halfway across the setting, Mary turned her face towards me with a grin that I had not seen before.

‘See? We can do it, Auntie Grace,’ she said.

I walked to the other end of the table and started to push. Indeed, the initial movement seemed to have freed it up and we pushed and pulled it across the stones and onto the cement, to stand under the back garden awning. We had to stop every now and then to rest and it took us a good fifteen minutes. Mary was very excited by our achievement and carefully extracted the dead flies clustered in the ‘v’ of each of the table’s legs.

‘It’s so beautiful,’ she said.

‘It cost a fortune,’ I replied. ‘I should have spent the money on something useful.’

Mary continued to clean, making no further comment. I could see that underneath the dirt, the patio setting was indeed beautiful. What good did this do me?

To show it off to widowed women, women who seemed content to have their lives defined by loss. What was it that God wanted if all He knew how to do was take? Was I going to have Mary taken away from me by her mother or, even worse, the sympathetic Mr. Roper?

‘I think I got ‘em all, Auntie Grace.’

Mary re-appeared from beneath the table, her cloth a tangle of dismembered insects and fragments of web.

‘Well done,’ I said.

She looked up from the filthy rag, surprised. She had expected me to correct her grammar, not praise her.

‘Thank you, Auntie Grace,’ she answered in a quiet voice. The table setting shone.

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The day of the lunch arrived with blue skies topped by swiftly moving clouds and only the hint of a chill in the air. Both Mary and I were up early, acutely aware of the tasks to be performed prior to the women's arrival at half past twelve. My stomach churned with nervous anticipation and, for once, I could not eat breakfast, having watched Mary gulp down her boiled egg, I thought how angry the Sisters would have been to see me waste my own bacon, the toast sliding into the bin with a reproachful thud. I had never had so little an appetite; usually meeting crisis with the need to eat, smoothing out the edges with hot food and warm drinks.

In my head, I went through the possible progression of the day, trying to think of interesting opening gambits to ensure the conversation kept flowing: un-complicated issues such as the rising cost of bread or where to get the best lamb shanks. I kept imagining the words turning towards war stories and me having to steer them away, like driving a snake back with a broom. In truth, it had been more than a year since the lunches went in that direction. We had heard all the tales of sacrifice and valour, there were only so many times that one could weep for other people's husbands. I had talked only once of Fred's letters, how they all arrived in a bundle, compressing his war years into a single afternoon of reading and weeping, how he had told me so little in them in order to protect me, how lost he felt to me even before there was news of his death. This last, at least, was partly true.

There had been a suggestion recently that the Widows' group take up some activity, such as crochet or knitting, to give us another reason to come together. Thus far, it remained an idea. I suspected most of the women were too tired to take up the needle. Many of them worked for charities, and enjoyed the fact that the Widow's Lunches, for the most part, asked nothing of them except banal chatter.

Mary continued to dig away at the insides of her egg. She had a habit of almost kneeling on the chair to enable her to see right down to the bottom of the shell, to ensure she did not miss one tiny bit of the congealed white. I had made the egg googly, the yolk centre liquid enough for the toast soldiers to be dipped in, then extracted with yellow goo over their bodies. Mary always watched with fascination as the eggs bobbed around in my glass saucepan, the bubbles sending them on a carefully timed dance.

In the living room, I started straightening the cushions on the lounge. The women would have to be kept comfortable in here prior to moving outside and I knew the surveying that would be done of every nook and cranny of the house, remembering my own curiosity when entering the other women's homes. At Enid Parker's house, the wildness of her garden had been commented upon, a distinct disapproval of the lack of roses and the presence of ugly, colourless natives. She had made up for it with a delicious homemade Pavlova. Mrs. Joyce, Mrs. Bishop's 'best friend', like me, had an outdoor privy, although hers was not also a laundry and there was general admiration of her ability to keep it smelling fresh. Possibly the worst incident of any of the lunches was the time when, at Mrs. Bishop's, in search of the bathroom, I had stumbled into a nursery, its walls painted blue. The dusty cot made me feel sick, I had never thought of Mrs. Bishop as maternal. She, like nearly all of us in the Widows' Group, was childless. Luckily, I proceeded on without disturbing anything that would have betrayed my discovery and I had never spoken to her about it.

The smallness of my house would ensure no such incidents. In fact, I would put Mary on duty, to follow their movements. For once I was grateful for having my outside loo (even if its concrete floors made it difficult to keep it smelling like Mrs. Joyce's) because once lunch was served at the setting, there would be no reason for them to re-enter the house. No reason to go anywhere near Fred's desk.

‘Have you finished your breakfast?’ I called to Mary, hitting my tapestry cushion, trying to restore some plumpness to the chaste shepherdess and the lamb she carried.

‘Almost, Auntie Grace,’ she called back and I heard her carrying the plates to the sink.

‘Leave those Mary!’ I shouted, still standing in the living room. ‘Go and get washed!’

I saw the blur of her out of the corner of my eye as she dashed off to the bathroom. We had to have enough time to plait her hair. There would be nothing wild about her today.

Enid Parker arrived first. She was the youngest of the group; at thirty years of age, her husband had been killed in Libya when she was twenty-three, a place she had never heard of until the telegram came. If I had been a real widow I think we might have been real friends. As it was, I smiled and handed her a cup of newly made tea and hoped the other women would come to fill in the silence. Mrs. Bishop and Mrs. Joyce soon arrived together, probably congregating on the front lawn before making the journey up to my door. I could imagine their gossip of expectation, wondering how the little girl would conduct herself, if her scrubbed and civil appearance at church could be carried through an entire afternoon of close contact.

Mrs. Chilsom and Mrs. Jackson came not long after, also seeming to brim with anticipation of the possible disasters ahead. Mrs. Bishop was her usual loud self, immediately attempting to take over.

‘Mrs. Jackson, do you think you should sit there? I’m not sure your leg will cope with the getting out again!’ A guffaw added by Mrs. Joyce completed Mrs. Jackson’s

humiliation. She had broken her ankle playing an ill-considered game of tennis and resented enormously the subsequent limp she would have for the rest of her life. Mrs. Bishop seemed to enjoy reminding her of it.

‘The lounge does not sink quite that low,’ I said. ‘I am sure she’ll be able to get up again.’

I kept my voice light and Mrs. Jackson muttered in appreciation as she lowered herself into the armchair. I had tactfully removed the footrest into my bedroom, aware of how difficult it would be for any of the older women to use it with grace.

We were still waiting for Mrs. Andrews, always late from having to manage two young boys with only an un-sympathetic mother-in-law for help. Aside from Mrs. Jackson, the women stood in the cramped room, holding their teas.

I would have liked to usher them all outside straight away but the natural instinct was to huddle together and I did not want to be as officious as Mrs. Bishop.

‘Would you like an appetiser, ma’am?’

Mary had a tray of crackers and cheese cubes and was offering them to Mrs. Chilsom. Mrs. Chilsom took one and she moved over to the other women with confidence. I saw them watching her with curiosity. It did not last long, for it was clear she was not going to drop anything or perform some outrageous, exotic act. They went back to their talk, which spread without my proposed opening questions.

‘Father Benjamin really does look very ill,’ I heard Mrs. Jackson remark. Her carefully coiffured hair could not move for its stiffness so her eyebrows appeared even more animated.

‘He’ll be returning to God before long,’ the sanctimonious Mrs. Chilsom answered and the two of them paused, as if to allow the priest’s soul to fly past them.

‘Sorry I’m late!’ Mrs. Andrews cried out, coming in the open front door without knocking. She pulled off her hat and revealed her frizzy hair, pins askew. Of course, she would be forgiven, having the watertight excuse of having children.

I announced that it was time to move out to the back garden.

‘What a novel idea!’ Mrs. Bishop exclaimed, exchanging a subtle look with Mrs. Joyce that spoke of her ambivalence towards me. I had always suspected her tolerance only extended to the degree to which I kowtowed to her, how much *she* remained the ultimate measure by which I judged myself. Another person in my life whose function it was to keep me in check. As if the dead were not enough.

The overlapping comments that came at the sight of the table – ‘oh, how lovely’, ‘what a treat’, ‘so tasteful’ – convinced me that Mary’s floral centrepiece of yellow roses in a cut-crystal vase, was not too ostentatious. Everyone took a seat, guided mainly by Mrs. Bishop. Unfortunately, being stationary threw us off. A quiet descended.

‘Mary arranged these,’ I said loudly of the flowers in my desperation to break the silence and all six of the women simultaneously turned towards Mary. She stood on the back steps, still with the tray in her hand, although most of the crackers and cheese were gone, revealing the tartan pattern beneath.

‘She really isn’t too bad,’ Mrs. Bishop declared first. ‘Certainly not as dark as they can be.’

‘You have been keeping her out of the sun?’ Mrs. Joyce asked.

‘Yes, of course,’ I replied.

‘But can she . . . well, does she really have the brains to be useful to you?’ Mrs. Andrews’ question went up an octave at the end.

‘I believe they can be saved,’ Mrs. Chilsom answered before I could respond.
‘As long as you get them young. Mrs. Smith is to be applauded.’

‘I just do not see how you can trust them,’ Mrs. Andrews shuddered. ‘In your own home ...’

‘She’s just a little girl,’ Enid Parker said quietly, not brave enough to really stand against the flow of the conversation.

‘As a parent,’ Mrs. Andrews continued as if she hadn’t heard, ‘I would never be able to have one in my house, to put my children at such risk.’

Mary continued to stand on the step, her face covered with the look I had grown accustomed to. I recognised the wall she put between herself and the words being spoken, between Mr. Roper’s fantasy and her self, between the hard slap of a hand and the real hurt inside. I had done it so often myself it amazed me I had not seen it immediately. There were thoughts and angers and hopes and hurts that I knew nothing of, little balls of pain she hid as well as I did. Mary’s eyes, which had seemed to be focussed on nothing, flickered towards me, perhaps asking, perhaps pleading, perhaps doing nothing more than wandering.

‘I trust her,’ I said, surprising even myself.

Mary moved from the step to the ground and walked directly to Mrs. Andrews. She put the tray in front of the woman, not with a thrust or any kind of challenge, just as she had offered the tray earlier, polite and courteous. There was a moment when it seemed she would be refused; I could almost hear Mrs. Chilsom’s breath being held in. After what was, in reality, only a short pause, Mrs. Andrews dutifully took a cracker and a piece of cheese. The whole table broke their focus on Mary and chatter began again.

‘Did you see the state of the pews last week? It really is time to replace Mr. Burrows.’

‘The wood looks as if he has used his spit for polish.’

The conversation now centred around Mr. Burrows’ ineptitude as the church cleaner, although the complaints were muted. After all, he was yet another soldier who had come back from the war changed, and no one wanted to mention the strange monologues he sometimes addressed to himself in a loud, erratic manner. That would have been too close to the truth. Instead, they talked of masculine inability to ‘do things properly’, to really wipe the pews clean. Mr. Burrows could not be specifically to blame, it was simply not in his poor, male body.

How absurd these women were, clinging to their superior knowledge of cleaning, as if it was enough; as if they were not stuck in their fortresses pretending they could not do anything more than bake. These women who had run the country while the men were away, now claiming to be content with lunches and charity work. I was not fooled. So much concealed frustration.

‘I just cannot get my gardenias to bloom,’ Enid Parker selflessly declared, in yet another attempt to turn away from character assassination.

I indicated to Mary that the tray was well and truly done with, waving her off into the kitchen where she would begin to assemble individual plates with cold ham, steamed runner beans and my renowned potato salad. I had instructed her to use the best china plates – pale blue with a gold trim – and her hands would be nervous laying out the precious pieces. I had bought the set not long after declaring myself a widow, perhaps anticipating these social occasions where the more established you looked as a couple, the more sympathy you evoked.

Excusing myself, I joined Mary in the kitchen. The table was covered with half prepared plates. All already had their ham; she had done well.

Mary had the bowl of potato salad in the crook of her arm and was moving from one plate to the next, smacking a pile of white cubes onto each. She did not look up.

‘I’ll do the beans,’ I said.

I took the saucepan full of drained beans and began to ladle them out. I moved in the opposite direction from Mary, to ensure we would not collide. Through the open door came the merry voices of the women, now in the full flight of gossip and recrimination. I listened for any further mention of Mary or myself but the subject did not come up as far as I could tell. Of course, there were crossed conversations so it was not always clear what was being said, exactly who was being criticised.

‘That’s all of ‘em, Auntie Grace,’ Mary said, putting the empty bowl on the side-bench.

‘Them,’ I corrected.

‘Them,’ she repeated.

‘You can take them out in twos,’ I instructed, picking up two plates myself. I moved to the back door.

‘Two by two they went,’ I joked.

Mary looked at me blankly.

‘As in, the ark . . . the animals went in two by two . . .’

She frowned. She still did not understand.

‘Hurry up then,’ I said, realising that she did not want to understand.

The widows ‘oohed’ and ‘aahed’ over the meal, complimenting me on the ham’s honey glaze, the homemade mayonnaise of the potato salad, the non-stringiness of the beans. I took the praise graciously, making sure to mention Mary’s help with the

preparation. She would hear from her place in the kitchen, eating her own portion. She could also have the leftovers. I would not be finishing my own meal. My appetite had not yet returned.

Mrs. Bishop's ANZAC biscuits were produced at the end. False smiles appeared at the sight of them, everyone eager to remain on her good side. The crunching threatened to overtake us. I could barely hear Mrs. Andrews' question.

'And when will she be going back?'

She had taken a biscuit from the same tray Mary had used for the cheese and crackers and her question went straight into Mary's face.

Again, I felt the abrupt quietness, the way in which all the mouths stopped chewing.

'She does not have to go back,' I said, 'as long as I choose to keep her.'

'Does she have any family?' Mrs. Joyce asked, although the words seemed to be directed at Mrs. Bishop. It briefly occurred to me that Father Benjamin might have mentioned something to them and this was a trap to catch me in a lie. Still, there was nothing else for it.

'No. No, she doesn't.'

I waited for the explosion, the dramatic production of a copy of Mary's mother's letter out of a handbag, the waving of it in my face with accompanying accusations.

'What about her mother?' I could hear them demanding, *'Isn't she family?'* Their cheeks red with inflamed dislike, their hair like harpies, teeth pointed and exposed. It was time for it to come to me, this accusation.

Nothing happened. Mrs. Bishop took another large bite of her ANZAC while Mrs. Joyce took a sip of her tea and surreptitiously lay down the uneaten half of her own biscuit on the saucer. Mrs. Andrews pursed her lips together, continuing to follow

Mary's movements as if confirmation of her lack of relatives merely proved whatever point she had been trying to make. Mrs. Chilsom started on about the state of one of her cats, Enid Parker leant in to smell the roses on the table and Mrs. Jackson reached for the sugar bowl.

†

Mary did the clearing away after we finished lunch. The widows sat sipping sweet sherry and I could hear Mary quietly washing the china at the kitchen sink, placing the plates in neat stacks on the table before transferring them to the cabinet in the living room.

Once the house was empty again, I found Mary in the sunroom, sitting on the edge of the cane chair, ensuring that the last of the afternoon light was catching her legs. She had her head down and the book *Jane Eyre* open on her palms. She was sucking on the end of her plait and appeared to be reading. Of course, this was impossible. Her lessons with me had been sporadic over the last weeks, conflicted as I was whether it was a good idea to teach her or not. There was no chance she had progressed far enough along to comprehend Brontë. Still, there she seemed to be, her eyes trailing across the page as if she knew what each word meant.

She must have been aware of my presence. Though I had moved quietly, there was surely enough of my scent, my essence, for her to notice?

‘Mary?’ I spoke from the archway.

She looked up and slammed the book shut at the same time. Her face held that defiance I had seen so often recently, a defiance that stopped me asking her any questions.

‘There’s still more to be done,’ I said. ‘We need to sweep outside.’

She jumped up immediately, the plait whipped out of her mouth.

‘Yes, Auntie Grace.’ She moved past me, silent and sure, placing the book on the side table as she went.

I picked up the book, balancing the hard spine on my own palm, waiting for it to fall open at whatever random place it chose. I remembered doing this with my Bible as a child, taking whatever words appeared as a sign from above.

Jane Eyre creaked apart, the stitches of the first folio ensuring an early opening.

I read:

“How dare I, Mrs. Reed? How dare I? Because it is the *truth*. You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so: and you have no pity. I shall remember how you thrust me back – roughly and violently thrust me back – into the red-room, and locked me up there, to my dying day, though I was in agony, though I cried out, while suffocating with distress, ‘Have mercy! Have mercy, Aunt Reed!’ And that punishment you made me suffer because your wicked boy struck me – knocked me down for nothing. I will tell anybody who asks me questions this exact tale. People think you are a good woman, but you are bad, hard-hearted. You are deceitful!”

I shut the book. I could hear the awkward rhythm of the broom outside. Like the rake, it was too big for Mary. It would be best for me to take over the rest of the clean up.

That night, yet again, I could not sleep. Too much inside my head to evacuate into the tunnel of slumber. Every time I was almost there, drifting, bumping into innocuous images and words, Mary would reappear, sitting there in the sunroom reading of the evil aunt, a woman whom Jane Eyre would not forgive until she lay dying in her bed.

Could Mary really read? If so, she had lied to me. A bigger lie than the penny. Larger than a small, round piece of metal, this lie was deep, at the core of who she was, and what she could do.

I had denied sharing Mrs. Andrews' fear of Mary, yet I was afraid. Afraid of what? Not the girl herself, surely? How could I be fearful of such a small creature? But, then, it is not the height or the weight or the mass, or even, I realised with a start, the colour of a thing, it is only the way you see it that counts. To arrive at the point when you are not be able to see around it, the hard, throbbing lump of it, the centre it has become: the possibilities it holds.

I got out of bed and made my way to the living room. It was early morning, the grey shadows of the furniture waiting as if in expectation. I went to the china hutch and opened the cutlery drawer. It made its usual clatter, the drawer sticking half way out so I had to pull at it to release it completely. I carried the drawer into the kitchen, only pausing for a moment to glance down the corridor at Mary's open bedroom door and listen for her breathing. There it was, and I could move on, quietly finding the bottle of polish and rag.

I sat at the table and, until sunrise, rubbed at every knife, fork and spoon I owned. In the bowls of the spoons I saw my own upside-down face, ageing with every passing moment, and wondered if the signs of my love for Mary were even vaguely visible.

†

My lunch had been a success by all accounts. The next week at church Mrs. Bishop loudly announced to everyone that I kept my beautiful home ‘impeccable’. This did not seem enough reward for so many hours of preparation – I had no real memory of enjoying myself at the actual time either – and most of the praise was a dig at married women such as Mrs. Mavis who, despite having a husband, could not exactly lord domestic felicity over us widows. I found it difficult to revel in this false triumph, Mr. Mavis’ sunken cheekbones speaking of nights as long as mine.

Surprisingly, Mr. Roper came and stood next to Mary and I after the service. I had not seen him all week though, caught up in the preparations for the lunch, I hadn’t really thought this odd. Now, the way he was threading the brim of his hand through his fingers spoke of nerves and the moment in the grotto came back.

‘How are you, Mrs. Smith?’ he asked in a formal voice not heard for a long time, not since the day he introduced himself to me.

‘Very well, thank you,’ I answered. I felt Mary tense beside me. ‘The gardenia cuttings you gave me are coming along well.’

‘Good to hear,’ he said.

There was silence among all three of us.

‘I want you to know . . .’ he began.

I could not encourage him to keep going, to provide explanations within shot of every listening ear. There were conversations going on around, yet I knew the skill: the ability to appear to be concentrating intently on those right in front of you while scooping up every word of your neighbour’s whisperings.

‘I know everything will turn out for the best,’ I said, without any clear sense of what I was referring to.

‘I know today is a very hard day for you.’ Mr. Roper was speaking to my feet and I wondered what had turned him into such a weakling.

‘Today?’ I had no idea what he was referring to.

‘The anniversary? Of your husband’s death?’

I felt the blood drain from my head. God, how could I have forgotten? Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mary looking up at me with confusion in her face.

‘Yes, yes,’ I managed to say. ‘Of course it is a difficult day.’

The lie of it seemed to be spreading across the entire churchyard, shaking the baby poplars to their very roots.

Mr. Roper gave me a little nod, a respectful nod like the ones you receive from people in the street during afternoon walks.

‘I thought Father Benjamin would include him in the Prayers of the Faithful, but I suppose, with his health the way it is . . .’

‘I didn’t want to bother him,’ I said, too loudly and knew my face was moving from white into red, the blood now creating a pulse in my forehead. Pathetic, showing all the tell-tale signs of falsehood, forgetting all that I had learnt in my years of deception: never make excuses, let silences speak for themselves and always ensure the other feels so awkward that they will eagerly move onto another subject.

‘I’m sorry, Auntie Grace,’ Mary said. She squeezed my hand.

‘You look a little peaky, Mrs. Smith.’ Mrs. Bishop had joined us.

‘Are you unwell?’ Mrs. Joyce, as always, tagged behind Mrs. Bishop and the two of them now stood on either side of Mr. Roper, examining me, as if x-raying my heart.

‘Not at all, I’m perfectly fine.’ I answered in what I hoped was a strong enough tone to put any further inquiries aside. I did not want this attention, did not want Mr. Roper to remind them of my false anniversary. I did not want any of it.

Funny to imagine how they would all look if I told the truth about myself: how my sleep, when it came, was full of the Virgin Mary’s face scarred with criss-crossing lines like a painting attacked with a knife; how my stomach turned whenever I could not see Mary so that, for the last week, I had almost tethered her to my side (today she had been forbidden from joining the other children or going into the saint’s grotto – poor, rotting Aloysius would have to do without her); how I had checked Fred’s desk every morning, inspecting the surface for tell-tale marks, always wondering why I did not just take the letters and burn them, save myself from the possibility of discovery. And always answering that I could not destroy them, not for any peace of mind, that the tokens have to be kept in their place.

†

To Grace,

I had never imagined your anger would be so great as to formulate such a plan as you detailed in your last letter. Nor that your desire for respectability would outweigh any affection or respect you once had for me.

However, since the news of my brother's death in Europe, my ties to home now seem well and truly severed. While it hurts me to agree to your plan, I cannot pretend that it will affect my new life over here. So, I consent to becoming your dearly departed husband. I will post a regular money order to you, at the post office requested (I hope you will not have too far to travel) but will have no further contact with you.

I hope this sacrifice is sufficient for you, at last, Gracie. I had never longed for a glorious life, only a happy one. You are welcome to my glorious death,

Fred

I had never before forgotten the date of Fred's death. For the last four years I had gently reminded Father Benjamin of the need for his name to be sounded out into the quiet space of the church, collected into the thoughts of the gathering, polished a little with prayer and sent up into the heavens. To have forgotten was another sign that all was not right.

'Off home already Mrs. Smith?' Father Benjamin asked as I made my farewells. His question had a tinge of desperation in it, as if he himself would like to escape, though knowing he could not leave before his congregation had dispersed.

'Yes, yes. Must be getting on,' I replied, still aware of Mr. Roper's gaze, not to mention Mary who was staring off into the distance, her forehead a mass of concentration lines. A few drops of rain had begun to fall, the forecast of heavy showers cooling down the day. I longed to be inside, in quiet warmth.

We arrived back home and my appetite limply returned. I had some crackers, sucking their salt on my tongue before biting into them. I sat in the sunroom with a book on my knees – for the moment I had put *Jane Eyre* aside, trying to find a happier orphan in *Great Expectations* – though I found myself checking on Mary too often to hold the narrative.

She was installed in the living room, carefully polishing the rest of my silverware, the idea occurring to me after doing the cutlery. She knelt on the floor in front of the newspaper-covered coffee table lined with the gravy boat, the candlesticks, the butter and cake splades, in fact, the entire contents of two cupboards at risk of going green without an application of polish. If Mary was anything like me, she would enjoy watching the clear liquid harden on the silver to a brown white, then delight in rubbing

at it to reveal the new, shiny surface beneath. It was a task I had done for the Sisters, making the crucifixes glisten.

‘The candelabrum are the trickiest,’ I called to her as she started on one of these, the holder with vine crevices. ‘You have to be careful you don’t let the liquid dry where you can’t rub it off.’

‘Yes, Auntie Grace.’

She did not stop to address me, just went on as before.

‘I’m sorry about your husband, Auntie Grace,’ she said quietly, continuing to focus on her polishing.

I had turned on the living room light because of the overcast sky outside and could have sworn that some kind of shaft caught the silver of Mary’s candelabrum and shot over to Fred’s photo on the mantelpiece, like a trick of the eye, a coin shaped patch of light hopping from one point on the glass to another.

‘Thank you, Mary,’ I said.

‘You must miss him?’

It was a question, not a statement. The rain started up outside, pattering against the sunroom window awning.

‘Of course I miss him.’

My answer held too much anger. I should have been weeping by now, clutching the oval-shaped frame to my broken heart. Mary had stopped polishing and, across the room, she stared at me. I had *Great Expectations* open on my lap, the pages flickering over, past my place, driven by the winds coming through the many cracks under the windowpanes.

‘He was a good man?’ she asked.

‘Good?’

I had never been asked this question, having had no father to check on the character of my fiancé, nor any mother to worry over my future. Funny to think I had never even asked it myself. There comes a point when it feels almost irrelevant.

‘He was kind enough to marry me,’ I replied.

I could not hold Mary’s gaze any longer and returned to the lucky Pip. He was being told of his transformed fortunes, plucked away from Jo and the grime of the blacksmith’s fire, given great prospects for wealth and happiness.

I tried to concentrate on the sentences waving before me but my eyes blurred with tears. Real tears, for myself, threatening to tumble over my lids. I could feel Mary was still looking at me, her hand not moving, no stink of fresh polish in the air. I did not know what to do. My head ached from the pressure of trying to maintain composure. Perhaps I could bark at her to get back to work and she would not see the drops about to run down my cheeks. Perhaps I could smile weakly and whisper of the need to ‘continue on in the face of lost love’, turning this into another performance of my widowhood.

Or, maybe, I could speak the truth to her.

I heard the glug as Mary tipped the bottle of polish upside down onto the rag and saw, in the corner of my eye, the movement as she began again to apply the liquid to the long thin arms of the candelabrum.

We were silent once more, although in my head I was speaking a thousand different words.

†

It was no longer clear to me what my expectations were. When you hope for something, or dread something, it may be that you will it into your life. It'd been my experience that nothing you anticipate – whether an occasion of joy or an occasion of misery – could ever live up to the feelings you had marked out for the event. I had always been let down or, worse still, had experienced the moment as if I was outside of myself, detached and only half there, noticing foolish details, like the wedding rice on the steps or the ocean light behind Fred as he stood on the dock. Silly, small things that did not help me to *feel* what I was supposed to feel, that did not give me the rush or the pit, the love or the sorrow. How to even pretend to show such emotions after imagining so much more, after looking forward to unfiltered delight or unbridled pain? On the day of Fred's leaving shouldn't I have had more than just a muffled goodbye, being jostled and bumped by all those mothers and sisters, wives and grandmas around us, going through their own separation? More than simply standing there, dry-eyed, waving with my gloved hand, too late aware that my chaste hug had ensured our skins had barely been in contact with one another at the end?

I understood why the visions of the saints were so important to the Church. In Saint Teresa's flight of ecstasy there was hope for a heaven on earth, a moment of no longer longing for more, a moment of feeling all that one should and showing it to the world, her eyes rolling back into her head, her hands limp and open, her lips only just parted. As if she was drinking in every minute of the moment, unafraid of the fall. I had never known such a moment.

†

Four days passed and I exhausted myself keeping a close watch on Mary, worried by the questions that seemed to be in the air. Night after night I woke up at exactly five minutes past three, sure that I had heard movement in her room. Each time, my trip to investigate found her dark shape asleep in bed. From the hallway – I had forbidden her to close the door or to go to the outhouse during the night – her breathing always sounded regular, with no evidence she had recently exerted herself jumping back into bed on hearing me. Still, I woke up.

During the day, aside from her taking over nearly all the house-work, I began to teach her knitting, both to keep her stationary and indoors and to take her away from the threat of reading. She did not take to knitting as I would have liked, using the needles clumsily and often dropping the balls so they would unravel across the floor. Not only this, but she persisted with asking about our afternoon walks.

‘It’s not very cold today, Auntie Grace,’ she hinted, after I had used that excuse for not going out. ‘Pretty sunny.’

She was right. It was a mild, still day. We also needed eggs. I had every reason to leave the house.

‘Finish ten more rows and we will see.’

‘Ten?’ she muttered and went back to her knitting.

In the hour that Mary slowly worked, the weather turned. An afternoon storm rolled in, a blanket of white cloud covering the sky and providing the perfect cover for staying put. Sheet lightning flashed through the curtains I had drawn against the weather. This sudden change was certainly not my fault.

Mary’s needles clicked and clacked under the thunderous wind.

On the fifth day she defeated me. I had been forced into making a promise of volunteering down at the St Vincent de Paul shop. Mrs. Bishop had, as usual, bullied me into saying yes before I was even aware of what I was agreeing to. I had planned to have Mary come with me but, when I appeared at her door, curious as to why she was not already up and preparing breakfast, she was lying on her bed, her knees clenched up to her body, her arms locked tight around her stomach.

‘I don’t feel good, Auntie Grace,’ she whined. I had never heard her complain before. Her quilt was lying on the floor, the sheets were bunched at the bottom of the bed. ‘Too hot,’ she whimpered when I tried to pull them out and replace them on her.

I put the back of my hand on her forehead. She was slightly hot but not, as far as I could tell, feverish. The room itself was stuffy; all of the windows were, of course, locked.

‘All right, then, you can stay in bed for the moment,’ I said. ‘I’ll bring you some water and dry toast.’

‘Not hungry.’

‘You have to eat something or you won’t get better.’

I stood at the toaster waiting to turn the bread – I had a habit of forgetting the toast inside the metal drawer, burning one side only to be extra diligent on the other and leaving it too short a time, only long enough to singe, creating very uneven slices.

I wondered whether I was being too trusting. Mary had been watching me closely, testing my answers to questions, as if to catch me out. The other evening it had been about Fred’s jacaranda tree. Sometime, I had told her the story of my father-in-law nursing it back to health.

‘How do you nurse a tree, Auntie Grace?’ she asked, as we folded the sheets, her stick-like arms spread wide as she walked the ends towards me. We were in the

backyard, making the most of the last of the light and the extra space. We had worked almost completely in silence up until that point. On the final sheet, she asked about the tree, up on her tip-toes as she handed me the corners of the double sheet before dropping her heels back down to take the nearly created ends.

‘You wrap it up, I suppose,’ I said and had an absurd vision of the Jacaranda in bandages, tightly bound like a swaddled baby.

‘Did it have a broken leg?’ Mary asked, with a smile in her voice.

‘Maybe some kind of broken limb,’ I replied.

‘A broken arm?’

She was playing with me.

‘A broken toe, Auntie Grace. A broken finger?’

‘Maybe all those things,’ I said, keeping my voice light, going along with this game.

‘Or maybe it was sick on the inside?’

Mary had stopped folding the sheet. It hung over my arms and we both stood looking at the flower-less tree, its purple gone for the winter.

‘You can’t use bandages for the inside can you, Auntie Grace?’

She had no longer sounded young and innocent, no longer a child asking for adult knowledge.

‘He saved it, Mary, that’s all that matters.’

I had picked up the rest of the sheets and moved off to the linen-press.

‘Here you are,’ I said, delivering two golden brown pieces of bread to the bed-ridden Mary, for once having managed to get the toasting right. I fetched a drink coaster from the living room to place a glass of water on her bedside table.

‘Thank you, Auntie Grace,’ she whispered, keeping her eyes closed. She had not moved since I left.

‘Can’t you sit up?’

‘It hurts,’ she said, and I felt the dropping of my name, as if she truly couldn’t make the effort.

‘Well, *I* have to go. Mrs. Bishop can’t be put off.’ I looked down at her curled body, so small. ‘Perhaps I shouldn’t go?’

The girl stayed silent.

‘Are you really sick, Mary?’

She opened her eyes, the whites had a red tinge in them.

‘Yes, Auntie Grace.’

‘Shall I leave you?’

I held my breath.

‘If you have to, Auntie Grace.’

I locked the front door behind me. I told myself it was for Mary’s safety – though I rarely bothered to use the deadbolt normally – to stop the wrong people from getting to her. Really, though, it was to keep her in and, although the lock could be easily opened from the inside, I hoped it might, at the very least, make her think twice.

For two hours, amidst the smell of mothballs and lavender, I sorted a box of jumbled shoes donated to the charity shop over the past month. As the shoes came in they were simply thrown into this box, with no sense of order, so that pairs were all mixed up, sandal straps snagging on the heels of pumps, already-dissolving laces breaking when I tried to pull them from the tangle. I worked and sorted them, laying them out in rows that began to take over the back room, sweating from the closeness of the air. I could

not understand why they were not simply put out immediately, instead of being left in this complicated mess.

‘Oh, but there’s never enough room,’ Mrs. Joyce replied when I enquired. ‘You have to select the very best of them to display. Didn’t I tell you that?’

‘No, you didn’t.’

I had struggled with the idea of having to sort out the entire box, but had been reluctant to voice any sense of being daunted by what was being asked of me.

‘No wonder it’s taken you so long!’ Mrs. Joyce laughed.

The shop bell rang and we were assaulted by the booming voice of Mrs. Bishop.

‘Thought I’d drop in and see how you ladies were getting on!’

‘Mrs. Smith has sorted *all* of the shoes!’

Mrs. Joyce waved her hand over to the back room behind the counter, lined with pair after pair of matching men’s, women’s and children’s shoes. Now that I looked closely, I could see that the majority of them were un-sellable, too scuffed, too flattened, many of the women’s were missing heels. I had not noticed in my zeal. The children’s shoes were in the best condition and dominated the display that was already out on the shop floor.

‘Isn’t she a wonder?’ Mrs. Bishop said, her voice tainted with disapproval, as if I had been extravagant in my service. Why did I manage to always get it wrong? How had I succeeded in being *too* helpful? My action spoke of excess, and there was nothing the widows disliked more than drawing attention to one’s self. We were to be shadows, beetling away in the background, content in our peripheral role.

‘I didn’t understand,’ I said apologetically.

‘You can throw most of them back in the box,’ Mrs. Bishop replied. ‘Awful what some people will donate. As if the poor don’t need their toes properly covered. I mean, look at them!’

The three of us had moved to the doorway of the back room, staring in at the shabbiness. Stale foot odour wafted up.

‘Most of them are from deceased estates,’ Mrs. Bishop continued pragmatically. ‘People just clear out entire houses.’

‘I don’t know how they can do that,’ I whispered, afraid of my own voice.

‘It’s for the best,’ Mrs. Bishop insisted.

‘I still have everything,’ I went on, unable to stop. ‘Even an old shirt he wore painting the house, torn and all paint splattered. It stinks of turpentine but still I have to keep it, it seems such a precious thing ... a token.’

‘Are you feeling all right, Mrs. Smith?’ Mrs. Joyce asked. It was too many times now that I’d been asked that question.

Mrs. Bishop and Mrs. Joyce were looking at me, their faces contained just a smattering of understanding, underneath their polite bewilderment.

The shop bell rang again and two old ladies entered. Mrs. Bishop and Mrs. Joyce readjusted their expressions, becoming, once again, the hard masks I was accustomed to.

‘Good afternoon!’ Mrs. Bishop exclaimed at the customers, making the frail little things jump. ‘Isn’t it a beautiful day?’

The day was anything but beautiful. Still, the two women nodded in agreement, smiling at the unexpected attention.

‘Perhaps you want to put out the shoes now, Mrs. Smith?’ Mrs. Joyce asked while Mrs. Bishop continued her small talk with the ladies. I wondered if this was a way to get me out of sight – did I not look “right” enough for them now?

In the back room, the rows of shoes seemed almost grotesque. I thought of the people that had once filled them. Those pale lemon heels taking slender legs with stocking seams painted down their backs across a dance floor, trying hard to keep in time; those boots marching stolid, hairy legs off to war, never wanting to fall out of step; those sandals skipping a child home after a day of playing stuck-in-the-mud, ‘you’re it, you’re it, you’re it’, and those flats dragging stretch-marked thighs wearily to church, afraid of being forgotten. The one-step, the two-step, the everyday step. All that spinning and kneeling and crossing and dancing.

I picked up a pair of children’s shoes. They were soft brown leather lace-ups with teardrop shaped holes cut into the toes. There was not a mark on them and, as I turned them over, I saw the soles were not worn down at all. Did the child dislike them and refuse to wear them? Or had her feet grown so quickly that her ‘best’ shoes only lasted one wedding or a Christening or a funeral, forever associated with big, adult things that meant they had to be hidden away in a box, their power only unleashed when her mother allowed? Or had this little girl’s feet never grown at all, a child taken to God before there was even time to fill this pathetically small amount of space? I did not know what had happened. I would never know.

†

I arrived home at three o'clock. Despite my failings, Mrs. Joyce could not do without me once Mrs. Bishop had gone on her merry, interfering way. The suits had to be re-assembled after a young man – 'down on his luck' as Mrs. Joyce referred to him – came in and tried on nearly all of them, creating piles of 'trousers too long' or 'jackets with shiny elbows' or, worst of all, 'smells like old men'. He was not a pleasant young man, his cheeks covered in small vicious hairs, the beginnings of an untended beard, and he ended up buying the cheapest suit of all.

'After all that effort,' Mrs. Joyce complained and went to put the kettle on, leaving me to clear up the mess.

My arms ached from lifting the heavy materials of all those suits and I tiredly turned the key in my front door without even considering it was not necessary. I went to push it and realised I had locked it inadvertently. This meant it had been unlocked since I had left this morning.

Perhaps Mary had ducked out to collect the post from the box (although I rarely had letters). Perhaps she needed air (although the back garden was surely the best sanctuary for a girl who was supposedly sick).

I re-turned the key and pushed open the door. The long, green corridor was, as to be expected, empty, the walls unadorned. It had always struck me as silly to put up pictures in transitory spaces, as no one could sit and enjoy them, and only on the end wall, the section that sat between the entrance to my bedroom and the opposite entrance to Mary's bedroom, was there the decoration of cream and gold wallpaper, vertical rows with gold swirls shaped like bass clefs, falling down to the floor, back-to-back. Wallpaper left over from the living room.

‘Mary?’ I called out, standing in the doorway. It seemed too hard to cross the threshold.

The house answered back with its silence. I wanted to hear some kind of creak or murmur, something to indicate she was somewhere here. The windows were rattling, as usual, the wood and glass moved by the winds to make tiny bangs and sighs. I took a step onto the carpet, recalling the moment when I had found Mary almost at this exact spot, waiting for me. In the mirror of the hall table, I could glimpse my own reflection, just a section of myself, my head garroted.

My legs moved down the corridor, these legs, and these shoes, which I knew so well. I turned the handle of Mary’s bedroom door and heard no stirring from within.

I saw in the one moment that Mary’s bed was empty and that the roll-top of Fred’s desk was open.

The lock had been jimmied with a screwdriver. Mary had left it sitting there after using it, making no attempt to cover her tracks. The screwdriver I recognised as belonging to Mr. Roper. He had left it behind during one of his many handyman forays into my life.

The pile of letters was gone.

Though I had imagined this, dreaded it, expected it, perhaps since the day Mary had arrived, the actual reality of seeing it – this violation, this loss – was shocking. I felt numb and turned from the gaping desk to sit down upon the bed, only to discover on the sheets a round, half-wet stain of what looked like blood. The outsides of the pool had dried, clotting into a brown edge, the middle still a fresh dark red.

What my mind would have liked – a kidnapping by faceless strangers or an enforced departure by nasty relatives or even a secret escape with Mr. Roper – could not hold with the fact of Mary’s first blood on the sheets. Her stomach pains had been

genuine, not a ploy. Yet here was the torn-open desk, the missing letters, her unmistakable absence.

What could I imagine? The pain and shock of her first monthly, her lying curled on the bed, wondering what was happening to her. Did she know anything of women's secrets or did she think, as I had, that she was seriously ill, her area down below suddenly revolting against her and turning from a source of pleasure to a flow of disgust? Would she have known, initiated by her sister or her mother years ago, before she was taken from them? Would she have been crying, afraid of the mess on the sheets, afraid of me? Getting up – the pain from her back less now that it had begun – and moving to the bathroom, taking a rag from the drawer and washing herself with a flannel, seeing herself in the mirror finally – staring at the face she had previously been un-curious about – and wondering why she wasn't allowed into Fred's desk. All those hours, lying in pain, directly across from the forbidden.

Had I left the screwdriver somewhere in plain view? I could not remember. If Mary had had her first monthly visit, I had missed the signs of her moving towards womanhood and there were, no doubt, other signs I had also failed to see.

I moved away from the blood – if I had been less preoccupied I would have noticed the metallic smell when I first entered the room – and made my way through the kitchen. For a minute I held to the hope that she would be out in the garden. Reading my lies, yes, but nonetheless present.

Standing on the backyard steps, it was clear she'd gone for good this time. Each one of my letters from Fred was pegged on the clothesline. They had been hung in order of date, held on with a single peg each, stuck so that the paper was being crushed and mutilated. The wind was smacking at them, threatening to whip them off completely or rip them apart.

I un-pegged them slowly, holding each against my stomach in an attempt to smooth them out, to repair the damage. Even as I took down the last of them – the one in which Fred gave me his death – I continued to believe I would find the letter from Mary’s mother, the letter that would have definitively turned her against me. Of course, it was the one letter Mary had taken with her.

†

‘I no longer want her to be my responsibility,’ I said to Father Benjamin that evening. I’d reported her missing to the police and driven straight to the presbytery. ‘If she is found, you’ll have to return her to the Home.’

Father Benjamin nodded, resigned. He did not seem to have any strength left to argue. He had lost any remaining fat off his bones, his face turned skeletal.

‘I tried my best,’ I continued. ‘You couldn’t expect more of me.’

‘No,’ he said quietly and sipped his cup of tea. I felt some kind of judgment hanging between us, as if I needed to tip the scales away from his damnation of me.

‘I wish you all the best with the scheme, Father Benjamin. Perhaps there are some of them who can be saved . . . from themselves. But you will have to get them younger.’

‘Younger?’ he asked.

‘Yes. Before the . . . corruption sets in.’

Father Benjamin stared at me. I returned his gaze, though I desperately wanted to look away. I had a sip of my tea. I felt the liquid flowing down into my throat, trying to warm me.

‘Perhaps you’ve done your best, Mrs. Smith,’ Father Benjamin said ethereally, one foot in another world already. ‘I don’t know if I have yet. God can only know that. Only God can know the true nature of our souls.’

‘Yes, Father Benjamin,’ I said.

We both glanced at the crucifix sitting alone upon his wall.

I no longer wanted Mary’s black face to belong to me. I tried to believe it was as simple as that. What was left of Father Benjamin understood, I hoped, and I would be free of any further thought of her.

The next morning I woke up and the light coming through my window had a different feel to it. Winter had begun to sap the sun of its warmth; we were finally heading to the cold.

I dressed and went into Mary's room. It had a dullness about it which I was willing to concede came from her absence. But there was nothing to be done about that.

I pulled the sheets from the sagging mattress and took them to the laundry tub. I washed them in the same hurry I had washed Fred's, only realising after I had scrubbed for an hour that the dried bloodstain was unlikely to come out without a long soak. Even then, I would still be able to see the outline, a round spot, a coin.

The sheets would have to be thrown away.

I had left Fred's letters on the kitchen table so I took them back to the desk. The roll-top stood open, the lock still broken. I noticed how smudged Mary's window was, the glass calling out for a thorough wiping.

'Not Mary's window anymore,' I said out loud, listening to the words in the emptied house. 'Fred's study.'

Standing in the doorway, this time looking, not at the silhouette of a young girl but at the corridor, I saw that I had tracked in dirt when I came in from the garden yesterday. I needed to vacuum.

It was easy, really, to move along. I worried about what I would be asked at church, who would inevitably pry into the details of Mary's departure. I had momentarily forgotten about the hushed lines of communication, how everyone knew about Mary running away before Mass even began, how this erased the need for direct enquiry. None of them had any facts, I was sure, only Father Benjamin's reassurance that I had done my very best under difficult circumstances.

‘How well you are looking Mrs. Smith,’ Mrs. Andrews said and I decided to believe her.

‘The colour is back in your cheeks,’ Mrs. Bishop declared.

I could not tell her that the red in my face could only be put down to my own private freezing.

‘Thank you,’ I replied, instead. ‘Aren’t the poplars growing well?’

The group turned towards the line of trees against the church fence. The poplars were still too short to provide a proper barricade but they were heading towards height and protection. I wasn’t sure if this was an appropriate thing to focus on and was reassured by the nodding of heads and murmurs of assent.

‘Yes, they are growing very well,’ Enid Parker said quietly.

The sky above the trees was a blanket grey.

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II

'I sincerely, deeply, fervently longed to do what was right; and only that. "Show me, show me the path!" I entreated of Heaven.'

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

I dreamt that the streets were empty of children and the crowds that had celebrated the end of the war wandered around in black veils, weeping for the lost babies. I could not find anywhere to stand in this world and I had to run back to my mother's house, a house that I have never seen but which, in my dream, was a larger version of the home I had had with Fred and then with Mary. Its rooms were vast, emptied of all furniture and there was an overwhelming smell of varnish. In the back garden, the laundry tub was overflowing, the sudsy water running up to my bare feet, stopped only by the force of my dream-will from saturating my toes. To my right, the jacaranda tree was burnt black but I would not turn my head to look at it.

I have not lived in that house for four years now. It seemed more sensible, when I finally accepted there would be no further additions to my household, to move into a flat.

Not that I'd been hasty. The poplars at the church grew tall and I smiled and simpered to Mrs. Bishop and the widows, maintaining the illusion as I always had. But I became desperate to flee, particularly after my final encounter with Father Benjamin. I kept my need well hidden. The surprise from the church lot when the 'For Sale' sign sprung up in my front garden was testimony to how well I'd looked on the outside. I had been lucky enough – or seen ahead enough – to have made Fred sign the house over to me before he went away.

'You will still be coming to services here, of course, Mrs. Smith?' Mrs. Joyce asked, unable to comprehend my excuse of attending a closer congregation.

'Yes,' I lied and wondered at the amount of attention my removal was eliciting. Surely these women did not really like me? I reasoned there was probably a dearth of

gossip; the mouths needed new material to chew on. The Mavis boy had killed himself months before, but the speculation surrounding his demise – a sad follow-on from Father Benjamin's more expected, but just as talked-about, departure – had begun to grow weary, not helped by the failure of Mr. and Mrs. Mavis to appear and receive their condolence.

'Everything is changing,' Enid Parker said mournfully. She had tried to reach out to me after Mary was gone but I had rejected her pity. She was right, though, everything was changing. Father Benjamin had been replaced by a young ginger-haired gentleman whose healthy smile seemed a mockery of his predecessor; we were so used to the granite grey of our previous parish priest. Father Richards would stand on the church steps positively beaming, frightening the old people with his enthusiasm. The loss of the Mavises had been felt as well, their quiet dignity a sorry absence, and with the growth of the poplars, even the feel of the church-yard had changed, secluded and un-inviting.

Leaving Wayville Street and the house I had believed would one day sing with my family life was a deafeningly quiet time. I labeled the trunks meticulously, making lists of what was going into each of them, worrying about losing sight of the smaller ornaments. I wrapped the best china in layers of butcher's paper and had to make disconcerting decisions on what was to be sacrificed, moving as I was into a smaller place, with less space for furniture and plants.

When I first arrived at the flat it smelt of mothballs and I learnt from my neighbour that a Jewish lady had lived and died in the two-bedroom place that was now my own. I aired it as much as was possible, letting the breezes in through the fly-screens but whenever I returned from an errand, I found myself on the same carpet track as the previous owner: down the corridor, past the bathroom on the right, straight to the main

bedroom to the built-in wardrobe to hang up my coat, out to the tiny laundry where the hat hooks were, nestled next to the living room that swept onto the dining area and then immediately to the kitchenette, decked in canary yellow, for a well earned cup of tea. The second bedroom was opposite the laundry and contained a glassed-in alcove that held Fred's desk. I was obviously following in the footsteps of the dead. I tried, as often as I could, to break up my routine and to vacuum the carpet pile in a different direction.

I had left the geraniums behind. Although I could have had them on the kitchen windowsill in my new flat, they were too much of a reminder. A month or so after I moved, I drove past the old house and saw that the geranium pots were gone, perhaps moved into the back garden or thrown out altogether. They had been replaced by a fat-cheeked garden gnome on one side of the carport struts and, on the other, a cement swan with a daffodil planted in its back.

The smallness of my new flat was a comfort. I had escaped the creaks and groans of an old house settling and found instead the hum of new cement walls and the distant pound of the sea. The lowness of the ceiling was the most difficult change to cope with – whether it was really lower I could not tell, perhaps it was only that the space itself was so much smaller that everything felt diminished. To make up for it, the balcony gave me a view, through the figs, of a strip of seemingly flat blue ocean and I began a ritual of sitting out there at sunset, drinking a gin and tonic, lady's tears providing just enough blurring to allow for some kind of sleep. I watched the sun sliding away behind the distant horizon and thought of the Holy Communion. A wafer converted to Christ's body, coming into me, swallowing God and all He was supposed to contain. How I had tried to hold Him close, to keep Him always part of my flesh.

I'd never been particularly attracted to the seaside but I would occasionally take an afternoon walk down to the ocean. I did not attend church, or hold lunches, or help at

the St Vincent de Paul shop. I tried my best not to think of that last scene with Mr. Roper or the other moments that had contributed to my departure. Though I had not moved far away, in terms of physical distance, I had stepped outside of that hermetic world and felt it was enough to cook myself a meal every night and wait for the hours to pass away.

†

One afternoon I made my way down to the beach to watch the seagulls and the young people who had begun to loiter in groups on the promenade, boys and girls who, after school, found the chance to escape their parent's chores and whisper to one another across the great divide between the sexes. This had become more common than it ever was in my day though I could see the familiar type of face, those girls who would've been in my office with the strap, leaning against the pillars of the pavilion, cigarette in hand, hair pulled back in pony-tails or, even more astounding, shorn short. They did not see me, as invisible as the "old" are to youth, so I could watch them closely enough as I walked by. I could see the doubt in their stance: these femme fatales who still wanted to go steady and get flowers from their rebel boys, who weren't quite sure what they were rebelling against. I caught the smell of tobacco in their air and heard the words: 'My mother says I am going to hell'.

I tried to hold myself tall, although my navy blue skirt was loose around the waist – I'd lost weight since Mary's departure – and my silk cream blouse was blown against my skin by the sea wind. Still, I knew this walk: down to the end of the promenade, where the waves hit against the brown rocks with a persistent coolness the teenagers would have liked to emulate, and onward to the post office to pick up my payment.

I had not written to Fred of my move. Given that I had always travelled here to collect his money orders, there seemed no need to alert him to the change. We had long since ceased personal correspondence. The crumpled remains of his letters were re-locked away in the repaired desk. I had paid a locksmith to come to the house, rather than engage the ever-curious Mr. Roper. On the surface, the evidence of Mary's break-in was almost smoothed away.

The lady behind the post-office counter knew me from my years of collecting the envelopes. She was married to one of the postmen – I had seen him leaning across the desk for a quick farewell kiss before rounds – and she wore floral dresses that had become brighter as the war receded further away. She would see me in the queue and smile, happy with a familiar face and familiar task. I had never asked her name, preferring for us both to remain within the one exchange: I would say ‘good morning’, she would say ‘good morning, Mrs. Smith’, then move to the pile of registered post and hand me the envelope to receive my ‘thank you’. The paper of the envelope, I would sometimes imagine, had a thinness to it that spoke of translucent rice and there was a requirement from me to stop those pictures coming back into my head. Pictures of rice paddies and peasants in triangle hats and a mountain called Fuji, romantic landscapes conjured by prints brought back by the BCOF and reproduced in *Women’s Weekly* or sold at market stalls. We had moved past the hatred and derision and entered fascination: the exotic East was rising from the ashes.

‘Good morning,’ I said in my customary flat tone.

‘Good morning, Mrs. Smith,’ the post office woman replied. Her voice had a slight trepidation in it that made sense the next moment but which I attributed to nervousness at the amount of people waiting. She bent down and seemed, as usual, to be locating the alphabetical shelf that held my post. When she straightened up, empty-handed, I knew she had known there was nothing for me.

‘Um, nothing for you, Mrs. Smith.’ Her face held pity. Though she had never known the contents of the envelope, she had obviously seen my reliance on its arrival.

‘Can you check again?’

She obliged, though her repeated movement had no tinge of hope in it. There were no Japanese stamps on any of the envelopes, their temples and oriental plum trees standing out against our kangaroos and the Queen's head.

'I am sorry, Mrs. Smith.' She spoke as if someone had died. The violets on her skirt seemed suddenly darker, like patches of mildew.

I faced up to the post office one more time, a month later, hoping for a double delivery, the delay a consequence of some tidal change or shifting winds. The postal lady visibly blanched when she saw me enter and as I joined the line of waiting customers she loudly declared to her co-worker that it was time for her break and disappeared out the back through the swinging wooden door with a portal window like that on a ship. I was served by the new young girl who asked me my full name and wanted to look at my identity card, giving me hope that this was required for a reason.

'Oh.' She stopped squinting at the tiny writing. 'I don't really need this unless there is something for you.'

She giggled and flicked her way through the pile of 's'.

'No, nothing,' she said flippantly.

I could not see through the circular window that separated the post office's work and leisure areas – the glass was frosted – yet I could feel the other lady watching, waiting for my shape to leave. I may have despised her cowardice some other time. At that moment, I completely understood her retreat from my pain.

†

I did not believe Fred was dead. Perhaps because I had been the one controlling his death before, I couldn't fathom him stepping off this earthly realm without my permission. Or maybe because his own particular way of recovering from the war had seemed to promise such long life – finding, as he had, his own Shangri-La – that I could not imagine it being cut off by anything other than old age.

I wrote to the last address in Kyoto that I had. The letter came back to me, unopened, with black characters scrawled across the front of it, strange, spider-like strokes which I could only assume were the equivalent of 'return to sender'. There was no way of knowing if they had been written by *her* or by some even more foreign hand, the new occupants of Fred's vacated house?

My situation was not immediately desperate. I had money in the bank that could continue to keep me in groceries for another year, and I owned my flat, although much of the money from the sale of the house had been eaten up by the cost of moving closer to the coast. There was no fear in me that I would end up on the streets, as such. The tremour came from losing a regular top-up to my savings. Without anything new being added, the pile would begin to diminish and there was no escaping the fact that I had to re-enter the world.

How dare Fred let me down again. What sort of man was he to leave me to the pity of postal workers? What could have possibly happened on his cherry-blossom island to justify this new level of selfishness? I did not want to imagine.

†

Dear Gracie,

Do you remember the fruit bats in the gardens at twilight? Do you remember we used to pass under them when you would come to meet me after a day at the bank? Their squeaks like budgies, their wings expanding out like prehistoric yawns, hanging from the trees like trumpet flowers (too many similes you would tell me, I know). Packets of fur and black skin, ugly things up close, we used to laugh at them together. The fruit bats come to me now. It is as if I hear their chattering everywhere.

I have not written for such a long time and it is likely you do want to hear from me but if you could hear it here you would know why I need you again. She is constantly crying inside her memory of the fire. I try to understand but I cannot really help her. I look into her face and I do not see what I used to. They stuck their noses into the pram and said 'how the daughter holds the sins of the fathers' and she cried and cried. Do we fall into the darkness or does it find us?

I have the blackest dreams, when the war days have returned and it is all I can do to struggle towards the light. If I let myself go I do not know if I will ever come out of it. There you stand, alone under a shooting star. You told me you had wished for me to come home and when you told me that I knew it could not come true. You would have known that, my superstitious Gracie. I imagine you looking at me with the cold clear eyes of the righteous. Is there no home left for me there?

The fruit bats are hanging in the trees and I will try to claw into the light. The fragrance in the dark stinks of rotten fruit. In the light it is jasmine. Where it is clear of all scent I do not know,

Fred

[Letter returned: no longer at this address]

Once again, I found myself sitting in the morning sun looking through the newspaper. I drank tea but I had given up sponge cake, or any type of cake, and had no cream to mock me. The breeze through the open balcony door was a clear easterly, tasting of salt. Seeing the many columns of 'Positions Vacant – Women and Girls' in the paper I knew the world had woken up and started looking prosperity in the eye. Fred had forced me to do the same.

The position I obtained was in the administration wing of a hospital. It was far less responsibility than I could have had but I was happy to succumb to the continuing excuse of leaving the higher employment for the returned men.

'The younger girls, well, they leave us when the babies start arriving.' The Chief Administrator, Mr. Anderson, a man whose thick moustache was only equaled by his bushy eyebrows, frowned at me during the interview. 'I have lost many a good clerk to the natural way of things.'

'Yes, of course,' I said and adjusted myself in the leather chair to avoid the beam of mote-filled light falling across my hands.

'But we will not have that problem with you.' He smiled, as if he had paid me a compliment. I would learn later that Mr. Anderson's wife had six children, her skin turned to crushed paper by the weight of them.

My office was a small room next to Mr. Anderson's. It had one window looking down to a courtyard with a flame tree at its centre, where the doctors and nurses gathered for irregularly timed lunch-hours, to smoke and flirt in ways that could be seen through the deadening glass: silent, foolish plays of advance and retreat with the depth of a pantomime. I watched as the women chanced their arm and the doctors, aware of

both their own appeal and their scarcity, left them to dangle under the fiery flowers for another day.

I did not join this outside theatre. I ate lunch at my tiny desk and whole days could pass without my hearing a single voice except that of Mr. Anderson on the telephone next door, either loudly conveying instructions to his employees or murmuring words of reassurance to his over-run wife.

I read the stories of the patients whose files I retrieved and re-placed inside the steel filing cabinets that lined every wall of my room. I saw files grow and grow, the sick whose papers were always being extracted to add another page to the saga, detailing diseases and maladies from polio, rubella and eczema to cancer, tumours and shell-shock. I was pleased to find there was little sympathy inside me for most of the cases – I was still hard enough to cope with the horror, a necessary coating to keep me going – and I only felt the slightest shiver when the list came in, at the end of every fortnight, of those files that could be moved into the ‘closed’ cabinets that lived in the basement of the building. Thankfully, it was not my job to carry the files of the recently deceased down below. I placed them in a special tray on my desk every second Friday and by Monday they would be gone.

It was essential to keep the records of the dead, in case of disputes between relatives, but it was better that they go out of sight. An ongoing argument surrounded the issue of dampness in the hospital basement; many of the surgeons with an eye to the future did not want their work rotting away. Mr. Anderson’s counter-argument was to simply ask: ‘Where else are they to go?’

If I were honest, I would admit that my reading of patient files, in contrast to the doctors, had an eye to the past.

†

I had visited Father Benjamin only once during his decline. He had gone to a religious hospice. Walking past the rooms I noticed an abundance of flowers in vases next to the beds – red roses mainly – as if to make up for the bloodlessness of the patients. There were whispered conversations only, no chance of miracles here, no shouts of joy at a baby’s delivery or the hurried frenzy caused by the rush to save a life I would come to know at my own hospital.

Father Benjamin received me, not lying in a bed as I had dreaded, but sitting in a wheelchair. His room was as thinly decorated as his house had been and, if not for the careful tread of the staff down the corridors, we could have been as alone as we were when he handed me Mary’s mother’s letter. Father Benjamin was, himself, as drained as a person could be without already being a cadaver, his hair in patches, and I was not surprised when he didn’t rise in greeting or offer any kind of refreshment. He simply sat, a blanket over his knees, and stared at me, trying desperately to hold to the strings of the conversation.

‘Are they looking after you well?’ I asked, just to have a beginning. What would I be able to do if he said no?

‘Yes, Mrs. Smith. The good as well as the damned.’

I chose to ignore the second part of this. Mrs. Bishop had warned me that the priest’s sentences did not always join together in a normal way.

‘I am glad to hear it. It is a beautiful place.’ I immediately regretted saying this for Father Benjamin began to look around, as though in search of beauty and, although the sky showing through the window was mid-summer blue and the grounds outside relatively well tended, I saw the walls themselves were hued in an ugly, thickly-applied

cream that seemed to have caught the filth. When you looked closely there were hairs and spots of dirt stuck inside the paint.

‘Mrs. Smith.’ Father Benjamin spoke my name, reminding himself of who I was.

‘Yes, Mrs. Smith.’ I took a breath and smoothed out my skirt although it had no visible creases. ‘I took in Mary, do you remember?’

‘Mary.’ The word spoken in his mouth could have conjured the girl out of nothing as, in essence, he had done.

‘I wanted to know . . . I was wondering if they ever found her? After she ran away?’

In the time watching the poplars grow, I had never been able to ask him this question. Surrounded at church, as he always was, by the ears of the congregation it had become a subject as unspoken as the hardness of Mrs. Bishop’s ANZAC biscuits, capable of breaking one’s teeth. While I had planned many visits to his presbytery, to find the privacy to enquire, they had never eventuated, my courage petering out behind the steering wheel, forcing me to scurry back inside the house to easier un-knowing. Once a coward, always a coward.

‘Mary?’ Father Benjamin repeated.

‘Yes.’ I nodded my head eagerly, trying to will him into memory.

The door of the room opened and a nurse stuck her head in. ‘Everything fine in here?’ she asked more loudly than was necessary, not bothering to bring her entire body into the room. Her face, closeted by a tight white headdress, was young and pink, her cheeks flushed. I wondered if she had dropped in from some other hospital where breathless exertion was still worth the effort.

‘Yes, thank you,’ I replied but her eyes were on Father Benjamin who simply nodded, his head bobbing like it was only just under his control.

‘Good. Let me know if you need anything. Tea?’

I worried that this interruption would make it even more difficult to keep Father Benjamin on track.

‘No, thank you.’

The nurse stayed for another moment, still using the door as her shield against her complete immersion into the room. I had the distinct impression she did not want to leave us alone.

‘Well, too-da-loo then.’

She closed the door quietly, at least. Her footsteps were barely discernible but I sat, my head inclined towards the corridor, and waited until there was no chance she could still be within hearing.

I turned to the priest again and discovered he had his eyes closed.

‘Father Benjamin?’

His lids opened and I saw a strange milkiness in his eyes, as if he was deliberately placing a film between the world and the supposed windows to his soul.

‘Mrs. Grace Smith?’

‘Yes, Father Benjamin?’

‘You have not changed.’ Father Benjamin’s voice had the solemnity of a godly judgment.

I felt myself move physically away, pushing my body into the back of my chair.

‘I simply wanted to...’ I began, my voice like a childish plea.

‘There is nothing simple about you, Mrs. Grace Smith.’ He said my entire name like a punishment. ‘You came here to pick at me.’

‘No.’

‘You came here to pick at me and pick at me. To throw her in my face once again. But, and I tell you this only once, *a healthy tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a poor tree bear good fruit.*’

His voice had become gravelly and his fingers twitched on the arms of the wheelchair.

‘For every tree is known by the fruit it bears; you do not pick figs from thorn bushes or gather grapes from bramble bushes! Do you? Mrs. Grace Smith. A good person brings good out of the treasure of good things in his heart; a bad person brings bad out of his treasure of bad things. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.’

Spit dribbled down the sides of his mouth. I wanted now for the nurse to return. Surely the sound of the priest’s ramblings would be carrying to someone?

‘I only came here to see you in your convalescence, Father Benjamin.’

I stood up. I had used the wrong word – there was no recovery around the corner – but Father Benjamin did not seem to notice. He did not follow the movement of my standing, his head still turned to the level of my waist. Perhaps he could not see me at all, his mind transported to some other time and place.

‘Can you tell me anything of Mary?’ I asked again, in as soft a tone as I could manage, pushing my irritation away as best I could.

‘For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of,’ he mumbled.

‘Goodbye, Father. I think you need to rest.’

I walked to the door, hearing a strange sound behind me and only understood when I turned to say my farewell that Father Benjamin had wheeled the chair after me in a fit of energetic derangement. His hands lay on the tires, shaking wildly. The chair was close enough that I could not open the door. The smell of stale urine drifted up

from his hospital tunic and, for the first time, staring down at him, I saw that he was, indeed, an old man.

‘They never found her,’ he whispered, his voice had a completely different quality to it, the timbre of frightening sanity returned.

‘Mary?’ I asked, although I knew he could not be talking of anyone else.

‘They searched and searched for her.’ His eyes were wide now, cleared of all whiteness. ‘Her mother, you see, Mrs. Smith, found me. She begged to be allowed to see her daughter. She thought I was lying when I said Mary had disappeared. She stood on my doorstep and wailed. She said I had an evil spirit in me and that I would be punished. She would not believe a word I spoke to her. My word! I gave her my word.’

I could barely breathe for the intensity of his self-pity.

‘My word,’ he said again finally and slumped back down into himself, the film back across his eyes. ‘What good is my word?’ He slurred the last, so it might have been ‘world’.

I leant over and rolled the wheelchair back, far enough away from me that I could open the door and leave him. I found the nurse who had stuck her head in earlier and told her Father Benjamin was ‘distressed’.

‘Why would he be distressed?’ she asked, with an accusatory frown.

‘I don’t know,’ I lied and scrambled from the hospice with an image of Mary’s mother on the presbytery steps, cursing me to Hell.

Father Benjamin passed away three weeks later. I learnt that our priest’s first name had been Peter. Peter Benjamin, named for the rock of the church. The funeral was well attended for a man with no family, although the formality of the homily from one of his fellow priests betrayed his separation from common Order life. It was his parishioners

who seemed to really weep for him, recalling his home visits and their sitting-room confessions. Perhaps, after all, they were more relieved than anything that his knowledge of their sins was being buried forever.

I watched the coffin descend into the ground and, rather than praying, I found myself trying to recall if Mary's mother's letter had been given to me in an envelope or if Father Benjamin had simply handed over the pages on their own. If there had been an envelope, surely I would have noticed some kind of address on the back, or the ink stamp on the front over the Queen's face, a pointer to its place of origin? Even the briefest of glimpses would surely have stayed with me? If 'the word' was good for anything, it was for this: creating a permanency for fleeting thoughts otherwise lost. At the very least, I had remembered the surname.

Mrs. Chilsom patted me on the arm by the graveside. The groups had already begun to form after the end of the service, the clusters of quiet comments beginning. The Catholic clergy section of Rookwood was an erstwhile rectangle, bordered by oaks, and pushed out by the growing dead.

'At last he has rest,' Mrs. Chilsom said, her usual piousness pervading.

'Yes,' I replied uncertainly. Did Father Benjamin really have peace at the end?

'And you?' Mrs. Chilsom asked. 'How are you, dear?'

Mrs. Chilsom was only a few years older than me yet she spoke as if addressing a child. She wanted to measure the state of her own completion compared to my own losses. The loss of Mary was a visible marker of my inability to cope.

'I am smashing, thank you,' I answered, using a Hollywood film term. It stood out oddly amongst the evergreens of the cemetery, but I needed a touch of glamour.

I didn't attend the wake, already feeling the need to let go of this set of people and their view of me, standing on high, looking down.

Like Father Benjamin, I only saw Mr. Roper once before I moved. He had dropped by with a new offering of fruit, as if nothing had changed, and I bustled on with packing up the kitchen around him, unwilling to leave any space for intimate talk. I had already put away the kettle so I could not offer any tea and felt vaguely resentful that he had, rather foolishly, brought a fruit basket to me that would just require more removal.

The table and chairs were stacked to one side of the kitchen so Mr. Roper had to stand, running his hands through his still-dyed blonde hair. I apologised over and over about the state of everything, hoping he would get the hint to go but, instead, he asked after Mary without the slightest embarrassment. With my back to him, I paused in nesting the saucepans together and the suspicions that had grown since Mary's departure rose up before me: his screwdriver used to open the desktop, his supplication to her in the grotto, the long line of his corridor salted with paintings of children.

'There is no news of her so far,' I replied, now digging into the back corner cupboard to get the last of the cooking pots.

'You should have called on me, like you did the other time.'

'I didn't want to find her myself, Mr. Roper.'

'Why not?'

My impulse was to tell him to mind his own business. It seemed as if a stranger was lurking in my kitchen, a man whom I had once sought to know, who had chosen, instead, to try and take away my little girl. I longed to be told exactly what his relationship with Mary had been, at the same time as I was terrified of it.

'I am tired, Mr. Roper.'

'You have never called me John,' he said quietly.

The stale smell of his cigarillo breath was closer; sometime in my busy-ness he had found his way across the linoleum. He placed his hands on my still ample hips, my back against his torso, our height almost exactly the same. I looked out to the garden, the curtains taken down and the absence of knick-knacks on the sill created a large, open vista of the jacaranda Fred had once sat under. I wondered if, on the other side of the world, he might be staring at a similar tree. This was not, perhaps, as romantic as pining at the same stars but I knew that jacaranda tree more completely than I would ever know the sky.

I could barely feel Mr. Roper's hands on my hips. My mind distant from my body, all too aware that those hands had been placed on me, not from any true desire, but because of the freedom granted by my departure. For so many years, opportunities had arisen for more than this between us: the time when Mrs. Mavis had left Mr. Roper's Sunday dinner unexpectedly, called away to the beginning of the end of her son, and I was the only other guest; the moments, even, on cleaning days – organised to save Mr. Burrows from a humiliating dismissal – when we'd been left alone in the dusty recesses of the church. Afraid of any public censure, though, Mr. Roper had never, in those private times, taken a step toward me. Now he saw the safety of an un-detected affair, perceiving that I wasn't coming back to the congregation.

I had no room in me to be flattered by his touch. What could I do with such a moment? I began to find the stink of tobacco rustling past my right ear quite revolting, his breath quickening with this newly found passion. In the window's reflection I could just make out the top of his head and watched as it moved to my neck to kiss the bare skin exposed under my auburn bun.

It would not be the truth to say that I continued to feel nothing, for the wet touch of lips couldn't be ignored as easily as the light brush of fingers. In the minute of his

kiss, however, I was able to compare the sensation to all I had felt before. All, I say, as though there were a plethora of experiences when it was only one long-ago boy who fare-welled my cheek after a church picnic and then the many flavoured kisses of Fred. He had often tasted of cigarettes and yet I could not recall ever feeling revulsion or wishing for the moments to end.

In the glass panel opposite me Mr. Roper's lips moved up my neck, he was not wise enough to detect my aversion and was blundering on, having been given no signal to stop. I didn't move, taken to so many conflicting memories that the present hardly seemed worth the effort.

I suppose it was this confusion that made me believe I saw the flash of a black head over the far back fence.

Mary.

'Oh my God!' I yelled and, pulling away from Mr. Roper, threw open the screen door and ran out into the yard. I stumbled past the clothesline and the jacaranda, down into the far end of the long block, over the flowerbeds, my heels sinking into the dirt, and threw myself at the spot on the fence I was sure she had disappeared behind. I pulled myself up onto my tiptoes, using the blunt ends of the triangle palings and peered down into the scruffy laneway that ran parallel to the house.

'Mary?'

Weeds and cracked dirt met my entreaty. The laneway was empty, only some withered dandelions appeared to sway as if someone had recently brushed past them. Which way would she have gone? How could she have disappeared so quickly?

Behind me, Mr. Roper thumped his way across the grass. I didn't know if he had heard my call or not, if he knew why I had so abruptly left his embrace. Frankly, I did

not care. I tried to see how I could get over the fence, cursed the fact that there was no gate.

‘She’s not likely to come back now, Mrs. Smith,’ Mr. Roper said loudly, revealing his knowledge. Despite my resolution of only a minute before, I hated the fact he had witnessed this, and felt him deflate the hope I had briefly had. I lowered my heels back to the ground, my heart pounding from the exertion of the run, panting loudly to regain my breath. I remained staring at the fence. If I had not been so acutely attuned to Mr. Roper’s presence, I might have cried.

‘She needs to be caught,’ I replied, addressing the weathered wood as coldly as I could. ‘For her own good.’

I pictured her amongst children of her own colour, with arms that could not be compared, with smiles that stood out from their faces as much as hers had. I quickly poked my head over the fence again, just to be doubly sure she had not materialised and saw that the dandelions were not moving, the spores of their globed heads all intact.

‘I wish she’d come to me,’ Mr. Roper said behind me and I held my breath, waiting for more. ‘She looked just like my little girl.’

‘Your little girl?’ I was talking to the fence, too weak to turn around.

‘Mary was like a reincarnation of her, only darker.’ He smiled a small, sad smile. ‘My wife and her, drowned, before I moved here.’

The children on his walls, I realised, were always in snow, safe from water.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, as I had to.

As we returned to the house, my breath fell back to normal and Mr. Roper made no further comments on Mary nor renewed any attempts to seduce me. The tan leather of my shoes was ruined; I tracked mud into the kitchen without much concern, knowing there would have to be a thorough cleaning for the sale. If there was any regret in Mr.

Roper that his advance towards me had been rudely interrupted, he didn't show it. He picked up an orange from the basket he'd delivered. He threw it up into the air: the whoosh of the orange leaving his hand, the smack of it caught in his fingers. From love to fruit. As swiftly as it had come, the time of his touch, his kiss, had rolled away. My knowledge of his past had come too late, long after I had imagined terrible things. Our knowledge of each other would be hidden under a layer of polite avoidance, forever stained by Mary.

I moved to the cupboards and asked Mr. Roper to help me lift the cast-iron baking ware that Fred's mother had sent by sea all the way from England as a wedding gift, a gift that had arrived so long after the day that I had always associated it with Fred joining the Militia rather than with our marriage.

'Still clean as a whistle,' Mr. Roper noted of the bake ware, with admiration, mistaking the cleanliness of their surfaces as a result of meticulous care, instead of lack of use.

To his credit, Mr. Roper did send me formal invitations to a few of his lunches after I moved. Handwritten notes that were, thankfully, posted, not hand-delivered and signed 'John' with a flourishing 'J'. They spoke of 'pleasure' and 'company' and 'good friends' and on the first few occasions I replied with carefully worded letters of thanks, my own 'regret' and 'disappointment' and 'prior engagements'. Refusals that could not really offend except in their complete speciousness. Gradually, the months between the invitations extended, and I took longer and longer to write back. I was struck by the farce of writing to say 'no' to a lunch long since baked and eaten and, finally, I left the next card from Mr. John Roper un-opened.

†

With Father Benjamin dead and Mr. Roper out of my life, I felt Mary was lost to me. I could only foolishly search for her in the patient files, knowing the city held many hospitals and the chance of her crossing my path was small. Still, they were known to be often ill, their weakness for alcohol increasing the possibility of a visit to these wards. My heart would skip a beat when the words ‘octoroon’ or ‘half-caste’ popped up and I would almost look away, just glimpsing the surname out of the corner of my eye so as to not be confronted head-on with the name. Mary Rose Fraser. When it did not appear my trepidation dissolved and I would be quietly astounded by my obvious need to find her. Father Benjamin’s words came back to me: *for the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*

The tree in the courtyard dropped its flowers and one of the nurses announced her engagement to a senior doctor, the one I had deemed quite ugly. A party was organised, which I did not attend, and the ‘closed’ list appeared to be longer that week, as if diligence had slackened in the face of new lives embarked upon.

That night I felt a presence again in my bed, almost the exact feeling I had had when the Virgin visited me as a child, except that the essence of the arrival was, unmistakably, that of a male. It was not as simple as the spirit of the Mother of Christ. This wandering, unnamed spirit scared me more than the spectral Mary because I could feel his need, the burning beside me. I lay, repeating to myself that I no longer believed in such things – surprised to find that this was the truth I harboured – but could not shake the sense that some kind of soul had entered the room. I did not turn my head toward him and, eventually, I fell back to sleep.

I would not have convinced anyone, had I had anyone to tell of my nighttime experience, yet I remained certain there had been a visitation. I had only to discover who he was.

†

I went walking again that weekend, finding my way into the city by the tram, not wanting the seclusion of my car, but the bustle of strangers, those expressions of indifference and anticipation that have nothing to do with yourself. The rattle covered most of the conversations and the continued need to cling to the straps and poles at every stop and start made it less obvious that I was alone.

I alighted at St James with the help of the conductor – ‘Mind your step, Missus,’ – and, with some intention, I stood near the Archibald fountain, the spray pushed by the winter wind towards my face, fine droplets sticking to the back of my gloves. I tried not to look as if I was searching, casually strolling around the edge of the pool, reading the bronze plaque. I wore a black dress, one of the few dresses I had, the smallness of my waist now allowing me a full skirt, something I thought was reasonably fashionable although my straw, wide-brimmed hat was from ten years ago. I should have been wearing a tight fitting cloche but they seemed, to me, to provide no modesty at all. And there were many more women now who didn’t bother with such things; not brought up like me to be proper and wrapped-up. Two such twenty-year-old creatures sat on one of the park benches in pencil-line skirts, chatting loudly, swinging their shiny, curled hair around as if they were at a dance.

To resist the pull of the War Memorial I deliberately headed toward the harbour. At the Domain, the huge expanse of open lawn holding out against the city’s encroachment, cricketers in white called to one another, hastening to finish their game before the sun gradually drained from the grass bowl, leaving only rectangular patches of light. There was a crowd at Speaker’s Corner, as was normal these days. Groups of firebrands, bordered by Moreton Bay figs and their leaf litter, declaimed against whomever or whatsoever they thought hadn’t brought them personal joy. Prosperity did

not extend everywhere, whole pockets of malcontents still remained, standing on their step-ladders, perched high enough to reach all with their withering gazes to proclaim their answers to the world's problems. I had caught some of their ranting on previous Sundays, as I skirted past them, following the path down to the Point.

I intended to do the same this day but as I walked I found my gaze drawn to a small crowd focused on a man standing precariously on a fruit box. He was silhouetted against the afternoon pale blue sky, a glimpse of the Harbour Bridge just above his head.

'We were sent to the other side of the world,' the man spoke. 'Sent to kill, to maim, to starve, to die, all to maintain the Empire and what did the Empire give us in return? She betrayed us. How many died because the Brits were more concerned with themselves than with us? Abandoned us like we were nothing more than rats. And, so the Yanks came in with their super-bombs and did... and did... and did... what they did. And then Korea.'

I knew the voice. Perhaps I had known from the first glance. He was, essentially, the same man, his moustache still in place, his shape still lean, his hair sleekly black. He raised his hands to encompass the crowd and – here was the difference – his fingers were quivering.

'Should we really go into all these wars without question?'

I heard the murmur of 'pacifist', spoken with clear disapproval.

'No, sir, I am not a pacifist. I simply ask the question: when does it end? When does... when does... when does the light return?'

I was still far enough back that I could only just make out his shiny brown suit. It'd once been a fine suit but the pin stripes were faded and it reminded me of the St V de P outfits rejected by the last young man I had served years ago. His hat had also lost

its firmness, joining his shoulders in a slow sloping towards the ground. I stood behind rows of similarly garbed men, mustiness rising off them. A few glanced in my direction, clearly surprised to see a woman. I was glad to be in somber, inconspicuous colours.

‘Surely we have a duty to God, to our fellow man, to question the need for all this... this... blood ... shed?’

I could not follow the train of his thought, but I could hear the weakness in his voice and the men around me could hear it too.

‘Catholic,’ I heard someone else murmur and the group began to move away from the box towards another speaker calling out passionately about the rights of the workers.

I remained still while Fred climbed off the rickety box. He stood looking down at it, as if it was to blame for his deserting audience. Here was my undead husband! He had stepped from the grave intact, even though he had never actually gone to his tomb. I thought of those I had wanted to return – my mother, Auntie Iris, Mary – and could barely believe it was my never-dead husband who had, instead, come home. Had I wanted this resurrection? Had I prayed for it? Had his spirit visited me just last night, as a calling card for his imminent arrival?

I had enjoyed my mourning. At some point along the way, the loss had embedded into me and I did not need, or want, to lose it. This figure beside the box was inconvenient, ghastly even, enough to cause flight.

He had not yet noticed me; I could have walked away and left myself the dignity of ignorance, let the shadow remain a shadow.

‘Fred?’ I said.

He seemed to take a long moment before raising his head, the Domain suddenly quiet, only the sound of my breathing.

‘Gracie.’ He said it simply and raised both his hands to remove his hat. The distance between us was the same. I had not moved from my position at the back of the vanished crowd. He looked to the ground and I foolishly followed his gaze to the grass, thinking I had missed something important.

‘Gracie,’ he repeated, his head coming up now to find the point over my shoulder.

‘Hello, Fred.’

‘I wondered ... I thought you would find me, some way.’

‘I haven’t been looking for you,’ I answered strongly. I needed him to know this, for there to be no misguided perception of weakness in me.

‘But you have found me.’ He smiled passively, a mere joining of the lips, and took a step towards me. ‘Gracie ...’

I wanted him to stop saying my name. With his whole frame hunched forward, his hat pathetic in his hands, he could have been a tramp about to ask me for spare change.

‘Where are you living?’ I asked.

My coldness seemed to stop his movement.

‘Here and there.’

I could not imagine how his Oriental woman had agreed to them living ‘here and there’. They were Here, after all, no longer There, where they belonged.

On closer inspection, Fred’s moustache was ragged and patches of grey hairs were littered all over his scalp. The quivering in his hands was not, as I had hoped, just a sign of his emotion while orating, but an almost constant shake that reminded me, horribly, of Father Benjamin. He licked his lips again and again but they still remained dry and his skin had gained a haggard pall. He had aged as I had, with the traces of his

worry plainly visible and lost dreams sagging his frame. Only his eyes held the same come-and-go spark.

‘Did you get my letter?’ he asked. We sat not far from the cricket game. Fred had produced a grey blanket from an old tattered suitcase and laid it out like a picnic rug. I tried not to look at the stains and holes in it or to imagine why he would have such an item with him. I tucked my legs up under myself, hoping to appear as a curious spectator watching the wickets fall with her aged beau beside her. Fred sat with his arms wrapped around his knees. His shoes, like everything about him, were scuffed and unpolished.

‘Yes, I got your letters,’ I replied shortly, wondering why he would want to dive right into the painful past.

‘And you didn’t want to help me?’ His voice had an accusation in it.

‘Help you?’

‘I was in despair, Gracie. As a Christian woman, I would have thought . . .’

‘In despair? You?’

‘I would have thought . . .’

He ran his middle finger along the hairs of his moustache, his head tipped up to watch the clouds hurrying across the sun. The dusk was making it difficult for the batsman to see the ball and one of the fielders was calling ‘Time? Time?’

I did not want to hear of his despair. None of his feelings could compare with mine. All the words I couldn’t speak to him. How could he talk to me of those letters with their joy of new-found happiness when I had had none of my own to replace his withdrawn love?

‘I sold the house, Fred.’ The simple statement of fact seemed the easiest option.

‘The house?’ He turned his gaze back to me, coming down from the sky. ‘The house?’ He repeated, as if only just remembering that there had ever been such a place, as if this, along with me, had existed in such a distant time that he could no longer recall its attachment to him.

‘I got a good price for the place and I bought a flat. The difference has been keeping me going since your money orders stopped arriving. And I work. At a hospital.’ I felt proud of this announcement and was frustrated by Fred returning his attention to his hat, sitting there beside his feet. He picked it up and I had a sudden fear he meant to put it on and walk away.

‘I like the work, Fred,’ trying to soften my voice. ‘I file.’

‘You file?’ He was asking his hat, rather than me.

‘Yes, I file.’

We had come to a dead end.

‘Do you do good, then, Gracie?’ Looking up at me, he had a smirk on his face and I supposed he was making fun of me.

‘I do what I must to live.’

‘Yes, we all do what we must to live.’

He glanced at the suitcase closed on the grass beside us and I was suddenly aware of its contents. I had seen briefly what was inside when he opened it to retrieve the blanket: a razor, a pair of trousers, a crushed shirt, one thick pair of socks and a brown paper bag twisted around a bottle. This, I realised, was Fred’s life! Any trace of *her*, the woman he had abandoned me for, was no longer evident. I could not decide if I was elated or sickened.

On the tram, I tried to recall asking Fred to come home with me. Perhaps it was assumed between us, that he would pack up the blanket and bring his worldly possessions along with him. I anticipated his entry into my flat with trepidation, acutely aware of letting this erstwhile stranger into the sanctity of my isolation. What items remained of our time together? I felt shy of pieces that might indicate any kind of shrine to what had been and wished I could snatch some time before he entered, to have things arranged properly. I was not a slovenly person – the dishes had been washed and put away – but I knew the cushions were scattered on the lounge and the smell of last night's meatloaf still hung in the kitchen.

I opened the front door hoping I had shut the curtains to the alcove where his desk stood. Behind me, I felt Fred hang back, standing in the short corridor with his suitcase clutched in his hand.

'It is lovely,' he said, before he had really seen it, the words coming out of his mouth as if he had been practicing them on the tram ride. I continued on into the kitchen, using the bustle of making tea to cover the tremble I had within me.

I heard him move into the living room and, filling the kettle, knew him to be examining the pictures and ornaments. Would he sit in his old armchair, one of the many pieces I had, in my weakness, kept for his mere memory? At the very least, he would not find his photograph anywhere. Without the widows' visits I had no need for such display and had stored it in one of the many cupboards. It would have been best to throw it away.

As I placed the teacups on the tray on the kitchen bench Fred was stood in the doorway, watching me. A waft of his decay overcame the remnants of my awful cooking and it was only the hum of my Kelvinator that filled the silence. Of course, there were other sounds outside, the Rosellas fighting over fruit; the murmur of my next

door neighbour's wireless that was permanently, it seemed, tuned to the latest vulgar serial; the steady hum of traffic getting louder and angrier every day. Inside, though, I felt only the quiet between Fred and me. Not a comfortable abstinence from words, the kind of sweet fellowship seen between old couples such as Mr. and Mrs. Mavis where a mere touch of the fingers conveyed all that was in their minds, forgave the trespasses of the past, placed every misunderstanding within the boundaries of acceptance. No, Fred and I didn't have this kind of bond. The best the years had done for us was open holes through which neither of us wanted to fall. I carried the tea tray out to the balcony and Fred moved away from the kitchen entrance awkwardly, my arm brushing against his torso.

We waited for the tea to brew, my husband squirming on the wrought-iron chair, not able, it seemed, to get comfortable. Once he would have teased me about purchasing such an instrument of torture but now he didn't dare to. This lack of ease made me angry again, irritated as much with his distant politeness as with his earlier advanced familiarity. As my revenge, I pretended not to remember how he took his tea.

'Milk? Sugar?'

'Come on, Gracie,' he admonished and I felt myself blushing. He had seen through me.

The breeze took the steam coming out of the teapot and I poured the tea black, as he had always had it.

After we had finished our tea in silence, I showed Fred his room. I'd set up Mary's old bed in the second room of the flat. Why I'd done this, I didn't think about at the time. The re-appearance of Fred made the move seem strangely sensible.

Fred had left his suitcase in the front corridor and I instructed him to fetch it. After turning on the light I stood in the corner, waiting for his exploration of what

would now be 'his' room. It was dominated by a chest of drawers though this bedroom was so much more spacious than the one at the old house that there was no need for squeezing past the cumbersome desk that had once dominated his tiny study.

Fred, once again, hung in the doorway. He did not move to open the curtains that lined the opposite wall. He either had no curiosity or had already felt the fine balance that hung between us in the tug of war over the tea. Behind the velvet curtains he would have found two large panels of glass with a door-less entrance between them that ran to the ceiling. A rectangle of a room attached itself to this, the floor covered in brown tiles, a small high window in the wall opposite the entrance. I could only assume it had been designed for a baby, although the tiles gave it little warmth and the inability to close off the area made me wonder at the point of creating a room to sequester a child away, without any method of blocking it out altogether. Without a view to this strange addition where Fred's desk lived, I felt the spare bedroom had a cosiness to it, contained in its horizons.

'This is sweet,' Fred said. He moved into the room and ran his shaking hand along the pink, patch-worked quilt that lay on the bed. The headstand was gold, a new addition since Mary's departure, and a picture of a young girl with bunny rabbits spilling from her arms hung above it, framed in dark bronze.

'Most of this is left-overs,' I replied, aware of what he must be thinking. 'I threw it in here because there was nowhere else for it.'

'You couldn't leave it behind?' he asked.

My stomach dropped and I had to stare hard at the hardwood knob of one of the drawers to prevent tears from coming into my eyes. This was not how to react! This was giving him ammunition against me. Where was the steel I needed? I had been so strong

over the years; I could barely fathom how one chance meeting seemed to have changed everything.

‘I didn’t have anyone to help,’ I muttered. ‘I had to do everything myself and there wasn’t any possibility of storing things. The house was bursting at the seams. I had to get rid of all your clothes and things. I should’ve thrown more away but even the charity shops have their limits, Fred.’

The longer I talked the more indignation I could muster. By the end of my speech, his name came out like a sharp slap. He seemed to feel it.

‘Can I use the chest of drawers?’ he asked timidly.

‘Of course.’

I restrained myself from pointing out that he did not have a great deal of possessions to stow away. Indeed, he placed his suitcase on the bed and clicked open the one lock that still held the lid on. Perhaps because he was aware I had seen it all before, he did not show any shame and, as steadily as he was now able, took up his ragged shirt and moved to the dresser. I stood in his way and we did the embarrassing dance of trying to find a path around each other without touching. And this was the man I had married.

I didn’t stay to see Fred settled in the room. I wanted to show how busy I was and took to dusting. Tomorrow I could proudly head off to work, leaving him to whatever manner of activity he occupied himself with. On a Sunday night, however, I would normally have had a gin and a plate of biscuits and cheese, my appetite content with the meagre, easy offerings of the back pantry. I was thrown by the need to provide dinner for another. Meatloaf leftovers was all I could offer.

Fred ate as if I had produced the food of the century, worthy of being exhibited at the Show. He had changed into his other pair of trousers and the shirt that was mildly

cleaner than the one I had first seen him in and, although there could be no illusion he was not the same man who had raved on his soapbox in a foolish suit, the mantle of newer clothes gave him an air of newness that was attractive.

I didn't insist on a prayer before he began to eat. In our other life, my husband had diligently bowed his head while I spoke the blessing. I suspected now it had always been a concession, that he had only attended church for my sake. Had he ever believed?

The tears that had threatened before were replaced with a little too much pleasure as I watched him wolf down his meal. I had to struggle to preserve the appearance of indifference to his compliments.

'Is it possible, do you think, Grace, for me to have a bath?'

Fred spoke with the same timidity as before and I noted the change in his naming of me. I had never called him anything but his proper name, never used endearments such as 'dearest' or 'sweetheart' or a secret nickname known only by the two of us.

'Yes, Fred,' I replied and tasted, for the first time, the hardness of it.

Fred remained in the bathroom while the water for the bath ran, monitoring its heat and depth. After washing the dishes and stealing for a moment into the spare room, I sat in the lounge and turned back to the adventures of *Tom Jones*, trying to ignore the roar of the pipes that carried around the walls, trying not to wait for the moment when the noise would stop and I would know Fred was undressing.

I forced myself to return to Tom, cast out of his benefactor's house in disgrace because of his base appetites. An illegitimate, condemned from birth and blood, to wander from one fist to the next, only dimly aware of how Fate was against him. I had already begun to skim over the chapters in which Fielding gave his own interpretations of morality, preferring the action of the love story: Sophia's determination to run away

rather than marry Blifil, Tom's letter claiming eternal fidelity to her even as he made his own perfidious escape.

The flat became quiet and I heard the small splash as my one-time husband stepped into the bath. I felt nervous. For fourteen years I had been without male company – if you did not count Mr. Roper – and I would have assumed all such feelings were dead inside me. I didn't think it was jealousy that had made it almost impossible for me to watch and appreciate courtship; I had surely surrendered the possibility of such twists in my own Fate. I knew the falsity of 'happily ever after', preferred the steady assurance of heart-less days. Why, then, did I jump like a schoolgirl at the sound of Fred's voice?

'Gracie!' His call came to me from another time. 'How about some music?'

I put my book down and moved to the Bakelite radio that Fred had received on his departure from work after enlisting, a tarnished plaque attached to its front with the words 'For Mr. F Smith from the Commonwealth Banking Corporation, with appreciation, 1941' smoothly engraved in it. I rarely used it and, when I did, had tried not to compare this item to the farewell gift given to me, that *Complete Works of Shakespeare* whose front blank pages had, recently, gained age stains the colour of tea.

Switching the radio on, a Frankie Vaughan tune jumped into the room. Immediately, Fred began to sing along, his baritone barrelling out from the echoing bathroom.

When you walk in the garden

In the garden of Eden

With a beautiful woman

And you know how you care

And the voice in the garden

In the Garden of Eden

Tells you she is forbidden

Can you leave her there?

I was confused by this man in my bath who, in one moment, seemed a weak rabbit, hopping stupidly around me and, in the next, bellowing like a bull with no obvious concern for what my neighbours might think.

When you're yearning for lovin'

And she touches your hand

And your heart starts a-poundin'

And you're feelin' so grand.

Can you leave her to heaven?

And obey the command?

Can you walk from the Garden

Does your heart understand?

'Are you swingin', Gracie?' he shouted out, his inability to see me giving him courage. 'Swingin' in the Garden of Eden!'

This could be the night before he went away, when we stayed up for as long as he could, dancing, until he had fallen asleep on the lounge, so exhausted from all his conflicting thoughts, and I had crept out to simply wish on the stars.

I wanted to call 'yes' to him, to pick myself up and swing, but my legs were leaden, my toes crushed inside my pumps. With no one here I would have taken them off. But with Fred here, like with Mr. Roper, I couldn't be barefoot. Had Fred become as distant to me as Mr. Roper? I swayed a little, moving myself to a rhythm I couldn't forget, my shoulders rocking, letting the music fall into me. How easy it was to go back

to memories, to step to the tune of the past. The trick was selecting what memories to keep alive, deciding just where to take yourself to.

Fred voice joined Frankie's crescendo.

Can you leave her there?

Can you leave her there?

Can you leave her there!

The bathroom door opened. I had not heard Fred drawing himself from the water, the song had drowned this out. I looked involuntarily, saw Fred in the archway with only a towel wrapped around his waist, and quickly tripped back to the lounge-chair, picking up *Tom Jones* and returning to the place held by my book-mark.

In the corner of my eye, his dripping shape moved to the spare bedroom and he closed the door behind him with a soft click.

I had lied to Fred when I said I'd given away all his clothes. I did not want him to think that I was, in any way, waiting for him. Yet an entire half-wardrobe still housed his suits and one of my drawers held pyjamas and under-clothes. While he was in the bath I had taken a pair of these pyjamas and laid them on his bed. I could pretend they were a one-off, accidentally kept in the chaos of the move; he was welcome to keep them, as I had no use for them. I tried to imagine myself saying this without a betrayal of the truth. Since leaving the widows behind I had not had to practice deceit – unless one included the various excuses created to avoid any return visits to the Church and to Mr. Roper – and I worried that Fred would see right through me, to the clinging wife who hadn't been able to discard his possessions.

I was aware of how strange it would be for him to emerge in his pyjamas when I was still dressed. The solution would be that he would not come out again at all but call 'good night' and leave me to my nighttime preparations.

It was ten o'clock, later than I would normally sit up, quieter than I was used to. I had formed a habit of getting to bed sooner than my neighbours so that I could hear their movements above and below me, a strange type of lullaby, reassuring in the same way that strangers on the tram reminded you of the continuation of other lives when your own seems stationary.

'Staying up?' Fred asked, standing at the end of the lounge-chair. His hands hung by his side, the sleeves of the brown and cream striped pyjamas hanging lower than his knuckles, longer than I remembered, or maybe his body was now smaller.

'Yes, I think I will,' I replied. In truth, I couldn't imagine sleeping. How to put aside this day of a ghost's return and settle into loose slumber? The tightness caused by the turmoil of bumping emotions, the strict need to show nothing when feeling everything?

'Is it alright if I sleep?'

'Yes.'

'Goodnight, Grace.'

He turned and disappeared into the spare room, closing the door with the same lightness, determined not to be slamming anything. Perhaps he thought I would not tolerate loud noises or any sounds that recalled departure.

I lay the book aside, knowing I had no concentration for it.

If I had ever imagined having Fred in my life again, it had never been like this. Somewhere along the way he had become, in my imaginings, one of the statues on the outside of the Memorial, those solid stone sitters with broad shoulders who, despite proportional deficiencies, maintained a worldly gaze and a strong sense of their place in the world. I would never have suspected he could become the emaciated bronze soldier inside, the defeated martyr, the figure I had hidden, through modesty, from Mary. What

would she have made of this man in her bed, raised from the dead and already producing snores loud enough to chase away demons?

I shut my eyes in bed, my arms pinned to the side of me, trying to block out Fred's snores by pressing one ear into the pillow and draping my hair over the other. How had I ever gotten used to this noise? I had no memories of frustrating nights, no need for the separate rooms that other wives hinted at.

The spots of colour that swam in front of my eyelids were not leading me to sleep. I had barely touched any of the meatloaf and the pit of my stomach reminded me of its emptiness. There was no point in getting up to try and fill it, my supply of biscuits run down by Fred's afternoon snack, his appetite making up for days, perhaps months, of subsistence living. He hadn't been explicit about when he had returned from Japan and begun his street existence. I could only guess by the state of him that it had been long enough to create shadows on almost all of his body, and soul.

The snoring abruptly stopped. He had, more than likely, woken himself up and I waited to hear the re-commencement of the steady breath that would rise and rise, that cycle of nervous waking, light sleep, deep slumber and return to dreams. I wanted him to not be awake like me; it worried me too much to think of us both marooned in our beds, without any clear idea of what was going on in each other's head. Was he still thinking of her? Had the war made him bitter only, or were there other angers inside of him? I had my anger still; all I had to do was remind myself of his abandonment, *that* letter. I could not let it be dampened by trembles and the soft speaking of my name.

There was no telling what time it was and still Fred's room remained silent, aside from the occasional squeak of his mattress as he moved. My mattress did not squeak because I did not move, continuing to lie flat on my back, willing Fred to sleep.

The next morning I crept around the flat, preparing myself for work. I had no memory of falling asleep myself but I must have had some hours. Fred's snores continued in the spare room and I didn't want to wake him. I refrained from boiling the kettle – satisfying myself with a glass of orange juice – and did not wash my face for fear of the noisy pipes.

I left my house-keys on the dining table with a note telling Fred that I would be back by six o'clock. I had never had a spare set cut – who would I give them to? – and had to trust to the fact that Fred would stay for at least a day, even if it were just for some decent food.

On my arrival at work, Mr. Anderson gave me a curious look. 'Everything all right Mrs. Smith?' he asked and I supposed it was my untidy hair that gave me away.

'Yes, Mr. Anderson, just running a little late this morning.'

'That's not like you.'

'Well, we all have our bad mornings.'

I had meant to sound cheery but it sounded out rather lower than I had intended, almost snappish.

'Chin up, Mrs. Smith, a bad morning does not have to mean a bad day.'

I grimaced and made my way into my office.

The day, despite Mr. Anderson's prediction, had an odd edge to it. When the phone rang next door I expected Mr. Anderson to appear, bearing some message of disaster from my home. I did not know what I thought would happen to Fred in my flat but I found it difficult to think of him there, alone, free to roam. I could not imagine him prying into my belongings, nor could I see him simply sitting quietly. It was strange to

have another's movements so closely tied to mine again and by the afternoon I could not stay in the confines of the filing cabinets any longer.

'Just popping out for a walk,' I informed Mr. Anderson.

He paused in whatever he was writing and frowned his hirsute frown.

'I didn't have a lunch hour,' I added, in case there was any perception of wasting time.

'That's fine,' he replied, continuing to watch me walk across the office.

I had not walked in the wards since my arrival at the hospital. I didn't feel it was appropriate, given how much I knew about some of the patient's ills, and had also felt a barrier between myself and the medical staff, their knowledge of the inner workings of the body making my own literary knowledge pale into insignificance.

Standing in the courtyard, red flowers withered to brown on the grass, I was aware of how sedentary I was, that the doctors and nurses were striding past, the time for food and cigarettes had passed and no-one else had no-where to go. I did not look up but I suspected Mr. Anderson was observing me from his office window, trying to determine exactly how far from 'fine' I was. To escape him, I found myself moving with purpose towards the building that contained the South Wing. Some of these wards would contain replicas of the Mavis boy whom I had never laid eyes on, embodiments of the words 'shell shocked' that were frequently scribbled on patient files without any further explanation seemingly needed.

The long, thin corridor I stepped into had open doors at more-than-regular intervals and as I clicked along the floorboards I saw that all of these entrances lead to a continuous room on either side, filled with single beds in rows under the huge, wide windows. The hospital had once been a colonial residence. This, then, was the converted ballroom, split down the middle, no longer fragranced with home-wrought

perfumes or eucalyptus oil rubbed into wood. Now formaldehyde tried desperately to mask the odours of the sick. The top panels of the windows were still blacked out, perhaps the paint kept some of the heat in.

I pattered along, determined to keep moving so as not to draw attention to myself. I had only a vague impression of the occupied beds – more than I had expected were empty, although their sheets were unmade suggesting only temporary absence – with figures that lay restless.

I passed the final door and heard a young man's voice calling, 'Sister? Sister?' I couldn't understand how he could mistake me in my dark clothes for the radiance of the nursing staff but I felt compelled to stop.

'I am sorry, young man,' I spoke from the doorway. 'I'm not a nurse.'

He was in the last bed of the ward – the closest, perhaps, to recovery. Or to a more final destination? His skin, from the sunken hollows of his cheeks to the long, thin arms lying over the blankets, was an awful yellow. Would I receive him soon in the form of a file to be deposited into the cavern below the hospital?

'I need to go,' he said.

'Go where?'

The blush that spread over his face showed me my mistake, the scarlet jumping out vividly because of his sickness.

'I'll see if I can find someone.'

He nodded his head and I turned to leave, unsure if I had the confidence to accost anyone and demand attention for the boy.

Immediately across the hall a nurse worked with her back to me, tucking in the sheets of an empty bed. Her uniform, a pinafore belted at the waist and a headscarf reminiscent of a nun's veil, was all white and the sunlight that came in from the window

seemed to make her luminous. Her manoeuvres were studied and efficient. I walked quietly across the corridor to stand under the door arch and held my breath as she used the palm of her hand to fold the linen under the mattress, creating a perfect, tight corner.

‘Sister Mary?’ an older, female voice called from out of my sight and the nurse looked up, her profile perfectly revealed, the same curled eyelashes, the same dark hue brought to stark attention by her whitely wrapped face. I drew in a quick gasp of air. She may have turned to investigate the noise but I did not stay to see. Hurrying away down the floorboards on the soles of my feet, ensuring the tap of my heels did not echo out behind me, I hoped somebody else would help the young yellow man who needed to relieve himself. At that moment, I could not help anyone.

Almost before I reached the end of the corridor I had begun to doubt myself, wondering if the return of Fred was creating phantoms, tricks of the mind that turned and tripped over my sense of order. Mary would have had to grow up. I was not foolish enough to keep her a twelve year old. Five years had passed and she had every chance of entering the workforce, but for her to be so much more than I had ever pictured her, to have people’s lives in her hands, for the sake of heaven! Was it really her or just another vision? Could she really have been standing there, against the light, with her hair perfectly contained, as I had always wanted it to be?

†

I knocked on the door of my flat that evening without really feeling the rap against my knuckles. I had not left work earlier than usual, determined as I was to allay any of Mr. Anderson's concerns about my pale-faced appearance after my walk, and it was already past six o'clock when I arrived home. In this way I had also given Fred more time to prepare for my return, for I had vague fears he would be up to something.

He answered almost immediately, unlocking the metal screen that protected the front door with an ease that suggested he had been in and out sometime during the day.

'Welcome home,' he said and I was surprised by the unmistakable smells of a meal in preparation coming from the kitchen. He was dressed in one of his old suits, grey, from his banking days, so he had found the half of the closet that still belonged to him. I did not say anything, aware that the past had completely melded with the present and all secrets were now under scrutiny.

'Good day?' he asked, reaching to take my handbag from my shoulder.

'Yes.'

'That's good.'

He hummed, placing the bag on the side-table and disappearing into the kitchen to turn off the kettle that was whistling insistently.

I sat in the armchair feeling like a visitor who must wait for the host to determine the next course of action. I waited, listening to Fred make tea, his humming continuing under the boil of saucepan water and the twang of the oven's metal shelves as they adjusted to the heat. My senses could not guess what he was cooking, or perhaps it was that my memory had no point of reference. The Fred I had known did not hum in the kitchen like a woman, nor place a cup and saucer tentatively on the armrest, ensuring the base of the cup sat exactly on the middle circle of the lace doily.

'Are you not having tea?' I asked.

‘I’ve been drinking tea all day.’ He smiled and sat on the end of the lounge. He did not have the waft of alcohol around him I had registered yesterday though he still stunk of tobacco and I saw through the balcony door a large pile of cigarette ends sticking out of an old bowl I’d once used to wash cleaning rags in.

‘Been keeping busy, Fred?’ I sounded caustic even to myself and knew, somewhere inside of me, that it was not fair to take out the confusion of my afternoon on Fred.

‘I went walking.’

He said this as if it was an achievement and I supposed in comparison to what he might have been doing, it was.

‘I walked along the coast. The wind was up but I managed to hold onto my hat, as they say.’ He turned his body towards me like a little boy wanting you to focus everything on his story. ‘The sea was wild. I’d forgotten how wild the ocean can be and I found myself just walking and walking without any clear sense of where I was going, or when I should stop. I could walk forever, I thought and I felt so . . . so . . . so tired, at that thought, the thought I could keep on walking and no one would care. That is how I have been spending my days, because no one cares, not even me, about how, or where I walk. I rant and rave and . . . and no one listens. The darkness . . . and then, Grace, I thought of you. How you needed me to be at home, even just because of the keys and how . . . and Grace, I was so happy when I remembered that, that I had to be back here, at a certain time, for . . . a real . . . reason.’

I could feel him willing me to raise my gaze from the teacup, the hint of tears in his voice.

‘I’m happy for you,’ I said, staring into the liquid. I stood up and took the half-empty cup to the kitchen sink.

The meal – a dish of chicken cooked in spices I had never purchased and which I could only assume had travelled back with Fred from his foreign lands – was eaten in almost complete silence. I could not really compliment the food because it left my tongue burning mildly but I ate every last piece as a sign of my appreciation, sipping water all the while to take away the sting.

The quiet, if anything, had a softness to it, different from the harsh silences of the previous night and I marveled to think we might already be settling into one another. A large part of me fought such a conclusion – I was tired, after all, from the illusions of the day and it was dangerous to read the mood in such times – and another part of me welcomed the idea, that I might, once again, enter the world of the loved, and loving. Would Mary, though, let such a thing happen? Could I slip past her into such a place?

We went through the rituals of preparation for sleep with murmurs of muffled enquiries of each other's needs, the brasher call of my neighbour to her children – 'Get to bloody bed before I come in there and wallop you!' – ringing out against our solemnity.

Fred whispered 'good night' and, once again, closed the spare bedroom door gently. Did his words have a question in them or had I imagined that he was asking permission for a continuation of our time together, for comfort that I had not had for such a long time? We were beyond flirting and I had not given him any doe-eyed encouragement to believe we could go there once more. My only sign, my only answer to a possibly un-asked question, was to leave my bedroom door wide open.

The presence in my room was real this time.

I had turned off my bedside lamp after pretending to read for a while, hearing Fred pace next door. I could not will him to know that the invitation was there, only

hope he would understand what the absence of the sound of my shutting door could mean.

I heard him draw a breath. He was standing at the end of my bed, possibly feeling the edges to get his bearings in the almost complete darkness. I kept my eyes shut, trying to keep my breathing even, to feign sleep even as I suspected he knew I was awake. So much pretence, still. I could not reach out to him, in case he drew away from me. He may have only been there to confirm his lack of desire for me, to draw the contours of my form in comparison to his other lover, to pull back in revulsion from my different kind of body.

I felt him trace out the mounds of my feet and carefully sit on the end of the bed. He had lost all residue of tobacco for I could only smell that essence of him, the saltiness.

I waited for him to speak, to ask if I was awake but he said nothing. I opened my eyes and waited as the blackness dissolved into varying shapes of grey: the dresser against the wall; the outline of the door; Fred sitting, hunched over, his elbows on his knees, his hands dangling between his legs. A great distance from me, a larger shadow than he really was. I closed my eyes again. The night ticked on and I wondered if I would hear birds awakening before either of us moved, if we would watch for the dawn together, a vigil of waiting. These thoughts changed my breathing and I could not hope to stop the small sighs leaking out of my mouth, the deep inhalations as I fought to not imagine his hands on me.

For this is my body, for this is my blood. If I could have willed the Virgin Mary back to me, to give me the icy film that had protected me in my youth, I do not think I would have done it. The heat in me was like nothing I had felt before, not even in the days of our marriage when Fred had urged me to forget the watching eyes, to embrace

him fully. I had never really done so, though the desire had been there. I had never held him, and only him, to my deepest heart.

My fingers twitched. All I needed was to lift myself and place my burning hand on his leg, to risk his scalding.

Before I could do this, he stood up. My eyes snapped open, his shadow had grown tall. He would leave now and, in my head, I shouted ‘No! No!’ and pleaded, ‘Stay with me, stay with me’, repeating the words with a pathos that almost made me nauseous. In my head, the desperation could be spoken but my mouth could not whisper a word.

Fred did not leave. Instead, he walked slowly around the end of the bed to the empty side. He pulled at the tightly tucked sheets and blanket, opening up a wide space for his entrance, and lay himself down beside me. Not close enough for our bodies to touch but close enough that I could feel the same heat coming off him. He lay on his back, like me, and, gradually, our breathing began to match one another. I did not turn my head to look at him and I sensed if his eyes were open they were looking at the dark mass of the ceiling. We lay, as two people laid out for their funerals, with enough warmth in the air to enable cremation.

I did not sleep. Much sooner than I expected Fred’s snores entered the confused night and all thoughts were punctured by his snorts and grumbles. My irritation brought down my longing and I tried to reason with myself that it was age that had magnified the strength of his night-noises. I waited, with further itchiness, for the flinging out of his arms, the eventual taking up of the mattress that had characterised our nights together before. I didn’t know if I would tolerate such selfishness now, if my meek days of being satisfied with only the very edge of comfort were over.

I thought of Mary on her first day, standing in my driveway, a vision of meekness – *and the meek shall inherit the earth*. What was there for her to do but lower her eyes and pretend to be content? How much the child is in our power, holding all that we want, all that we have lost somewhere along the way. Little wonder I had clung to her, little wonder she had slipped away. In that greyness of approaching morning, I saw she had never been meek under her skin, her face a prophecy of every sin I would commit against her.

Fred's snores stopped. His eyes opened and he turned to face me. I felt the heat again, generating off the both of us.

'Grace?'

'Yes?'

'Perhaps . . .'

'Yes, Fred?'

'Perhaps we could go for a walk sometime?' His voice was quiet and it did not seem like a strange thing to say. 'Like old times. We could take a walk down to the fruit bat colony, hey?'

In the dawn light, I could see his eyes were on me intently, as if trying to read something in my response.

'Yes, that would be nice,' I replied quietly.

Fred breathed out loudly again. 'Did you get that letter, Grace?'

'Which letter, Fred?'

'The fruit bats . . .'

I thought back over the collections of Fred's letters, so over-protected inside his desk, wind whipped on the clothesline, now re-wrapped in ribbon. I could remember no mention of the fruit bats. My puzzled expression seemed enough.

He turned his head away and closed his eyes again.

'I'm glad,' he whispered. I didn't ask what he was referring to.

The test of my meekness didn't come in the night for Fred continued to stay diligently within the confines of his half of the bed.

†

Mr. Anderson enquired about my health upon my arrival at my work the next morning. I had worked hard to make my tired face presentable but had been completely unable to arrange my hair, having to content myself with wearing it loose. Though I tried to inject as much enthusiasm as possible into my reply to Mr. Anderson it did not prevent him from periodically sticking his head into my office throughout the day to check if I needed anything. He was obviously afraid that my weary appearance was a sign of some discontent, a discontent that could result in his losing one of his best ‘drones’ as he referred to me, labouring the image of the hospital as a thriving, busy bee-hive in which we all contributed to making the honey of health and well-being.

I waited as patiently as I could for the beginning of the lunch-hours. In general there were no appearances in the courtyard until noon, but the comings and goings could continue past two o’clock. There was no possibility of watching closely that long so I dedicated only the middle hour – from half past twelve to half past one – to standing at the window, carefully hidden by the bank of curtain, checking the nurses’ faces for that tell-tale shade of skin. I was no longer able to sneer at the love dances of the couples being played out below. They seemed beautiful and tragic. What would I feel on seeing Mary again?

The file of a typhoid patient lay open on my desk. A succession of doctor’s hands had written notes beside dates that ran over the last month, leading to the final entry: ‘Died 9.47pm’. It wasn’t necessary to read the clinical list of the man’s final days. I knew where the file needed to go, knew where the end lay, for his record, at least, if not for his being. Nevertheless, I found myself reading over the scrawls of symptoms and attempted treatment, over the timetable of decline, chronicling his fever and pain, the rose-like spots rising on his chest, the green soup of his excrement. One

entry, 'A turn for the worse', seemed the grossest understatement and some of the entries were completely indecipherable, leaving the impression that the doctor had barely had time to catch up with Death.

How quick it seemed on the page, just a few scrawled strokes – ink in a different pattern from the characters on the envelope that came back to me from Japan but holding that same power – and yet how many hours had it been for the dying man and how must he have clung, even in his pain, to those vanishing minutes? To grip on to what we are losing every day. I wished, more than anything, that Fred had reached for me across the bed last night, that he had placed his hands on the bliss below and taken me to the stars.

Once more, I declared my intention of going for a walk in the afternoon and, once more, Mr. Anderson watched me depart. I planned to return to the South Wing, to check on the young yellow boy, to confirm that yesterday had been an aberration, that the arrival of Fred into my life had simply created associations. *Their* Sister Mary could not be *my* Mary. It was too much to hope for – or to dread.

The corridor was busier this time, two nurses were re-organising a trolley of supplies and an elderly couple – had I seen them someplace before? – were hovering outside a doorway, perhaps waiting for their patient to be presentable. The woman, dressed in a long tweed overcoat, clung to a brown paper bag overflowing with grapes. As I passed, the woman whispered something to her husband.

I walked on with the growing sense that I was shrinking, becoming smaller the further I travelled from the entrance. I glanced into the wards as I passed, afraid of any signs of black skin, whilst still praying there would be some. Could I rush to her? Could I stop myself from turning away as I had done the day before? It'd only been surprise, surely, that pushed me away? This time I would confront her, spectre or not.

I came to the final entrance and saw that the last bed, the home of yesterday's young man, was empty. The sheets were turned back but the mattress still contained the boy's imprint. I moved to the bed and felt the hammer of panic combining with the smell of sweat. Where had he gone? Surely, only some place close. Not the final journey. On the bedside cabinet sat a glass and a large jug of water. There was also a book placed facedown, its spine bent open to hold the place. It was *Oliver Twist*.

'Can I help you?'

The voice was behind me and I turned to see her. She had an arm around the yellow boy and was helping him to sit onto the bed.

'Hello,' I said.

The girl's eyes were fixed on her charge. Moving around the other side of the bed, she let him lean the weight of his back onto her hands and slowly lift his legs up. I waited as he gently tilted back into the pillows, a suspension bridge controlled by her hands.

The boy sighed.

'Thank you,' he said.

The nurse straightened herself up and, with the bed and the young man's pain between us, directed honey-brown eyes at me.

'Yes?' she asked.

I couldn't keep looking at her. I glanced down at the patient.

'You came back,' the boy said. He smiled.

'You're a relative of Luke's?'

I shook my head, unable to say anything.

'A friend?'

I nodded.

‘It’s lovely of you to visit,’ the girl said.

She spoke simply, without a trace of surprise in her voice, and I was warned to think that even after all these years, I was perfectly incapable of disconcerting someone like her.

She continued to scan down the other beds, as if ready to go to a patient’s aid without hesitation.

‘Luke is doing well.’ Leaning down, she smoothed out his blanket. ‘He’s told you about it?’

I didn’t know how to explain that I had no connection to the sallow boy. He had closed his eyes, removing himself from us.

‘Maybe we should go for a walk?’ the nurse suggested, perhaps worried that we might be keeping him from sleep. ‘I can explain it all to you.’

I tried hard to keep myself poised even as I itched to put my hand on her, to claim some possession of this extraordinary being.

She led the way down the corridor and I followed her thin legs, so neatly ended inside hard leather brown shoes. Outside, the afternoon was almost over, the last of the light falling on the grass around the flame tree. She did not hesitate to stand in it, rubbing at her arms to rid them of any remaining goose pimples. I felt too hot myself and remained in the shade.

‘Luke is past the worst of it, now we have the dysentery under control,’ she said. ‘The doctors say the jaundice is only a result of that, so they should be able to get him back to his normal colour soon.’

Normal? I had to resist staring at her skin.

‘You are doing a good job,’ I said, a statement of fact that could not be misinterpreted.

‘I hope so.’ She interlaced her fingers, hanging her hands below her waist. Her shoulders visibly dropped, as if, out here, she could let go of her eternal vigilance.

‘A wonderful thing,’ I added.

‘Thank you.’

She spoke like she was imparting me a gift, though she looked past me, over my shoulder, more than likely to a younger me, the one she had known.

‘You work here?’ she asked.

‘Yes, as a clerk.’

‘Under the dreaded Mr. Anderson?’

‘Under the dreaded Mr. Anderson.’

We laughed. I felt a vague pang of guilt that I was willing to join this assessment of Mr. Anderson, never having been on the end of his rages. I had heard his storms against the incompetence of the medical staff, knew of the gulf between the administration and those ‘on the ground’. I wondered what he would be thinking, seeing me down here, in plain view, talking to the enemy.

I could find no direction in the discussion that could take us into ease with one another. We stood in silence.

‘I should probably get back,’ she said and now her looking past me was a longing to return to that place beyond me, to her future.

‘Can I see . . . Luke again?’ I asked without meaning to, finding myself saying things, as I had always done with her, that I could not control. I had wanted to ask if I could see her again, but it would have sounded too desperate, too sad, to be pleading to be admitted to her sight again.

‘Yes.’ This time she did sound surprised and she stared at me, a small crease between her eyebrows. ‘He will be here still, for quite some time.’

She smiled a polite smile. Her fingers unlaced and, for a moment, I thought she was going to reach out and place her hand on my shoulder. Instead, her hands dropped to her side and Mary walked past me, arms softly swaying, a confident take-leave without a hint of looking back.

I could not go straight home at the end of such a day. I lingered and lingered in my office, glimpsing out the window constantly, wondering if I would catch another sight of her. Mr. Anderson was also working late, possibly delaying his descent into domestic chaos, and our movements sounded out of the ever-quietening building. Across the way, the dimmed wards still threw out signs of life, darkness never truly resting there.

Eventually, Mr. Anderson came in to tell me he was locking up. Although I had a set of keys, I did not trust myself to be the final gatekeeper and followed him out through the large oak door.

Once we had said goodnight, I pretended to walk with a purpose towards my car though, in honesty, I could barely stand the thought of driving it. To be enclosed inside my head was enough, let alone further enclosed behind a steering wheel.

I kept walking, returning my keys to my handbag unconsciously and plunging on into the back streets. I did not have the best shoes on for such an undertaking – an old pair of T-strap sandals that were too small for me – and, too soon, I felt the ache in my ankles, the press of my heels into my cracked soles. I kept moving along the pavement, hardly registering what kind of houses I passed, hearing only the tinkle of a corner store bell after it was long gone, catching the gust of car fumes only after the vehicle itself was nowhere to be seen. A whirl around me of homes I would not enter, ground I had not tread upon, a constellation of thoughts that Fred would never share,

nor Mary ever hear. I would walk and they would not catch me, or catch me out. I would walk.

On the edge of Centennial Park I knew where it was I was going. I had avoided the place for long enough. From behind the park fence there came murmurs and laughter, from men who had forgotten their names and from women who never thought to ask. They seemed to be the only people out, if you could truly call it 'out' given they were so hidden away amongst the oleanders and thistles. It was too late now for the evening strollers with dogs and prams, all had retreated into their living rooms. The lamps, sporadically positioned along the streets, shot all their light up into the sky creating black patches of pavement that, at another time, I would have loathed to walk through. How had I been afraid of the dark, scared even of making my way to the outside bathroom? Now it seemed I should have always been out here, exiled.

I hurried along the un-lit pathways, heading on to Oxford Street, a street without anything of England about it. How badly labelled this city was, as if no one had put any care into it, refuting the importance of names. Didn't they know how much it defined you? Every syllable resonating. *Auntie Iris. Auntie Grace. Mr. John Roper. Peter Benjamin, Rock of the Church. Frederick Smith, Private. Mary, Mother of God.*

On Oxford Street were the people who did not have living room barricades with which to protect themselves. Cancers of men outside bars, reeling in the aftermath of their inebriation; prostitutes leaning against doorways, barely able to keep themselves upright; children sitting in the gutter staring at their blue feet. I caught only the impression of it, spreading out downwards from the corner, before I lowered my head, the brim of my hat, a shield to catch no-one's eye, to raise no-one's ire. I moved through the glow and, despite my precautions, the church crowd would have gasped in horror to see me passing by, flinching at the catcalls and jeers.

The slope made the journey easier and, though my ankles throbbed, there was still enough left in me for the final destination.

Hyde Park was also not empty, rustles told me that the bushes held dirty liaisons; the figs themselves held sleeping ibis whose wings shifted in the moonlight, the fountain in the distance still trickled on. At the reflection pool I stood and looked up at the edifice I had not visited since chasing Mary here. To my left the museum rose up in hardy sandstone, housing the ancient. It seemed to gaze with envy at the War Memorial, home of the lucky dead. A single fruit bat flew down and skimmed the surface of the pond, drinking while it could.

This was the kind of night Mary had stayed within when she ran away. Had she lain near the chill of the water, or been drawn, like I was, toward the stone of the Memorial's steps, still warm from the day's sun? Another bat – or perhaps the same one – swooped behind me. I tried to imagine it was just a dog taking its fill, not wanting to think of its leathery wings and the pig-like face Fred had once drawn my attention to.

At the top of the stairs, the Memorial stood open, its metal doors pulled back on either side. In the week leading up to the Great Day of commemoration, ANZAC day, the building remained accessible for all, in honour of the first vigil held down at the other cenotaph in Martin Place, when a widow was kept company by a group of veterans stumbling home from their own private drinks.

The Hall of Memory appeared empty. It was too dark to make out the stars in the dome above. Only the pattern cast by the eternal flame helped to give distinction to the various corners. The firelight did not touch the hole in the centre of the floor and it sat as a circle of blackness that I hesitated to go near. I trembled, although the air was not cold. I tried to think of waking up next to Fred and the heat I had felt from having him near. Already it seemed too long ago to be real, the woman I had been then cut by her

encounter with a young, unfathomable nurse. I continued to shiver and, wrapping my arms around myself, walked to the carved balustrade, lowering my head to stare into the Well of Contemplation, expecting only shadows, listening for the same old hiss.

The bronze sun surrounding the statue was alight. For a moment I thought there were people down there, burning torches at every side. For a moment I thought it was Mary's people. I blinked and saw it was the full moon hitting the polished gold with all its force, the light a trail that ran, I realised, along the reflection pool and up to this point, dropping down into the Well like a waterfall, a deliberate quirk that must have happened every month. For once, I was in the right place. In the cradle of this beauty the emaciated soldier was a burnt skeleton.

Here it was. I knew the lesson. I had held the darkness of Mary's skin next to mine and thought it would show me as white and pure. All it had done was expose the soul beneath, my lies spreading out like the flames on the floor below. Heaven lost.

I gulped in the gassy air but this could not save me from myself. The sobs came; I heard them, as if from far away, exploding into the silence. I folded my arms, trying to stop the pain in my side, struggling to control the weeping. God, how much it hurt. I had not let myself do this since . . . I could not remember a time when I had let myself do this. The tears fell down my face and I wondered if I would ever be able to stop them.

†

‘Where have you been?’ Fred asked. The flat smelt of lamb and rosemary.

There was a ready lie on my lips, one I had thought of during the drive home. I hadn’t walked all the way back to the hospital, preferring to hail a cab, the driver of which assumed I was visiting a sick friend and was subsequently silently respectful. My red eyes and sniffles perhaps hinted at something terminal that he clearly didn’t want to hear about.

I removed my hat and gloves without answering Fred, sat down and, for the first time, took off my shoes and stockings in front of him. The buckles of the sandal straps were stiff and, as I rolled the nylon down over my ankles, I saw that they had imprinted an ugly red cross into my skin. My toes were swelled and pulsing. I sat up to find Fred staring, his hands in his pockets, his upper body swaying slightly as if caught in a breeze.

‘You look beat,’ he said. ‘Let me run you a bath.’

I nodded in agreement and he left me. I went into the kitchen and took out the faintly charred lamb from the oven. Fred had already eaten his share. I cut a slice and placed it on a plate, then moved out to the balcony to sit at the wrought-iron table. It was past ten o’clock, later than I had ever had a meal in my life. The chewing felt unnatural, the echo of the sea an unlikely dinner partner.

Fred returned and sat down to smoke opposite me. The weight of his presence hung on me, even as I tried to muster gratitude for his acts of kindness. I had been so long alone that the smallest gestures of care unsettled me. After my day, perhaps I would have been happier to come back to solitude, to the probable collapse into further weeping. Perhaps I would always hold myself back.

He stubbed out his cigarette into the ashtray he had created.

I had barely managed to swallow three pieces of the lamb, the cold strings catching in my throat. ‘Fred,’ I began.

He lit up another cigarette, sticking the match on the side of the box with an experienced flick. I wanted to tell him everything.

‘Gracie?’ he answered and the use of my old name sent me back again, to that shining pit of light. I began to cry then and, without knowing all the moments or the movements, I was in Fred’s arms, held fast against his chest. He locked me tight against him and I disappeared into the bones of his shoulder. If there were stars above us, I didn’t know, only aware of his whispered reassurance.

‘I am here, I am here, I am here,’ he murmured over and over and, finally, I had to forget the time when he was not.

Fred’s pale torso rose and fell under my arm. He had fallen asleep almost immediately afterwards and I was left in the quiet of the ongoing night, his snores the closest they had ever been. His mouth gaped open beneath the moustache that had tingled my lips an hour before.

I pulled at my nightdress as discreetly as I could, trying to untangle the bunching above my waist. Fred claimed that I was as beautiful as ever but I suspected there were limits to such talk, that he would not want to see my varicose veins in the morning. I rolled onto my side and felt dampness run down my thigh.

May Thy Body, O Lord, which I have received, and Thy Blood which I have drunk cleave to mine inmost parts: and do Thou grant that no stain of sin remain in me.

I did not want those words yet there they were, reminding me of all that did not remain inside me, of the lost chance of Mary, of everything that I must regret.

Fred slept on. His dreams were not, as I had dreaded, of a paradise lost. His plea to me as he made his way to pleasure did not have any echo of *her*. He had gripped to me as if his life depended on it and shouted only ‘Gracie, Gracie, Gracie!’ reaching his height much sooner than I could. I had expected nothing more and wanted nothing more than his body beside me, flowing with the blood that had not been spilt on the battlefield, nor drained in a prisoner-of-war camp, the flesh that had received no medals of honour, had found no glory. The in and out of his breathing was enough.

†

Mary stood under the flame tree, her face in shadow. She was talking to another nurse. From the window I could only see the woman's back. In my arms I held a stack of closed files that Mr. Anderson had asked me to take down to the basement, finding myself transfixed by the ease of Mary's hand gestures, the confidence with which she was laughing with her fellow nurse, the strength of her black skin against her uniform. There was no hint of a whisper around her, the other staff stood in their own engrossing conversations. Her head turned at one point to acknowledge a passing doctor. She was one of them, then, and, from behind the glass, I knew her thoughts were not on me, that if I registered at all on her consciousness, I was a blurred figure, glimpsed from the corner of her eye.

I watched for a little longer, acutely aware that Mr. Anderson would return any minute and catch me neglecting my duties, again lacking the focused diligence he had hired me for.

'Are you all right, Mrs. Smith?' It was Mr. Anderson, reappearing at the moment I had predicted he would. I was about to turn to him when I saw that Mary had, indeed, seen me, her head turned up to my second floor. She raised her hand in greeting and I could not take my eyes off her. I left Mr. Anderson waiting behind me. The girl did not wave as such, only raised her palm and spread her fingers as if making a print in the air.

I raised my own hand, letting the fingertips rest lightly on the pane. In the time it took for the glass to lose its coldness, the girl's arm had already dropped back down to her side. She spoke to her friend – words that I could not interpret – and then spun away, walking the path to the South Wing.

'Mrs. Smith?'

Mr. Anderson still waited but I could not bring myself to address him. I had to follow her every last move, to witness her disappearance into the converted ballroom where she would dance to the tune of the dying, where she would help all others who needed her, where she would soothe and bathe and calm the ill. I had to see her go.

‘Mrs. Smith!’

I lowered my hand, resting it on the top folder of the files in the crook of my arm.

‘Yes, Mr. Anderson?’

‘Do you need something?’

‘Need something, Mr. Anderson?’

‘You seem ... distracted Mrs. Smith.’

‘Not at all.’

I turned towards him. The coloured spots on my vision from looking out at the light hung in front of his face for a moment before clearing away to reveal his forehead so furrowed that his brows were almost one long line of wiry hair. He was not concerned for me, simply for the work, the efficiency of every hour.

‘Do you know that girl?’ He gestured to the courtyard below, the wave encompassing any one of the still milling nurses.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘She’s just like a girl I once knew.’

‘Off to the basement then.’

Rarely did Mr. Anderson issue orders to me. To move from here, to abandon the spot on which the girl and I had joined hands, if only in the intangible firmament, was a hard punishment for a few days of less-than-perfect work in his service.

I turned back to the window, ignoring Mr. Anderson, closed my eyes and lowered my head. The branches of the flame tree silhouetted on the back of my eyelids,

like an x-ray, and for the first time in, I did not know how long, I said a prayer for someone else.

Credits

The content of Fred's wartime letters draws on material in *We Were There: Australian Soldiers of World War II Tell Their Stories* (Ed. John Barrett, Victoria: Penguin, 1987). Fred's poem on page 55 is adapted from David Gascoyne's 'De Profundis' in *Poetry of the World Wars* (Ed. Michael Foss, London: Michael O'Mara, 1990). Father Benjamin's Bible quotes on page 170 are from Luke 6:43-45. The song lyrics on pages 192-3 are from Frankie Vaughan's 'Garden of Eden', 1957 (copyright expired).