

NIGHTSWIMMING

Rebecca
James

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Rebecca James

Dedication

For Hilary

I

Prologue

She arrives home much later than she expected. She had to stop several times to take care of Josh, to feed and change him, to comfort him, and the drive from Sydney has taken almost ten hours. By the time she pulls into the driveway, she's exhausted. Her eyes are red and sore from driving and she is cold and hungry.

She feels like she's been gone forever, more than just a day and a half. She sits still for a moment, her hands on the wheel, and stares through the windscreen. She listens to Josh breathe in and out with the soothing, regular sound of sleep. It is good to be home. Good to know that soon she'll be in her own bed, with Brett beside her and Josh in his cot next to them. She is filled with relief. And she is suddenly certain, suddenly confident, that it was foolish to go. That she and Brett can be happy together. That they are, however imperfect, a family.

She puts her key in the lock and pushes open the door. It is dark inside. She closes the door quietly so she doesn't wake Josh, then stops in the hallway and breathes in the familiar smell of home. She waits until her eyes adjust to the dark, and when she can see again, she tiptoes upstairs to their bedroom.

She sees Claudia first, sound asleep, arms flung over her head, naked breasts exposed, her mouth slightly open. Sarah is momentarily confused and thinks for a second that she has somehow come to the wrong room, the wrong house.

She is about to turn when Brett raises his head sleepily. He smiles and begins to move his hand towards her in welcome. Then he glances down at Claudia and stops. The smile disappears from his face.

She clutches Josh close to her chest, turns around and walks away.

Brett

“Pregnant?”

Sarah nodded.

Brett pushed the sheet off, sat up and slid to the edge of the bed.

“What?” he said. “How? I mean...are you sure?”

“No. Not *sure*.” Sarah sat up too, pulling the sheet up to cover her breasts. “But I’m about ten days late and that’s weird. I’m never late. Not usually. And you remember that night after the party at Gilly’s? Down in the garden? We didn’t have any condoms, remember?”

“No.” He shook his head, thinking. A vague, alcohol-dulled memory started to surface.

“Remember? I was wearing that red dress. The one you love so much. And my black boots. We thought we’d be safe because it was just a few days after my period. But apparently...” She shrugged. “Well, I asked Gilly...and she said that sperm can live inside you for ages. For five or six days even.”

“Oh God. I remember now. But that was ages ago, wasn’t it?”

“Six weeks.”

He looked at her and made an effort to smile. Sarah’s hair was messy, her eyes dark, huge in her pale face. She held the sheet protectively over her naked breasts—a strangely modest gesture—which made her look very young, very vulnerable and he felt a sudden rush of tenderness for her. She looked so innocently expectant, so hopeful. He put his hand on her thigh and squeezed gently. “Do you want me to go to the chemist and buy a test?”

"If you want to." She shrugged. "But I think I know what the result will be. I'm more worried about you. About what you think. I mean it's not that bad, is it? You won't be unhappy, will you? If I really am pregnant?"

"God, Sarah. I don't know. Can't we just get the test first? Make sure it's real before we start to freak out?"

Sarah was quiet for a moment. She shook her head and spoke quietly, in a strange, flat voice. "Freak out? What a lovely way to put it. What a sweet way to receive the news that you might be having a child." She blinked rapidly and looked as if she was about to cry.

"Sorry." Brett pressed his hands to his eyes and shook his head. "Shit. I'm really sorry. I'm just... I'm just shocked, I guess. It'll be cool, I'm sure, once I can get my head around the whole idea. I just really wasn't expecting this."

"Nor was I, Brett. It wasn't exactly planned, was it? But I thought you might be happy anyway. Excited even." She sighed. "I am. Well, I *was*. I would be if you didn't look so bloody miserable."

Brett stood and picked up his shirt and jeans, the clothes that he'd tossed on the floor, so carelessly, so happily oblivious, less than an hour before. "Sarah. Don't cry. Please don't. I'll just run down to the chemist and get a test. Okay? There's no point talking about it until we know for sure." He waited in the doorway. "Sarah? Okay?"

He went outside, relieved to escape the suddenly oppressive atmosphere of the flat, and jogged quickly down the three flights of stairs to the ground floor. It was cold outside, raining lightly, and he could smell the wet road, the cloying tar-sweet smell of wet city. He crossed the street and started the long walk up the hill to the late-night chemist. He trudged slowly, his limbs stiff and slow, weary with the shock of this unwelcome news.

Pregnant. A baby.

He didn't want a baby.

He'd never understood what other people found so appealing about babies and young children. He'd always found them quite disagreeable,

their funny, wrinkled, red faces, their unseeing eyes, and later, when they got older, their snotty noses and incessant whining. And when he thought of all the negative aspects of having one—the complete loss of freedom, the burden of always putting another human being’s welfare before your own, the shit, the vomit, the tantrums, the lack of sleep, the enormous financial cost—he couldn’t understand why any sane person would do it voluntarily. He just couldn’t fathom why any reasonably intelligent person would sacrifice a potentially rich and fulfilling life, the freedom of being able to do whatever you pleased, whenever you wanted, for the sake of a child.

He loved Sarah, at least he thought he did, but he’d always imagined—though the thought was vague, only half-formed—that they’d eventually break up. And although they lived together quite happily and had done so for almost two years now, he didn’t think of his life with Sarah as a permanent, forever kind of thing. He thought of their affair as a sort of training ground, an interim relationship while they both waited for the real thing. He’d never thought that this was *it*, that Sarah would be the last woman he ever lived with. He’d never thought of her as the great love of his life.

Deep down, he knew that he was meant to be with someone else, someone he loved even more.

His mother’s relationship with his stepfather, Grahame, had been so passionate, so tempestuous and exciting. They’d been so in love that, whenever they could, they’d spend their time alone together, touching and kissing and giggling like teenagers. Admittedly, it hadn’t been all that wonderful living with them as a child, because they’d barely had time for him. Not that they’d ever been unkind, they’d never refused him anything he wanted, but he’d always felt a bit invisible, and often wondered if they’d even notice if he disappeared.

But he’d always admired their obvious passion for one another. There was a feeling that you got when you were around them, a sense that they were more than enough for each other, that they didn’t need anyone else. Other people were somehow unnecessary, superfluous.

That didn't mean they never fought—they fought often and vehemently. But they always made up. And when they were making up, their embraces, their declarations of love were all the more fervent.

He remembered weekends when he was a kid, they would always start drinking early, straight after lunch. Sometimes they fought—drunk and irrational, screaming and yelling about complicated, adult things, things that Brett didn't understand. It would be over something one of them had said or done the previous night at dinner with some friends or relations. Their voices would get louder and louder until finally, inevitably, his mother started crying.

Then the fighting would stop. Grahame's voice would become deeper, soothing. He would reach for Brett's mother and try to embrace her. She would pull away. He would reach for her again and again until the game had gone for long enough and she could give in and collapse into his arms. They would take another bottle of wine, some more beer, and disappear into their bedroom for the rest of the day.

Brett would play quietly in the lounge room with his model airplanes or watch the afternoon Disney movie. Every so often, he would hear the clink of glass, or a sudden outburst of laughter, a muffled giggle, from behind the closed door.

He'd learned how to prepare his own dinner. Simple things. Baked beans on toast or grilled cheese and tomato sandwiches. He had felt mature, responsible. As if he were much older and more capable. It was his job to ensure that they were left alone, that there were no interruptions.

When the phone rang, he would say they were out. If the caller seemed surprised that he had been left alone, he would say they had only gone to the corner shop and that they'd be back in a second.

He had felt, on those afternoons, that he was a necessary part of their game, a key element in its successful performance. He was a guard, a sentinel of their love.

His relationship with Sarah was much less passionate. They didn't really fight—not like his mother and stepfather had—so there was none

of the resulting excitement, the inevitable highs and lows that came with a more tempestuous, volatile relationship. Instead of excitement and passion, he and Sarah lived together with a comfortable ease. A slightly dull, domestic content. She no longer made his heart beat faster, there was none of the ardour that had seemed to fuel his mother's second marriage. Sarah was so easygoing and relaxed that she was difficult to fight with. She was the opposite of his mother. She was soft where his mother was hard. Quiet and calm where his mother was loud and eternally restless.

"Can I help you?"

He was startled by the voice of the girl in the chemist shop.

"Oh. Um. Pregnancy tests?"

The girl directed him to another aisle. "Now, these ones are early detection tests, so they cost a bit more. These ones underneath are a bit cheaper, but probably not quite so good if it's really early and..."

"Thanks," he interrupted. "I'll just read the boxes. I'll be fine. Thanks."

He picked up one of the boxes and started reading it vaguely, barely comprehending the words. He thought about his mother and how disappointed she'd be if Sarah was pregnant. Ever since he was an adolescent, she had lectured him on the importance of contraception.

Brett, she would say, I don't want to be indiscreet, darling. But I can't remind you enough that the only way you can be safe is to take control of the contraception yourself. Never, never leave it up to the girl, darling. Never.

He would nod, roll his eyes and try to change the subject.

Girls have biological urges to make babies. It's not really their fault, poor things. But you mustn't forget this. Basically, darling, they cannot be trusted. The only way you can avoid a mistake is to take care of it yourself. She would tap the table for emphasis. *Always. Each and every time. Never believe a girl when she says it'll be okay.* She would grab his arm, her red-painted fingernails digging into his skin. *Otherwise you'll*

end up trapped, darling. Trapped. With some awful tart and a screeching infant. Your life ruined.

He picked up another test. This one could detect a pregnancy on the day the woman's period was due. He took it to the counter and paid.

Perhaps Sarah had done this deliberately. Maybe his mother was right about women and Sarah had secretly wanted a baby all along. Just because he'd always assumed that their relationship would eventually fizzle out, that one of them would meet someone new and move on, didn't mean that Sarah felt the same. In fact, it was pretty clear that he'd been quite wrong on that count. She *didn't* feel the same. She obviously wanted the baby, if there was one, and she wanted him to want it too.

And all this because they'd had a few too many drinks at a party.

A stupid mistake.

When he got back to the flat, Sarah was waiting, dressed in her pyjamas. She'd obviously showered because her hair was wet and combed back from her forehead. She looked even younger like that, her face shiny-clean, her body hidden in baggy pyjamas. She was thirty-three, two years older than him, but sometimes she could pass for a twenty year old.

"Do you want to do it now?" he asked.

"Yes. I've been holding on. I'm busting."

She didn't look directly at him but her eyes were red and he could tell that she'd been crying. He reached out to her.

"I'm sorry if I upset you, I didn't mean to. It's all just a bit of a shock."

"I know." She looked at him and shrugged, ignoring his outstretched hand. "I don't know what I expected, really. But I think I know what the test is going to say."

She walked into the bathroom and closed the door. Brett went to the kitchen, got himself a bottle of beer and poured a glass of wine for Sarah. He returned to the lounge room to wait. After a few minutes, she walked out of the bathroom, handed him the test and pointed to one of two little square windows.

“That’s the control line,” she said. “When that goes pink, the test is done. If a second line appears in the other window, the test is positive. If not, it’s negative.”

She picked up her wine glass and sat on the other chair, watching him.

He stared down at the test. The dampness was moving rapidly up the length of the stick. The control line appeared quickly and he stared at the other window. A faint pink line started to form. It grew darker. More definite. Positive.

He looked at Sarah and forced a smile. “Well. You’re right.”

She nodded and looked down. She stared at the arm of her chair and began pulling at the loose threads, her hands moving quickly, nervously. He knew that she was waiting for him, expecting and hoping that he would be overcome with excitement, that he would pick her up and swing her around the room in a dance of joy, perhaps even ask her to marry him.

But he couldn’t. The sense of disappointment and unhappiness was too overwhelming. A baby wasn’t a part of his life plan. This pregnancy was just the calamitous result of a drunken episode of lovemaking, a moment’s carelessness. He didn’t want to hurt Sarah, he would have liked to give her what she wanted—he wished he *could* be happy, for her sake. But he felt as if his future, which had looked so full of promise and opportunity only an hour before, had been stolen from him without warning and switched with a bleak and miserable one instead. A future full of tedium, responsibility and endless work. He couldn’t pretend to be happy when he was on the verge of tears. When his chest hurt with dread and his stomach churned with anxiety. He couldn’t pretend to be happy when what he really wanted was to flee, to pack his bags and run.

Sarah

Sarah knew Brett would find the question irritating, that he would just want to switch off after work, read the paper or watch television, but he hadn't mentioned the pregnancy once since she'd first told him about it. It had been almost two weeks now. It was both insulting and unbelievable that he clearly preferred not to acknowledge it and with each passing day she grew more resentful, more furious. She couldn't wait for him to *get his head around the whole idea* any longer. They had to talk about it. She coughed softly to get his attention

"So," she said. "Have you thought about it any more?"

He kept his eyes on the newspaper. "About what?"

"The pregnancy, Brett. Our baby...the fact that you're going to be a father." She struggled to control her temper, to avoid becoming sarcastic.

"No, not really. But nothing's really changed. It's still a shock."

"Yeah? And?"

"And *what?*" He looked up, irritated.

"You're shocked. So am I. Shouldn't we talk about it?"

"We've got nine months for that." He shrugged and looked back down at the paper. "Heaps of time."

Sarah stared at him. She often felt stung by his ability to remain so detached, at the indifference he could sometimes show towards her. She wondered whether it was some kind of defensive reaction, a way of hiding his own feelings, of avoiding some kind of spilling-out of emotions that, for some reason, he found frightening or undignified. Or whether it was simply that he really *was* as uninterested and as detached as he sometimes seemed.

She picked up the plates and took them to the sink. She could feel her mouth tightening, her lips turning down with the effort of not crying.

She filled the sink with hot soapy water and started on the dishes. The water was too hot for comfort, but the sting of it was a welcome distraction. She washed the plates quickly, dipping them under the surface of the water briefly to wet them, wiping them over with the sponge, and dipping again to rinse. Her fingers became red with the heat. When she finished, she turned to face Brett.

"Well, *I'm* happy about it." She swallowed, trying to control the emotion in her voice. "I want this baby. And I think we'll be good parents."

"Of course we will."

She watched him look down at the paper and turn another page. Everything about him, the way he kept his head bent down to read, the tense set of his shoulders, his exaggerated fascination with the paper, told her that he wanted the conversation to end, that pursuing it would be futile. But she felt as if she'd been avoiding a fight since the day she told him she was pregnant. "Is that *it*? Is that all you can say?" She slapped the counter so that he looked up. "Brett...*please*...can't you show even the slightest bit of interest?"

"I don't know, Sarah...I don't know...I'm sorry."

"Sorry what? Sorry you can't show any interest? Or sorry you don't know?" She could hear her voice getting louder, more high-pitched. "Sorry what? Why the hell are you *sorry*?"

"Jesus." He clenched his teeth. "Fuck." He folded the paper, stood up and pushed his chair beneath the table roughly, so that it scraped along the floor. "I'm sorry you're getting so upset. That's why I'm sorry. And I'm sorry you just can't accept the fact that I'm not over the moon about it."

"I *can* accept it. I don't exactly have a choice, do I? But we still need to talk. I'm not exactly expecting or asking you to be enthusiastic about it. God, no. I know that would be asking too much. But you should at least be interested. I mean it's your life too, Brett. This affects everything, it changes everything. We can't just go on ignoring it for the next seven

months...pretend it's not happening...we need to talk about it...and soon."

"We will. Just let me get used to it...let me get my head around the whole idea."

"God, Brett. You should hear yourself. *Let me get my head around the whole idea?* If you use that stupid fucking phrase again I'm going to scream. You make pregnancy sound like a terminal disease."

Brett walked to the doorway and paused. Then he turned back to face her and leant against the door frame. He smiled tentatively, spoke gently. "That's why I don't want to talk about it. Whatever I say is just going to disappoint you."

"But why? Why does a baby have to be such a bad thing?"

"It's *not*." He shook his head. "It won't be. Just give me some time. Okay?"

"Okay." Sarah smiled back, making a real effort to make it look genuine. She suddenly wanted the conversation to end. It wasn't a good time for a serious conversation anyway—she was tired, irritable and was finding it difficult to keep her cool. She also felt quite nauseous and emotional and would be unable to stop herself from bursting into tears if Brett became sympathetic now.

Brett was so obviously desperate to end the conversation that he was happy to accept her smile as the real thing. He smiled back, clearly relieved, and turned into the hallway.

"I'm just going to take a bath," he said.

When she finished cleaning, she boiled the kettle and made herself a cup of tea. She didn't usually drink tea in the evening, the caffeine kept her from sleeping, but since she'd been pregnant she'd been so tired that nothing could keep her awake. Each night, as soon as her head hit the pillow, she fell immediately into a deep, dreamless sleep, as easily as if she'd taken a sleeping pill.

She took her cup into their bedroom and sat on their bed, a pile of pillows behind her back for comfort.

Brett's attitude, his unhappiness about the baby, just confirmed her worst suspicions. Deep down she knew, or was pretty sure she knew, why Brett was so miserable. He didn't love her enough. He simply didn't love her as much as she loved him.

She was certain about their relationship and she had been since the night they met. She thought they were perfect for each other. She believed that he was her soulmate, and unlike Brett, she'd known, very quickly in their relationship, that he was the one for her. That Brett was the man she'd like to spend the rest of her life with.

And she also knew that she was the right woman for Brett. Whether he realized it or not, she knew that she could make him happy. She *did* make him happy. They had a loving, fun relationship and got on far better than most of the other couples they knew. They understood each other, they were compatible—both physically and emotionally.

But Brett had a distorted idea of what constituted a good relationship. He viewed the relationship between his mother, Helen, and his stepfather, Grahame, as some kind of ideal—a yardstick against which to measure the quality of his own relationships. When he told Sarah stories about Helen and Grahame—their wild lovemaking, their vicious fights, their narcissistic and selfish behaviour—it was obvious to Sarah that their marriage had in fact been quite destructive. An overly dependent, possessive, manipulative and fundamentally abusive one that only survived, paradoxically, because of and in spite of Helen and Grahame's mutual dependence on alcohol.

And yet Brett was completely oblivious to the true nature of their marriage. In fact, he admired them and thought of their relationship as one of true passion and love, as something to aspire to.

Sarah finished her tea, which was sweet and milky and delicious, put her cup on the bedside table and shifted lower in the bed. She sighed and stared up at the ceiling. It was pressed metal, ornately decorated with patterns of leaves and flowers. She and Brett had tried to count the leaves several times while lying in bed together. But they always lost count, always got confused.

Sarah loved the flat. It was old but had huge windows that faced north and let in the winter sunshine. Best of all, it was right near Bondi Beach and only three flights above all the cafes and restaurants. It was her favourite part of Sydney. She loved its vibrancy and its energy. She loved to be among the crowds of people who buzzed through on a Saturday night.

And on Sunday mornings, it felt completely different. Everyone looked a little subdued, more relaxed, and the vibe was a lot calmer. There was a cosy sense of community among the people who lived and worked there. If Brett and Sarah both had the day off, they would wake late and then walk to one of the local cafes for breakfast. They'd hold hands and stroll slowly, looking into shop windows, commenting on the different clothes people were wearing. They'd eventually choose a café to eat in, settle down, and read the paper over bacon and eggs and numerous cups of coffee.

They'd lived there for almost two years. And they were, without a doubt, two of the happiest years of Sarah's life.

She first met Brett at Gillian's thirtieth birthday party. Gilly stood beside her and whispered, "There's that bloke I was telling you about. Brett." Gillian lifted her chin in the direction of two men who were leaning against the wall drinking beer. "He's the taller one with the dark hair."

The man was handsome and dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt. He had a pleasantly cheerful-looking face.

"He's a spunk, isn't he?" Gillian spoke in the voice of a teenager.

Sarah grinned. "He is actually. Quite the babe."

"Why don't you go over and introduce yourself? Ask him out for dinner or something?"

Sarah looked at him again. "I can't, Gilly. No way. I'm just not that forward. What if he said no? I'd die of embarrassment." She laughed. "Anyway, he looks like a surfer."

Gillian nodded. "He is. But he's not stupid or anything. He's a nurse. Works in rehab."

"Where?"

"Royal North Shore, I think. But don't ask me, ask him." Gillian put her hand on Sarah's back and pressed firmly, as if trying to push her towards him.

Sarah slapped her hand away. "No, Gilly. Don't. I can't."

"You said you wanted to meet a nice bloke. Sometimes you just have to be bold, woman."

"It's okay for you. Women are less intimidating."

Gillian rolled her eyes. "That's only because you're not attracted to them, you idiot. They intimidate me."

"Oh. Well, I'm a gutless wimp, then."

"You are."

Sarah looked at him again. "He *is* handsome." She grinned. "Maybe you can introduce us, later." She linked her arm through Gillian's. "Just let me have a few more drinks first."

But in the end Gillian didn't have to introduce them. Sarah found herself standing next to Brett later in the night. One of the guests at Gillian's party, Robert Koffman, was arguing loudly with a petite, embarrassed-looking blonde woman about the value of the single mother's pension.

"That's bullshit," Robert said, his face flushed from alcohol, his tone belligerent. "Why the fuck should we support people who can't control their own fertility? You can get condoms for free, by the handful, from family bloody planning."

"That's hardly the point," the blonde woman said quietly. "And what would you have us do? If we don't help these women, it is ultimately the children who suffer, and really, as a community..."

"As a community," the man imitated her nastily. "Blah fucking blah. You bleeding-heart types always talk like that. Fuck the *community*, babe. This is capitalism. This is the era of individualism. It's dog eat

fucking dog out there. Survival of the fittest, babe. You ever heard of Charles Darwin? Get with the fucking programme, I say, or get the fuck out of the way.”

The woman stared at the man, her mouth open in shocked disbelief. Blotches of colour appeared on her neck and cheeks and she shook her head rapidly as if she'd been contaminated.

Most people who had heard the exchange were sniggering at the man's malevolent conservatism, others were shaking their head and looking offended.

Brett looked at Sarah and rolled his eyes. He grinned and held out a packet of cigarettes.

“Want to join me outside? It's starting to get a bit heavy in here,” he said.

Sarah was so surprised at the invitation, and so secretly delighted, that she said yes before she remembered that she didn't smoke.

He took her hand and dragged her from the apartment. Once they were outside, he lit two cigarettes at once, dragged deeply on both of them and handed one to Sarah.

Sarah put the cigarette into her mouth and sucked on it tentatively. The initial taste made her grimace and when the smoke reached her lungs she put her hand over her mouth and suppressed a violent cough.

“You don't smoke.” He smiled.

“Not really.” She looked at him apologetically and hoped she wouldn't blush. “I've had about two in my life.”

Brett took the cigarette from her hand and ground it out with his boot. “Well, don't have it. If you're not used to it, the nicotine can make you nauseous.”

He dragged on his cigarette and smiled through the smoke. “So why did you ask me for one?”

“I thought I'd take it up. You make it look so enjoyable.”

He flicked his cigarette into the bushes and stood up, then reached out his hand. “Come on. I'll show you something cool.”

They walked down Campbell Parade towards Bondi Beach. Sarah felt pleasantly drunk and relaxed enough to enjoy holding hands with a man she barely knew.

Brett stared straight ahead, straining to see the beach. A small smile of anticipation bent the corners of his mouth up. He looked so eager, so impatient to get there, that Sarah couldn't help but feel excited too.

She tugged on his hand. "Hey."

He looked at her and grinned suddenly, a little startled, as if he'd actually forgotten she was there. He had perfect teeth and brown eyes. A sprinkling of freckles across his tanned face. He squeezed her hand tighter and walked faster, pulling her along. "Look. They're huge." He pointed towards the beach.

She strained to see but wasn't tall enough. "I can't see."

He walked even faster, dragging her, so that she had to skip every few steps to keep up. "Hurry. It's getting dark."

"Wait." Sarah bent down and slipped off her sandals. They had heels and were making it hard for her to keep up. She held his hand and started running. They turned onto the grassy slope between the beach and the road and slowed to a walk. Brett looked at her expectantly, watching for her reaction.

"Wow," she panted, breathing quickly.

"Magnificent, isn't it?"

The waves were enormous. The water was grey, opaque, and with perfect regularity, each small swell grew larger and larger until it peaked, massive and frightening, and then collapsed furiously onto the shore in a booming explosion of foam and water. They walked quickly onto the beach. Brett pulled her down until they were sitting, side by side, in the sand.

Sarah could smell the salt spray, taste it in the air.

"King tide," Brett shouted. The noise of the waves was deafening.

Sarah nodded in response. She suddenly felt shy. The effect of the alcohol had worn off a little and she felt too self-conscious to shout.

Brett leant back on his elbows and stared at the beach, a happy smile on his lips. He looked at her and said something, but it was so noisy she couldn't hear him.

Sarah covered her ears with her hands, grimaced and shook her head.

He smiled and began to mime eating and drinking with his hands. He pointed to a small restaurant across the road and then offered her his hand and raised his eyebrows.

She nodded and put her hand in his. They stood up and crossed the road.

The restaurant was quiet and dark inside. It was lit only by candles and had a hushed atmosphere of cosy intimacy. Sarah and Brett chose a private table in the corner. Sarah ordered a glass of wine and Brett a glass of beer. They both chose pasta and it arrived quickly, coated generously with parmesan cheese, bacon and pepper. It smelt wonderful and Sarah realised that she was starving.

"I've met you before." Brett picked up his fork, put some pasta in his mouth and washed it down with a large gulp of beer. "At that restaurant. The Frog."

Sarah laughed. "Tadpole." She nodded. "I work there. With Gillian."

He turned and lifted his arm, waved to get the waiter's attention, and turned back to face her. "You manage it, don't you?"

"Yes."

The waiter approached their table.

"Do you want some more wine? A bottle this time?" Brett asked.

Sarah nodded and opened the wine list. She pointed to a wine she liked. "This one?"

He shook his head. "I don't want any. I'll just stick to beer if that's okay."

She put down the list. "I can't have a whole bottle."

"Why not? Are you working tomorrow?"

"No."

“Neither am I.” He smiled and put his hand on Sarah’s. “Order it and we’ll stay until you finish. We can take as long as we want.” The way he was looking at her, the way his hand, warm and dry and large, covered hers, made her body feel suddenly weak and her breath come in short, quick gasps. She felt her heart beating faster, felt her cheeks flushing warm. She wanted to hide her face, to laugh with happiness and excited anticipation of the night ahead. The way he looked at her, the way he touched her—it was a both a question and a promise. *Let’s get drunk and see where this takes us. I will if you will, I want to if you want to. How about it?*

This man was gorgeous, everything she wanted. Intelligent and educated, without being too serious or conceited, good-looking enough to turn most female heads without being at all aware of it. Funny. Gentle. Self assured.

And she wanted the alcohol. She wanted the sense of confidence and carelessness that it would give her.

“Okay.” She showed the waiter the wine list and pointed. “I’ll have a bottle of this, please.”

“Shhhh.” Sarah giggled and put her index finger to her lips. “Gillian’s asleep.”

“No, I’m not.” Gillian suddenly appeared in the bathroom door. She had her pyjamas on and was cleaning makeup from her eyes with a cotton bud. “Where have you two defectors been?”

“We went down to the beach.”

“And then to a restaurant for some food.”

Gillian shrugged and turned back into the bathroom. “Well, it ended up being a really good party.” She continued cleaning her face in the mirror. “We played that game...you know...where you have to find adjectives to describe other people’s personalities?” She laughed. “Johno said I was noble and Beth said I was scary.”

“Oh. I love that game. But scary?” Sarah chuckled. “What did she mean?”

Gillian made a claw-like shape with her hand. “I don’t know.” She shrugged. “But the worst one was Ralph, that weird guy, he described me as vintage.”

“Well, I guess you are about twenty years older than him,” Sarah said. “He’s only just turned twenty-one.” She looked at Brett. “Last time we played, someone said I was still.”

“Still?”

Gillian walked back to the bathroom door and flicked the light off. “Yes, still. As in not moving. And it’s true.” She put a hand on Sarah’s shoulder and squeezed in surreptitious encouragement. She kissed her on the cheek. “Sarah is blessed with an admirable lack of restlessness. She is never bored. She is amazingly content.”

Sarah laughed and rolled her eyes. She felt mildly embarrassed.

“Gilly?” a woman’s voice called from Gillian’s room.

Sarah nudged Gillian with her elbow. “Who’s that?” she whispered.

“Frances.”

“Frances? Is she...?”

“Apparently.” Gillian shrugged. She smiled happily. “Nighty-night. children. Be good.” She walked into her bedroom and waved cheekily before closing the door.

Brett looked at Sarah and smiled. Then he reached out for her hand, picked it up with both of his and massaged the back of it with his thumbs. “How do you feel?”

“Pretty drunk.”

“Me too.” He put his hands on her waist and pulled her to him. Then he kissed her on the mouth, gently, and with his lips closed. He smelt good. A masculine mix of cigarette smoke and alcohol and a very faint hint of aftershave. He sighed. “I’d better go. We’re both pissed.”

“No. I want you to stay. We can sleep together.”

He leant back and looked at her quizzically.

“I mean sleep-sleep.” She giggled. “As in snore-sleep.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Sarah nodded and kissed him lightly on the mouth. Then she led him to her bedroom. She grabbed her dressing gown from a hook on the door and kissed him again. “I’m just going to have a quick shower.” She smiled and went to the bathroom.

She took her clothes off, stood in front of the bathroom mirror and looked at her body critically. She was pale, her skin smooth and evenly toned, the triangle of her pubic hair dark in a dramatic contrast. She’d been told before, by earlier lovers, that she looked better naked than she did with clothes on. Being short and quite voluptuous—nipped in waist, rounded hips, big breasts—she could sometimes look a bit swamped by clothes, a bit matronly even. Lots of fashions were designed to flatter a different body type—a taller, leaner shape—and on Sarah they looked wrong. But she looked quite beautiful naked. Rounded and soft, perfectly balanced.

She stepped closer to the mirror and looked at her face. It was pale from all the alcohol and the late night. Her dark, almost black hair was wind-blown, messy, and her mascara had smudged a little under her eyes. It made them look very dark, very deep-set.

She was pleased. She looked mysterious. Exotic.

Most people thought of Sarah as a very sensible person, a good girl and her friends often described her as being safe and reliable. And although she knew that they meant to be kind, that they meant to flatter, she hated being described that way. It made her feel boring.

So she was glad that she looked a bit wild tonight. And she was excited to be sleeping with a man she barely knew, to be taking a chance.

Sarah woke early. Brett was still asleep, his back towards her. She put her hand, palm down, against his skin and ran it down the groove of

his spine. His shoulders were broad, very tanned. And in a spot on one of his shoulders, the skin was flaky, peeling, damaged from too much sun.

She got out of bed and walked to the kitchen. She made two mugs of instant coffee and took them back to the bedroom.

“Hey.” She stood above him. He didn’t stir. She put the mugs down on the bedside table and crouched down next to him. She kissed him gently on the cheek. “Brett.”

He opened his eyes and blinked, startled, then leant his head against his elbow. Sarah smiled warmly and put her hand over his. But he stared back, his face blank and unsmiling, and moved his hand away to run it through his hair.

She felt suddenly uncomfortable. She felt stupid crouched down on the floor so close to him. His coldness made it seem presumptuous and overly intimate. It occurred to Sarah that he must regret having stayed the night, that he’d only stayed because he was drunk. She stood up and took her mug, sat on the end of the bed and spoke quietly. “I made you a coffee.”

He stretched his arm out and picked up the mug. He sipped on it and sighed. “Thanks.”

“What are you doing today?” she asked.

He shrugged noncommittally and kept his eyes down.

They were silent. The only noise the blowing on and sipping of coffee. Sarah felt keenly aware of her own discomfort and embarrassment. She actually felt like she was in his bedroom, not her own, and was unsure of her welcome.

She stood up, determined not to be pathetic, not to let him upset her, and went to the wardrobe. She started pulling out clothes.

“Hey. What are you doing?” His voice was suddenly warm and affectionate.

She turned to faced him and held up her clothes. She didn’t smile. “What does it look like?”

“Come here first.” He patted the bed.

She sat down and looked at him. He leant towards her and kissed her on the lips. "Sorry if I looked grumpy before. I'm not a good morning person."

"Do you regret being here?"

"How could I?" He pushed her hair from her eyes and lifted her chin. "You're so beautiful."

She felt such a rush of happy relief that she started to laugh.

Brett stared at her and smiled. Then he put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her gently backwards until she was lying on her back across the bed. He knelt above her and put his fingers on his lips. "Shhh."

She stopped laughing.

He parted the top of her dressing gown, uncovering her breasts. The air felt cold and she felt her nipples pucker and rise.

He looked down at her breasts. As he stared, his eyes, his whole face seemed to light up with an expression of intense delight. He looked like a child holding a Christmas present, anticipating the pleasure of opening it.

He touched her nipple gently, with just his fingertip, then bent forward and took it in his mouth. He sucked on it, very softly, barely closing his lips around her breast, then sat back up. She'd barely had time to feel the soft warmth of his mouth but it was enough to make her want more. She couldn't believe that such a quick, light act could feel so wonderful.

He frowned then, as if uncertain. She closed her eyes and sighed, very softly, urging him to continue.

He untied the cord at the front of her gown and pushed it open so that her entire naked body was exposed.

He put his hand on the outside of her thigh and ran his fingertips up the length of her body. He stopped by the side of her breast and let his thumb linger briefly on her nipple. She started to tremble, to breathe shallowly. She lifted her hand towards his face but he caught it and put it firmly back down by her side. "Don't move," he whispered.

Slowly, he stroked his hand up between her legs. She felt herself growing wet, aching to be touched. With his fingertips he teased her clitoris, barely touching it, and then he pressed the heel of his hand into her pelvic bone, cupping her firmly. She lifted her pelvis and arched her back to meet him. Pressed herself against him.

He moved his head up the length of her body, kissing her, until their eyes were level. He smiled. "Hello."

"Can I move now?"

"Yes."

She reached up and pulled him to her.

* * *

They moved in together less than six months later.

They didn't have much furniture between them and it only took a few trips until they were finished. Getting the sofa and the bed up the stairs was the only difficult bit. Both were too heavy for Sarah to lift and manoeuvre around the staircase, so they sat on the sofa at the bottom of the stairs and watched people walking past. They shared a beer and Brett had a cigarette. Eventually one of the neighbours offered to help and, between the three of them, they finally managed to get the furniture upstairs.

After they were finished they sat in the mess of the new flat and drank beer. The neighbour stayed so long that Sarah became impatient. She wanted to be alone with Brett. She wanted to decide where to put their things, where to hang their pictures. Mark the territory as their own and celebrate the merging of their lives.

When he left, it was after nine. As soon as they shut the door behind him, Brett and Sarah lunged towards each other desperately. They kissed. Brett pulled his T-shirt off and put his hand down her underpants. They had clumsy, drunken sex on the lounge.

Afterwards, they laughed and laughed at the neighbour's lack of sensitivity, at his boring conversation.

"I hope he doesn't expect us to hang out with him," Sarah said.

Brett shrugged. "He's not that bad."

"Oh, come *on*." She stood up and put her hands on her hips, mimicking the neighbour's slow speech, his deep voice. "I hope your good woman doesn't mind if I partake of a cigarette?" She snorted. "*Good woman?*"

Brett laughed. He put his hands on her hips and pulled her towards him, pushed his face into her stomach. He bit her gently and looked up. "So, you're not a good woman then?"

She put her hands in his hair. "I most certainly am not."

"Shit. I fucked up then, didn't I?"

She moved away and walked around the lounge room. She ran her fingers along the roughness of the wall. It was painted in a textured pastel-green paint that left the surface bumpy. In places, the green paint had started to peel and flake off and beneath it an old mustard-yellow colour was visible. A sickly shade of yellow that reminded Sarah of tobacco stains. She hadn't noticed it before, but there were patches of it everywhere. Whoever had painted the walls had done it quickly, without preparing properly.

She went to their collection of pictures, which were stacked up on the floor. She wanted to try to hide some of the yellow patches. "Hey, Brett, let's put these up." She picked one of her favourites, a framed Joy Hester print, and held it against the wall. "What about this one here. What do you think?"

"Yeah." Brett nodded. "Good."

"Oh, come on. You're not even looking."

"I'm tired. Let's do it tomorrow."

"But you're working tomorrow."

"Well, you can do it while I'm at work." He yawned. "I'm exhausted. I'm going to bed. You coming?"

"Soon." She was disappointed. "I'm not really tired yet. I'm too excited."

“Okay.” Brett put his hand on her behind and squeezed affectionately. “Goodnight.” He stumbled off to sleep on the unmade mattress on the floor.

* * *

Now, Sarah rolled onto her side and closed her eyes as a wave of nausea rolled up from her stomach. It was funny that this was called morning sickness. It was actually all-day sickness, and for Sarah it became worse at night. She put her hand over her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut tighter in an attempt to block out all sensation. She tried to visualise pleasant things, beautiful places. A book she’d read suggested that it might help. She tried to imagine herself walking along the beach at dawn, with the sun rising in the background, but found it hard to concentrate.

She couldn’t stop thinking of Brett and how, unlike previous relationships, the longer she lived with him and the better she knew him, the more certain she became that she wanted to be with him. She preferred his company to anyone else’s in the entire world and she cared deeply that he thought well of her. She wished desperately that he was happier, but she also knew, whether he was happy about it or not, that she was going to have this baby.

She wondered what Brett really thought about the pregnancy. Perhaps he thought she had done it intentionally. She hadn’t, but then she hadn’t been overly cautious either. Neither had he. He was pretty casual about using condoms and if they ever started without one, which they sometimes did, it was always Sarah who convinced him to stop and put one on. He would always prefer, in the heat of the moment, not to wear one at all.

But he had been so shocked the night she’d told him. He’d seemed stunned. Horrified. As if the possibility of having a baby had never even crossed his mind.

She'd always believed that Brett would eventually come to realize how much he really did love her and when she'd first realized that she was pregnant, she'd been naively certain that this pregnancy might be just the thing to make that happen. Stupidly, she'd hoped that he might even be excited, that he might welcome the idea of a baby as a natural extension of their love for each other, as the logical next step in their relationship. Or, at the very least, that he would accept it as the obvious and expected result of frequent sex, and a slack attitude towards contraception.

When she'd realised the truth, that he actually saw it as some kind of catastrophe, she'd felt humiliated and betrayed. Harsh words ran through her head as she looked at him, as she began to understand the true extent of his unhappiness.

What the fuck did you think would happen? How dare you look at me like that! We take risks all the time. If the idea alarms you so much, why didn't you take more care? Why didn't you wear a fucking condom?

But she'd held her tongue.

She wondered if Brett would secretly prefer it if she had an abortion. Neither of them had mentioned it and, to be honest, Sarah really wanted to avoid any such discussion. She already knew that she wouldn't have one, and if that was what Brett wanted she would have to leave and have the baby on her own.

She'd already had one abortion. She'd become pregnant in her early twenties after a drunken one-night stand. She hadn't realized she was pregnant immediately and then she'd taken so long to decide what to do, that she'd been over ten weeks pregnant by the time she went to the clinic. She'd hated it. She'd felt irresponsible and selfish and had cried secretly for weeks afterwards.

The doctor at the abortion clinic had been kind. She'd tried to dissuade Sarah from looking at the screen when she did the ultrasound. And when Sarah burst into uncontrollable, heaving sobs at the image, the doctor had tried to reassure her that the little bean-shaped shadow was no more than a sticky blood clot. A parasitic clump of cells.

But Sarah found her glib assurances offensive. She didn't want to be soothed and placated with a patronising distortion of the truth. She didn't need to be persuaded that an abortion was meaningless and caused no harm, that it was all for the best.

She already knew that a ten-week-old foetus had little arms and legs, miniature fingers and toes. The beginnings of a face. She knew that it moved around involuntarily in its watery world. That if left alone it would grow into a baby, a child, a person. A person with a life of its own. A person who would love and be loved.

Her own flesh and blood.

She knew that the abortion wasn't the best thing for the baby. It was best only for her. And she had vowed never to do it again.

She rubbed her stomach and imagined the tiny foetus clinging to the side of her uterus wall. Holding on desperately. Knowing what she was capable of. Sensing that its future was uncertain.

"Don't worry," she whispered. "Don't worry."

Brett

Brett lifted the lid from the pan and stirred the soup. He'd offered earlier to cook dinner and had decided on a clear chicken broth, with thin strips of chicken and celery. When he was young, his mother would make it for him when he was sick, it was light, refreshing and he hoped that Sarah might enjoy it, or at least tolerate it.

"It's ready." He put two bowls on the bench near the cooktop and ladled in the soup.

Sarah came into the kitchen and sat at the table. She'd already had a shower and put her pyjamas on. Her hair was wet and hung limply around her ears. She was pale and looked tired. She smiled at him as he put her bowl and a spoon down in front of her. "Thanks."

He sat opposite her and ate some of the soup. He was pleased. It tasted good, just like his mother's. He watched Sarah lift a spoonful to her mouth. She blew on it gently and took a tiny sip. Then she closed her eyes, put her spoon down and put her head in her hands.

"Don't you like it?"

"I'm sorry. I just can't stand the smell of the chicken." She stood up, moved to his side of the table and kissed the top of his head. "But thanks for trying."

"But what are you going to eat?"

"Nothing appeals." She made a face. "Even the smell of food is making me feel sick today. Don't worry. I'll have something later. I might just watch TV for a little while."

He heard her turn on the television and listened to her switching through different channels. She stopped at the news. A reporter talked

solemnly of an impending rise in interest rates, of families struggling under the pressures of their mortgages.

He finished his bowl of soup and started to eat Sarah's. The soup was good, which surprised him, as he didn't enjoy cooking and wasn't normally very good at it. He usually refused to follow recipes and never took any notice of the required proportions of ingredients. He could never resist adding a little more of his favourite foods and a little less of the ones he disliked. The results were often inedible. And the constant tasting and testing he indulged in while cooking usually ruined his appetite anyway.

When he and Sarah were first going out, he would often go to the restaurant she managed and wait for her to finish. Sarah would bring him little plates of food, new and tasty things from the menu. He'd sit at the bar, sip on a beer and nibble on the food she brought. He would chat to the barman and watch her work.

It was a large restaurant, seating over three hundred people most Saturday nights, and when it was busy Sarah would be a bit distant, preoccupied, her mind on the job. He'd watch her and secretly admire her calm, assured manner of dealing with every crisis. Twenty drunk people could walk into the already full restaurant demanding food, and within a few minutes, Sarah would have them seated and content, drinks in their hands, meal orders taken, as if it was the easiest thing in the world.

The staff clearly respected and liked her and ran to her when they had a problem, when a customer complained, or when the chef had a tantrum. She would put her head down and listen, then nod and give directions. He'd never seen her lose her cool, or get upset the way the waitresses did. She seemed to glide around the restaurant floor, a serene, smiling oasis in a whirlpool of frenzied activity.

He didn't go in very often anymore. The novelty of watching her and waiting all night for her to finish had worn off. But sometimes he would finish work and decide to go into the restaurant, and when he did, it reminded him of how he'd felt in the early days. Her confidence, her competence still turned him on. And on the nights he went into the

restaurant, they always went home afterwards and had sex. He would feel lucky to have her, he would feel in love. And on those nights, all the doubts he had about their relationship, the fears he had that he was still too young, that their love was a bit too staid, a bit old-coupleish, that she wasn't the true love of his life, they all disappeared. He would lay his head on her breast and be overcome by a feeling of blissful content.

Sarah

Brett was sitting at the table, drinking coffee and reading the paper.

“Good morning,” she said.

He looked up and smiled. “Hi. How do you feel?”

“Oh, you know, the same. Sick.” She smiled, conscious of sounding like she was whining. “Pregnant.”

“I’ll make you a pot of tea.” Brett stood up and went to the kitchen. He filled the kettle. “Hey. Don’t forget we’re having lunch with Mum later today.”

“No. I haven’t forgotten.” Sarah leant in the doorway and watched him make the tea. Going to lunch with Brett’s mother was the last thing she wanted to do. Helen always made her feel uncomfortable. She was cold and patronising and clearly disliked Sarah. But Brett didn’t notice; he thought Sarah was just overly sensitive.

“Where would you like to go? Mum said she’d shout.”

She shrugged. “Just around here somewhere? To a cafe or something? I’ve got to be at work early tonight. There’s a big party on. A fiftieth.” She walked over to Brett and put her arms around him from behind. “So what did she say about it?”

Brett turned around. “Watch out. It’s hot.” He held the tea up high and wriggled out of her embrace. He took the tea to the table. “I don’t think she was overly impressed.”

“Well, she wouldn’t be, would she? She hates me, Brett. Admit it.”

“Bullshit, Sarah.” He rolled his eyes. “She hardly knows you. What could she possibly hate about you?”

Sarah poured the tea. "Maybe the fact that I've got you. That I'm nothing like her. That my fingernails are short and unpainted. That I..."

"That you're paranoid," Brett interrupted, frowning. "That *you* obviously don't like *her*. That you're always on the lookout for the smallest slight. Come on, Sarah, get real."

"I am real, Brett. It's how she makes me feel. You just completely refuse to notice how she is towards me."

"That's because I'm not looking as hard as you. I don't analyse and agonise over every single fucking exchange." Brett stood up and walked to the door. "Look. Let's not fight about this. It's stupid." He picked his jacket off the hook near the door and put it on. "I'm going to buy some smokes. Do you want anything?"

Sarah shook her head. "No. No, thanks."

Brett walked out, closing the door firmly behind him.

"So. How's work?" asked Helen.

"It's fine." Brett nodded. "Great. The same as always."

"I don't know why you won't do some extra study and get a consulting job." She shook her head. "The extra money would be nice."

"I like my job, Mum." Brett rolled his eyes. "I don't want to be a consultant."

Helen rubbed Brett's arm and looked at Sarah. "Isn't he amazing? Choosing a caring profession over money?" She lit a cigarette. "He could have done anything you know, Sarah. Anything. Medicine. Law. Architecture. He was always such a bright boy." She looked at Brett and smiled. "I was always so proud."

Sarah nodded. She'd heard this before. The first time Helen had bragged to her about Brett's intelligence, Brett had laughed about it afterwards. He told Sarah how he'd barely even passed his Higher School Certificate because he was continually stoned throughout years eleven

and twelve. He'd been lucky to get into nursing. And he'd only chosen it because it was a course where he was bound to meet lots of girls. It was mere good fortune that he found he actually enjoyed the work, and was also good at it.

Helen picked up the wine bottle and poured Brett another glass. She held it over Sarah's glass. She raised her eyebrows. "Yes?"

Sarah shook her head. "No thanks, Helen. I'd better not."

Helen poured herself another large glass. "Oh. Of course not." She smiled artificially and took a long drag on her cigarette. "We really didn't *fuss* so much in my day, you know. I smoked and drank all through my pregnancy with Brett."

"Well that explains all my problems then, doesn't it, Mum?" Brett joked.

His mother stared at him, her face impassive. "I think you have far fewer problems than most other people your age, Brett." She tapped her cigarette and took another deep drag. She frowned, lifted her chin and blew the smoke into the air. "That is, far fewer problems of character. Far fewer...personal defects. And that, I'm happy to acknowledge, is largely a result of good genes and good parenting. But...problems of circumstance," she shrugged, "are something over which I have very little control. Unfortunately."

Sarah swallowed. She could feel the bile rising up her throat. Helen's cigarettes were making her feel sick. She stood up, excused herself and walked quickly to the bathroom.

She vomited her lunch into the toilet bowl.

Brett

“So, Brett.” Karen, a physiotherapist from the hospital, smiled. “I hear congratulations are order.”

Brett shook his head, confused. Then he remembered that Karen knew Gillian, and Gillian would definitely know about the baby. “Oh. Thanks.”

“Wonderful news. Sarah must be excited?”

“Yeah. She is.” Brett smiled and looked back down at the patient notes he was completing. He was reluctant to be drawn into a conversation with Karen. She had a reputation for being a bitch and Brett avoided talking to her about anything other than work as much as he could.

Karen took a seat opposite him at the staff table. Unfortunately, she was clearly keen to talk about it. “So how are you guys going to manage? You know...work-wise. It’ll be a struggle with both of you working nights.”

Brett put his pen down and sighed. Karen obviously wasn’t going to let up. “We’ll manage.”

“Of *course* you will. It’s just interesting to hear how people *think* they’re going to arrange their lives before the baby’s born. Everyone thinks that they can have plans, but it just doesn’t work like that. Once the baby is born, that’s it. Life has to fit around the baby and not the opposite. It can come as a bit of a shock. Believe me. ”

Brett shrugged. “We’re both intelligent people, Karen. I’m sure we can work it out.”

“Well, one thing’s a given...you won’t know yourselves once the baby’s born. Your life will be turned upside down.”

“Mmm. So people say.”

“Oh, but it’s true though. No more sleep-ins. No more late nights partying. No more lazy Sundays reading all day.” She put her hand over her mouth and whispered through her fingers. “And if Sarah’s typical, no more sex for a while.”

“Great, Karen. Thanks.” Brett stood up. “You make it sound like a real picnic.”

During his lunch break, Brett walked down to the maternity ward and through to the nursery. He stopped by a cot and stared at a newborn baby. Its fists were clenched up by its face. Its unfocussed eyes were open, staring blindly towards the light from the window. It was a funny, helpless creature, and it stirred no paternal desire within him at all. Perhaps he would feel differently once he actually held his own child, his own brand new son or daughter, but he couldn’t imagine it.

A man walked into the nursery holding a very new baby. He stopped next to Brett and looked down at the baby in the cot. “Fantastic isn’t it?” He smiled at Brett, tears in his eyes “What did you have? A boy or a girl?”

“Oh. No. Nothing.” Brett shook his head, indicated his uniform. “I’m a nurse in the hospital.”

“Oh.” The man immediately lost interest. Brett watched him place his baby carefully in its cot and tuck a blanket around it. The man put his hand on his baby’s head and caressed the baby’s forehead gently with his thumb. He started to hum a lullaby.

Brett left the nursery and walked outside. He lit a cigarette and strolled around the hospital gardens. He turned his mobile phone on and dialed his home number.

“Hello?” Sarah answered.

“Hi. How are you feeling?”

“Fine. How about you?”

“Oh. I’m fine too...I’m good.”

“Good.”

There was a silence.

“Sarah?”

“Yes?”

“I just...”

“What, Brett?”

“I...”

“What is it, Brett?”

“You know that I’ll help you. Support you. You know that, don’t you?”

Sarah was silent.

“Sarah?”

“Mm.”

“Did you hear me? It’ll be okay, Sarah. I feel okay about it. I’m sure that once the baby’s born I’ll feel better about it all. I’m sure everything will be fine.”

“Great, Brett. That’s great.”

“You don’t sound happy.”

She was silent for a moment. “I’m fine.” She sighed loudly. “Thanks for the call.”

“Sarah, wait. What else can I say? What do you want?”

“I don’t know, Brett.” She sighed again. “I don’t know.”

Sarah

She wiped down the bar. The stale smell of spilt alcohol was so strong she had to keep her face turned away and try not to breathe. When she was finished, she watched Gillian who was crouched down at the fridge, restocking it with bottles of beer and white wine.

“So, Gilly. What do you think?”

Gillian stopped still for a moment and looked up. She shrugged. “What does Brett think? That’s the important question.”

Sarah rinsed the cloth under hot water, squeezed it out and hung it over the sink to dry. “We haven’t talked about it yet. I only just thought of it yesterday. But I can’t really keep working here after I have the baby.”

“No. It’d be awful. Very difficult.” Gillian chuckled. “Neither of you have very family-friendly working hours.”

“I know.” Sarah knelt down next to Gillian and opened a case of beer. She took two bottles out at a time and put them in neat lines in the fridge. “And how could we live in Sydney on Brett’s income? It’s less than mine, almost half.”

“That’s shocking.” Gillian clicked her tongue. “Bloody government.” She turned to Sarah and grinned. “But imagine you and Brett living in the country. I can’t picture it.”

“Why not?” Sarah spoke in an American twang. “I’m a country girl at heart.”

“Really? And Brett?”

“I don’t know. But he always complains about the cost of living in Sydney and the traffic and stuff. So maybe...”

Gillian nodded in an exaggerated way. "Sure. He hates the city. Just hates it."

Sarah laughed. They finished restocking the fridge in silence. After they finished, Sarah poured Gillian a glass of wine and got herself a glass of lemonade. "Anyway, leaving Sydney is our only real alternative. Don't you think?"

"No." Gillian shook her head. "Of course it's not the only option. You could work and Brett could look after the baby. Or you could both work part-time. You could figure something out, if you wanted to. If you really *wanted* to stay. People do have babies in the city, you know, and they're not all millionaires. "

"Brett quit work to look after a baby?" Sarah snorted. "Sure." She stood up and went to the sink and poured the lemonade out. The sweetness and the bubbles had made her feel sick. She poured a glass of water from the tap. "There's no way he would even consider it. He loves his job. And he wouldn't go part-time, either." She looked up and smiled sadly. "Brett doesn't even really want this baby."

Gillian picked up a coaster and started peeling the paper from it. She kept her eyes down as she spoke. "Then I should think that Brett would be your biggest concern right now. Not more complications like moving out to the country. I mean, come *on*, Sarah. First you whack him with the news that you're going to have an unplanned baby. Then, before he's even had time to digest that bit of life-changing information you want him to agree to move to the country, leave his job and the beach. All the things he loves. Give the poor bloke a chance."

Sarah tipped the rest of her water out and put the glass down firmly. She couldn't believe what Gillian was saying, the patronizing tone she was using, the implication in her words that Sarah was being unfair to Brett. "Well, there's really not much I can do about Brett's fragile feelings at this stage, is there? The reality is that we're going to have a baby. And, guess what, it was a big fat surprise for me, too. I didn't plan it. And I certainly didn't make it happen on my own. What about me, Gilly? How am I supposed to feel? I'm the one who's pregnant. I feel like crap and I have a man who is not exactly enthusiastic about the whole thing, I have

to work out what we're going to do, how we're going to survive, where we should live. All of this terrifying, and as you said yourself, life-changing, stuff is happening to me, yet you reckon I should give *Brett* a break. Fantastic. I guess I have to work this out all by myself. With no support from anybody. That makes me feel utterly deserted, Gilly." Sarah felt like she was about to burst into tears and looked down to hide her face. She spoke quietly, almost whispering. "You probably think I should have an abortion. I'm quite sure that would make everyone happy. But I'm not going to, Gilly. No fucking way."

"God." Gillian groaned and put her head in her hands. "Sarah. I'm so, so sorry. I can't believe I actually said something so stupid. You'd think I was some kind of ignorant male chauvinist, or something. That was really, really stupid and horrible and you know that I don't really think like that at all. I was just upset because you were talking about leaving Sydney and I don't want you to go. I'm a childish, selfish cow. I think you're in a horrid situation, absolutely terrifying, and I think Brett's a big bastard."

"Wow." Sarah wiped her cheeks, which were now wet with tears and laughed. "Now I feel better. My life is shit and my man is an arsehole. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Gillian smiled, reached over the bar, took Sarah's hand and squeezed. "I am so sorry, though. I'll support you in whatever you decide to do. Of course I won't desert you. I'll just miss you desperately if you leave Sydney. Please forgive me."

Sarah shrugged. "There's nothing to forgive. I'm not really mad at you. It's just...it's just everything. This whole pregnancy, and Brett, and our jobs and all this worrying...*all* the time. *Should I do this? Should we do that? Am I being unfair? Should I have an abortion? Does Brett really even want to be with me anymore?* It's awful. It's so constant and so exhausting. I just want to be happy. And I'd like to be treated with a bit of care right now...you know...some tenderness. And *then* I start to wonder sometimes whether I did this deliberately...in some subconscious way or something. But I really don't think so. And *then* I get really bloody mad with Brett because I've got all this to think about on my own and I

can't even talk to him about it. It's not fair. I feel like I'm being punished. And I thought it would be nice, you know, exciting. I certainly didn't imagine it would be like this. Terrifying and lonely. I always thought that being pregnant and having a baby would be a joyous thing. A time when you'd feel...when you'd *both* feel special and excited and..." Her voice cracked and she put her hands over her eyes and tried to stop herself from crying. "*Shit.*"

Gilly stood, walked into the bar and put her arms around Sarah. She held Sarah so tightly against her chest that Sarah could feel the rumble of her voice as she talked. "You poor, poor baby. But listen. I know it all feels like a terrible mess right now. But it'll work out. You'll have a gorgeous, beautiful, super groovy, intelligent, genius of a baby. And you'll love him or her so much...and so will Brett, of course...and you'll just completely forget this whole time. And it'll all be worth it. A thousand times over."

"Really? Do you promise?"

"Yes."

Sarah sniffed and smiled weakly. "I'll hold you to that."

"Okay." Gillian put her hands on Sarah's shoulders and looked at her. "I hate to make you feel even worse but you really do look like shit. You're as white as a ghost and you've got huge shadows under your eyes."

"I know." Sarah had felt awful for most of the night, nauseous and tired. And now that the restaurant was almost empty and there was very little left to do, she hardly had the energy to stand up straight. "I feel revolting."

"I think you should go home and get into bed. Seriously. This can't be good for you. I can lock up."

"Are you sure?"

Gillian looked around the restaurant. "There's nothing else to do except wait for those two to leave."

Sarah paused. She wasn't supposed to leave staff members on their own in the restaurant at night. But the two remaining customers were

regulars and she knew that they'd see Gillian to her car. "Yeah. Okay. I will. Just make sure you get Mr and Mrs Waters to walk out with you."

Gillian nodded. "Of course."

She kissed Gillian on the cheek. "I owe you one."

She walked outside. A cool breeze blew up the street from the beach. It was refreshing after the closed-in warmth of the restaurant. Sarah immediately felt better than she had all night and walked home quickly.

When she arrived, she opened the door and entered quietly. It was dark. Brett was obviously in bed already. She went to the bathroom and showered quickly, washing the smell of the restaurant from her hair and skin. Then she went to their bedroom and climbed into bed.

She pressed her naked body against Brett's curved back. He was warm. Asleep and breathing softly.

She rubbed her hand down his side, along his muscular thigh and then between his legs. She moved her hand up until she found his testicles. She cupped them in her hand and squeezed gently. She pressed her breasts and pubic area hard against his back. She felt him move slightly in response.

He turned towards her and she opened her arms. Took him in.

Brett

Brett paddled out past the waves, over the swell, and floated, arms and legs still for a moment, until he caught his breath. He was fit, but was finding it harder each year to paddle for hours on end, to spend whole mornings in the surf.

He'd started surfing when he was twelve, when the extreme sensitivity of adolescence had suddenly made him feel awkward around his mother and step-father and the embarrassing nature of their relationship. They'd either be fighting noisily, screaming and slamming doors, or they'd be all over each other, kissing and fondling and eventually rushing to their bedroom. Brett would go to the beach by himself to get out of the house, away from them.

Now, he paddled lazily and waited for a good wave. He thought about Sarah and the conversation they'd had the night before. She'd told him she wanted to move to the country so that they could afford a house and she wouldn't have to work when they had the baby. So that they could have an easier, more relaxed lifestyle.

"Imagine it, Brett," she'd said. "It'd be lovely. I'd cook your dinner, keep the house tidy, dress up nicely for you." She had smiled cheekily at that and had pushed her chest out, pouted her lips. "I can be a Stepford wife."

"But what about our friends? Won't you miss them?"

"No." She shook her head. "I won't have to. They can come and stay at our house." She put her finger up then, indicating that he should wait and ran to the desk, picked up some sheets of paper and brought them back to him. She sat next to him and showed him the papers. They were pictures of houses. "I printed these out yesterday. They're all for sale."

He looked at them one by one. Stopped to look closely at one that he liked. A large, two-story, white weatherboard with a veranda wrapped around it. "This one's nice."

"And guess how much it is." She pushed his knee, smiled and leant forward eagerly, excited that he was interested, that he was taking the idea seriously. "You won't believe it."

He handed the page back, looked at her and smiled. "How much?"

"Guess," she urged.

"Four hundred?"

"Less." She bounced on the lounge. "Much less."

"Three."

"Two-seventy." She arched her eyebrows. Waved the piece of paper about. "And it's got three bedrooms. *And* a study. *And*." She paused dramatically and pointed to a line on the page. "Look! A huge in-ground swimming pool." She grinned.

Brett took the picture from her and stared at it more closely. The idea *was* tempting. He wouldn't mind owning a big house with lots of room, lots of space for friends and parties. And if they were going to have the baby, which they clearly were, they may as well make the most of it and try to live as comfortably as possible. Sarah didn't want to work for a while after the baby was born and he agreed that it would be better if she didn't.

A few of their friends had kids already and Brett had noticed how difficult everything was when both parents continued to work full-time. Their relationships seemed to degenerate into fatigued battles over who did more with the baby, who lost the most sleep, whose turn it was to get up first, wash this, change that. The very air around them became tense, plagued with spite and bitterness. And for Sarah and Brett, whose jobs both involved night work, a lot of sleeping in the day, the situation would only be worse, a logistical nightmare. It seemed a fair solution to Brett that one parent should do the majority of child-rearing while the other brought in the money. And if he and Sarah moved to the country, they'd

avoid the difficulty, the near impossibility, of trying to survive in Sydney on his modest income.

“Okay.” He handed back the paper. “Let’s drive up and have a look.”

“Really, Brett? Are you serious?”

“Yep. Why not?”

Sarah laughed happily.

“Let’s drive up next weekend. I actually wouldn’t mind owning a beautiful house like that,” he said.

“Okay.” Sarah had pulled him to her and hugged him tightly. “I can’t believe it.” Her voice was high-pitched with excitement. “You’re wonderful.”

“I am.”

She leant back and looked at him. “What made you change your mind?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “An aversion to all the hard work it takes to live in Sydney probably.”

Now, Brett stared back at the shore, at the beach that was slowly getting crowded, and wondered how much he’d miss the surf. Probably not as much as everyone would assume. He loved surfing, and it was an important pleasure in his life, but finding the time to do it on a regular basis was difficult. Lately, if he had to choose between an early-morning surf and a couple of extra hours sleep, he preferred to sleep, and only made it down to the beach if he’d made a firm promise to meet a friend. And even then he had to drag himself out of bed.

And, as Sarah had pointed out, he could easily meet his friends at the coast for surfing weekends. Intense, enjoyable days of surfing and drinking and purely male company that his friends indulged in every few months or so. He always used to go. But since he’d met Sarah, there had always been something else to do or somewhere else to go, commitments that she would make on his behalf. Dinner parties or group trips to the mountains with friends. But, in order to persuade him to move to the country, she had suggested that he start going on the surfing trips again. And he would. He would make it a condition of their moving.

He looked back at the incoming waves and sighed. The swell was practically nonexistent, hardly worth waiting for. He caught the next small wave back to shore, lifted his board up under his arm and ran from the surf.

Sarah

The following weekend they drove to Tamworth. The house was more beautiful than Sarah had expected. The garden was overgrown with large, shady trees and sweetly-scented rosebushes. Inside, the house was spacious and cool. The ceilings were high, the floors were polished timber and the walls were painted white. Their footsteps echoed loudly as they walked through.

Upstairs there were two enormous bedrooms. Sarah went into the larger of the two.

“Brett. This room is beautiful,” she said.

Brett followed her in and she could see that he was impressed. The room was freshly painted and had French doors leading to a veranda that looked out over the back garden and the swimming pool.

The pool was dirty and unused, the water a murky grey colour, but Sarah imagined it clean; pictured herself heavily pregnant, swimming leisurely, contented laps while she waited for her baby.

“I love it.” Sarah leant on the veranda railing and looked down into the garden. “It’s perfect.”

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Brett stood beside her and pulled on the railing as if testing its stability. “There’s no way we could ever buy anything like this in Sydney.”

“No. Brett, I really, really want to buy this house.” She turned around and gestured back towards the bedroom. “Look at that room. Imagine waking up in it and having a cup of tea in bed, looking out of these doors.”

“And hearing the sound of birds rather than traffic and sirens.”

“And having so much extra free time every day because there’s no hour-long commute to get into work.”

Brett nodded and looked at her. “But shouldn’t we look at other houses? Wouldn’t it be a bit mad to just jump in and buy the first one we see?”

Sarah was both thrilled and surprised that Brett was taking it all so seriously, that it seemed to be almost a given that they would buy a house here. But she loved *this* house and knew it would be perfect for them. She didn’t want to waste time looking at any others, she was afraid someone might jump in and buy this one in the meantime.

“Who cares?” she said. “Anyway it’s not like you to be so careful.”

“I’ve never actually spent so much money before. I’ve never taken on a thirty-year debt before.” He blinked. “In fact I never thought I *would* get a mortgage.”

Sarah took his hand and squeezed it between both of hers. “But you won’t be getting it alone. It’ll be *our* mortgage, our home. We’ll be able to do whatever we want with it, imagine that. We could paint it purple if we wanted to.”

Brett was quiet for a minute and Sarah could see by the vague, unfocused expression in his eyes that he was thinking. Suddenly he shrugged. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s do it.”

They made an offer on the house, which was accepted the same day and the next morning they returned to Sydney. Sarah spent the afternoon making phone calls. She rang her boss first. She thought it would be better to get the unpleasant calls over with. She told him that she was pregnant, that she would be leaving Sydney.

“Oh.” He sighed. “I guess congratulations are in order.”

She wondered if that counted as actually saying it. She didn’t think so but gave him the benefit of the doubt. “Thanks.”

He sighed again. "I guess Gilly could manage for a while."

"Of course she could. She could manage permanently. She'd do a great job."

"Perhaps." He was silent for a moment. "I'll just have to think about it."

She rang her old friend David, who she hadn't spoken to for months.

"Wow." He sounded shocked and was quiet for a moment. "Congratulations."

"Isn't it exciting?" She was disappointed at David's reaction, at the lack of enthusiasm in his voice.

"I guess so. But you'll be so far away from everyone. From all your friends."

David's pessimism irritated her. She laughed off his concerns and brought the conversation quickly to a close. She told him she had to go, that she had a lot to do.

"Okay then," he said

"I'll speak to you later." She was impatient to hang up.

"Sarah. Wait."

"Mmm. What is it?"

"Sorry if I sounded negative. I really hope it all works out well for you guys." He coughed, sounding awkward. "I really do."

She rang Gillian and told her about the house. "I can't believe it, Gilly," she said. "I can't believe he agreed to it."

"I know. I'm glad for you." Gillian was silent for a minute. "But I'll really miss you, Sarah. A lot."

"No, you won't. You won't because you'll come and stay with us lots. It'll be just like our trips out to the mountains. Except when you guys all go home to the city, Brett and I'll get to stay." She sighed happily. "On holidays forever."

Brett

He ran up the stairs towards his flat. He was looking forward to a warm bath and some food. Pizza or Chinese takeaway. He was too tired to cook and Sarah probably wouldn't even be hungry. He opened the door.

"Brett?"

Sarah walked towards him. Her eyes were red. She'd been crying. Her arms were open.

"What is it?" He felt momentarily alarmed, then thought of the baby. In an instant, he prepared himself to comfort Sarah, to wrap his arms around her, and to hide the sudden feeling of relief that had overcome him.

But Sarah looked at him tenderly and put her hands on his cheeks. She took his hand. "Come and sit down."

He knew then that whatever had happened was worse for him than for Sarah. She was clearly upset on his behalf. He stepped back, felt his heart begin to pound. "What is it? Tell me."

"Your dad." Sarah's chin quivered with emotion, she put her hand to her mouth.

"What? Is he dead?"

Sarah nodded and lifted her arms, tried to embrace him, but he pushed her away and stepped back. He went to the door and ran back down the stairs and onto the street.

* * *

“Daddy?” Brett pushed the door open and went inside. The hall was always dark and full of shadows and he had to force himself not to run through it. To walk calmly and breathe normally. But it was a long hall, and by the time he had almost reached its end, had almost reached the nicer part of the house, the kitchen and its cosy warmth, its well-lit safety, he could barely restrain himself and would often end up running through the last bit. He was ashamed of his fear and always promised himself to be calmer the next day. To be braver.

“Daddy?” he called again as he got nearer to the kitchen. Sometimes his father would meet him in the hallway, pipe and newspaper in hand, and all his fears would instantly disappear. His father would take his hand and walk with him to the kitchen. Ask him about his day at school. Tell him about something interesting he’d read in the paper. Brett didn’t always understand, but enjoyed it anyway. He liked listening to his father’s deep, calm voice. His slow, easy speech. And he liked the smell of the tobacco, the rise and curl of smoke from his pipe.

But his father wasn’t in the kitchen, so he turned back and went across the hallway to his parents’ bedroom. The door was partially open and a blade of light lay across the hallway floor.

He pushed the door open. “Daddy?”

His mother turned to face him and smiled. “Darling. You’re home.” She scooped him up and put him on the bed so that he faced her, his eyes almost level with hers. She had bright red lipstick on and her hair was done in a style he’d never seen before. She wore perfume and the smell was overwhelming. “Now, you and I are going on an adventure, my little angel.” She straightened his tie, tucked his hair behind his ears and smiled at him happily. “It’ll be just like a holiday. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

He nodded silently.

She kissed him on the cheek and pressed him to her. “Good boy.” She bent over, picked up a bulging suitcase and shoved some clothes into a side pocket. “Now, I’ve got your things. My clothes.” She pressed

her finger against her lips and thought for a minute. She looked at him and nodded. "I think we're ready."

She stood up and walked to the door, bent sideways by the weight of the suitcase. "Come on, darling." She started down the hall. "Time to go."

He stood on the bed for a minute and looked at his reflection in the mirror opposite. There was a smear of red lipstick on his cheek. It glistened and looked like blood. He rubbed at it with the palm of his hand, but it only got worse and the stain got larger. He spat on his sleeve and scrubbed but it didn't come off, just spread across his face until his whole cheek was red.

Grahame, his new step-father, lived in a modern brick house. It was freshly painted in light, pastel colours and had good lighting, so there were no dark places. No scary spots.

His mother already seemed to know the house and, to Brett's surprise, had already organised a bedroom for him. It had a big bed and enormous built-in cupboards stacked full of brand new toys and books.

"It's fun here isn't it, darling?" she asked, night after night, as she tucked him in.

Grahame also came in to say goodnight. He perched awkwardly on the side of the bed and patted Brett's shoulder under the blankets. Once he even bent down to kiss Brett's cheek. He smelt strange, quite different from Brett's father, who smelt warmly of timber and smoke. Grahame smelt sharp, lemony, like some kind of astringent soap or aftershave. The smell repulsed Brett and he recoiled, alarmed at the unwanted intimacy. Grahame cleared his throat noisily and stood up. "Well, goodnight then."

Brett squeezed his eyes shut, held his breath, and sighed with relief when Grahame left the room.

He waited for the holiday to be over, for the adventure to end.

Brett's father left Sydney and bought an old weatherboard house near the beach in Ballina. Brett went and stayed with him during summer holidays. He could hardly wait to go each year and would start marking off the days on his calendar months before.

He loved the big, old house. It had golden timber floorboards and huge windows that let the sun in during winter and the cooling sea breeze in summer. It was sparsely decorated with only the bare minimum of furniture. A bed each for Brett and his father, a dining table and chairs, a lounge suite and a couple of director's chairs on the veranda. There was no TV and there were no toys. There were no decorative items, no pictures or vases or curtains, only books in the bookshelves and his father's huge collection of *National Geographics* stacked neatly in piles.

But there was a cassette radio. A good-quality, modern radio that looked oddly out of place. Brett's father would listen to the news in the morning and at night, and sometimes he would borrow cassettes from the library and they would sit on the veranda in the dark and listen to recordings of books being read aloud.

In the mornings, they would rise early and run down to the beach for a swim before breakfast. His father taught him to body surf and they caught wave after wave together, their bodies parallel, gliding smoothly through the water until they reached the shore. There, they grinned at each other, puffed and happy, and ran back in for more. When Brett said he was hungry, they walked back up the beach, holding hands and breathing heavily, barely talking. They had a hot breakfast, bacon and eggs, every morning. Afterwards, his father would light his pipe and sit on the veranda with his coffee and a newspaper and Brett would find a book and sit beside him, not really reading, just enjoying the nearness of his father, his warm smell, his calm presence.

Once, his father borrowed a tape of Henry Lawson's short stories and he asked Brett to come and sit with him on the veranda and listen to *The Drover's Wife*. The fact that there was a snake in the story got Brett's

attention immediately and he listened, completely rapt, his eyes wide in the dark, his body tense with anticipation.

When it finished, he looked over at his father. "That was a cool story, wasn't it, Dad?"

"Yes." he nodded. "Very cool."

"And that lady killed the snake, didn't she?"

"She did."

"So it was a happy ending, wasn't it?"

"Well. It was good that she killed the snake, I guess." He was silent for a moment. "But, I don't think it was a happy story overall."

"Why?" Brett was disappointed. He didn't like unhappy endings. "Because her husband wasn't home?"

"That's right. She was alone. "

"But she had four kids, Dad," he protested. "She wasn't *alone*."

"But adults need other adults too, Brett. Men need women and women need men." He stood up and stretched his legs, then put his hand out to help Brett get up. "We all need love, Brett."

* * *

"Are you okay?" Sarah asked

Brett looked at her, his eyes wet, and smiled weakly. "Yeah. I guess so." He looked down at his feet and kicked at the loose gravel. "I just wish I'd made an effort to see him more often."

Sarah rubbed his back. Leant her head against his shoulder.

"I bloody *loved* him when I was a kid, you know." His bottom lip began to tremble, and his voice shook. "He was a *fantastic* dad."

"I know." She turned to face him and put her hand on his cheek. "And you were a good son."

Brett put his head down and started to cry. Tears streamed down his cheeks and neck and rolled beneath his collar. His shoulders shook. Sarah put her arms around him and held him.

He put his head up after a few minutes, wiped his eyes and stared over at the small group of people lingering outside the crematorium. It was pathetic, really, how few people his father had known. How few had cared. He blew his nose and looked at Sarah. "No." He shook his head. "I wasn't a good son." He felt the pressure of more tears against his eyes, looked up and blinked hard to stop them. "I didn't even go and see him once in the past two years." He put his hand over his mouth. The thought of his father's loneliness, the fact that he'd probably suffered more than he had to because of Brett's neglect, filled him with shame and self-loathing. He shook his head slowly. "He was alone, Sarah, alone and sick."

"But you didn't know," she whispered. "You didn't *know*."

"Yeah," he said bitterly. "Because I didn't *want* to know."

She stared at him for a moment and then took his hand and kissed it, and pointed up to the car. "We'd better go, Brett." She put her arm around him. "I'll drive us home."

Sarah

“Thanks for coming, Dad.”

Sarah’s father shrugged and waved his hand dismissively. “Of course. He was a nice man.”

“Well, Brett appreciated it.” Sarah sipped on her orange juice. She’d suggested to Brett that he take a few days off work, that he spend some time doing nothing, letting himself be sad. But he’d refused. He only had a fortnight left at work before they moved to Tamworth and he didn’t want to let anyone down. In any case, he’d said, he didn’t want to sit around feeling miserable, he wanted to work.

“So.” Her father smiled and put his hand over Sarah’s. “You’re very, very happy?”

She looked down at her plate and pushed the risotto around with her fork. She hadn’t eaten much, the texture of the rice was making her feel ill.

“Yeah.” She looked up and forced a smile. “I am.”

He nodded, satisfied. “Good.”

It was always easy to reassure him, to let him think that everything was going well in her life. The truth was, she thought, that he didn’t want anything to be wrong. He just didn’t have the inclination, or the energy, to worry about her. He didn’t want the extra stress or to feel obliged to help Sarah in any way. He was busy with his own life, his younger family in Perth, his wife and their sons.

“So, how are the twins?” she asked.

He rolled his eyes and immediately looked more relaxed. He was clearly much more comfortable talking about himself, his own life. It was

familiar territory and there was no threat of any new demands being made on him.

"A bloody handful." He laughed fondly and shook his head. "They've discovered fire."

"That sounds dangerous."

"It is. There was an incident just last week. Fire engines came, the whole catastrophe." He spooned some risotto into his mouth and chewed for a minute. "It was pretty embarrassing, actually."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Christine was out, and I was supposed to be watching them." He waved his fork around. "But you know me, I got caught up with some work and..."

"I wouldn't have thought ten-year-olds needed that much watching."

"Ours do. Little shits."

They were quiet for a minute. Sarah watched her father eat and wondered if she'd ever get her appetite back. It was difficult to remember, while she was feeling so ill, that eating was meant to be enjoyable. She pushed her plate aside and sipped on her drink. "So how's Christine?"

Her father looked up from his plate, his face suddenly guarded. "She's fine." He nodded as he spoke. "She's teaching at the university part-time. She's really happy, really enjoying it."

"Good." Sarah smiled. She consciously kept her face open, her smile warm. He was always cautious when he spoke to her about Christine. Sarah wasn't sure if he was more wary of the possibility of somehow offending Sarah, or, on the other hand, of giving her an opportunity to have a dig at Christine. "I'd love to see her."

He put his fork down, raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yes. Of course"

"But you've never seemed to like her." He looked at Sarah and frowned. "Christine thinks you hate her, to be honest."

"Well, I don't." She felt immediately defensive. It was strange how easily all her old resentments and jealousies towards Christine could

resurface. She hated it that her father felt the need to defend Christine, that he would even contemplate taking Christine's side against her. She knew it was irrational and immature, but she couldn't help it. She'd felt like this since Christine and her father had met.

She'd been fourteen, and she'd felt it as a devastating betrayal that her father would need another female in his life. It was not only a betrayal of her mother, who'd died when Sarah was nine, but it was also a betrayal of Sarah and her relationship with her father, of her childish belief that she was enough for him, that she was in fact the sole focus of his life.

Christine had been in her late twenties. She'd been one of Sarah's father's more gifted students and had even been a little famous, at least in academic circles, for some controversy over a book she'd written.

When Christine moved into their house, Sarah had deliberately made it as difficult for them as she could. She'd been cold to Christine, unwelcoming. And her father had felt so guilty, had been so concerned that he was upsetting her, that Sarah found she could get away with some appalling behaviour. She was rude to Christine, she rolled her eyes and made faces when Christine talked to her, or simply ignored her and laughed spitefully when she made an effort to be friends.

Sarah had tried to embarrass Christine as much as she could. Once, when Christine was cooking dinner, Sarah had gone into the bathroom shortly after her. A bloody tampon floated in the toilet, having obviously resurfaced after being flushed.

Sarah walked back to the kitchen, a look of horror on her face.

"What's wrong?" her father asked.

"I can't use the toilet." She made a face. "There's something disgusting in there."

"What?" Her father started toward the bathroom, then he paused, a look of suspicion on his face. "What is it, Sarah?"

She'd shaken her head, as if she was too upset to talk.

Her father went into the bathroom. Sarah heard him flush the toilet. Christine had stopped cooking for a moment. She stood completely still

and stared silently down at the food she was stirring, at her own hands. Sarah watched her, wishing that Christine would look at her so that she could enjoy her triumph, her satisfaction at having humiliated her.

But her father returned to the kitchen and, without speaking a word, had walked up to Christine and embraced her from behind. He'd kissed her neck and buried his face in her hair. They had stood like that for a moment, swaying together, Christine's face tight and sad, until Sarah's father made a small coughing noise, a clearing of the throat, and moved away to set the table. When they sat down to eat, Christine was quiet, she didn't look at Sarah, she hardly spoke, and Sarah's father was more tender and gentle with Christine than Sarah had ever seen him before. They had smiled at each other sadly and held each other's hands across the table as they ate.

Sarah had hated Christine more than ever that night. She'd assumed that her trick had backfired and that her very meanness, her wickedness, had somehow made them both very sad. And that their mutual sadness had ultimately served only to unite them against her.

It was only years later, when Christine and her father joined the IVF programme, and her father told Sarah all about their years of failing to conceive, that she realised that their apparent sadness that night must have had very little to do with her, or with her nasty attempt to embarrass Christine. It was more likely that the bloody tampon was the first he knew of another failed attempt at pregnancy, another heartbreaking period for Christine.

But when he'd first told Sarah this, it had only exacerbated her hostility towards Christine. She'd felt the bitterness of betrayal all over again. They had kept her in the dark, they had never even told her that they were trying to conceive. She felt as if a huge secret had been kept from her. They hadn't trusted her, or even worse, they thought that the fact that they were trying to make a baby, a baby who would be Sarah's half-brother or sister, was none of her business.

The fact that she would never have welcomed the idea, that she would have made it very difficult for them and that she would have been terribly cruel to Christine, didn't occur to her until she was much older.

Not until she was in her late twenties and had a brief affair with a divorced man who had two children of his own.

She realised then, after spending a few miserable weekends with the man and his hostile, surly kids, how brave Christine had been. It was so difficult to care for someone else's children, to see them as anything other than an obstacle to happiness. And Sarah saw how much real power children could have in determining the success or failure of such relationships.

Now, she put her hand on her father's and squeezed. "I don't hate her, Dad. I know I was a bitch when I was younger, but..."

He interrupted. "All perfectly understandable, Sarah."

"Maybe." She shrugged, "Maybe not. But I really *would* love to see her. And the boys."

"Well, you're welcome to fly up anytime. Both you and Brett. Now or after the baby's born. Christine would love it."

"We will. Probably after the baby is born." She laughed. "Well, if we can ever afford it."

"Don't be ridiculous. We'll pay."

Sarah was about to protest, to insist that she and Brett would pay for their own tickets, but she saw her father's eager face and changed her mind. He loved to be able to help her in ways that were easy, by giving her money or buying her things, and she felt inclined to be generous, to please him, and make up for being such a difficult teenager.

And accepting his offer of paying for the tickets would show that she really was keen to go to Brisbane and see Christine and her half-brothers. To make a real effort to be friends. To let her father off the hook.

"That'd be great, Dad." She thought for a minute. "Maybe we'll come over for next Christmas or something, when we're used to having a baby. When we're all settled and know what we're doing."

"Good." Her father gestured to the waiter for the bill. He looked at Sarah and smiled. "So when's the big day? When exactly are you leaving Sydney?"

Nightswimming

“In two weeks.” She could barely contain her grin. “And I can’t wait, Dad. I can’t wait.”

Brett

“You’re coming out with us for drinks tonight, aren’t you?” Brett asked.

Kelly continued writing up her patient notes and kept her face hidden. “Maybe.” She shrugged. “I might.”

Brett grabbed her shoulders and shook them gently in make-believe anger. “But you have to. It’s my last shift.”

She looked up at him and smiled playfully. “Well. It depends.”

“On what exactly?”

Kelly stood up and closed the staff room door. She leant against it. “Is your girlfriend coming?”

Brett shook his head and laughed. “You’re unbelievable, Kelly.” He walked towards her and grabbed the handle. Pulled on it gently so that the door opened and she was forced to step forward. “We’d better keep the door open. It’ll look weird. And no, Sarah’s not coming. She’s tired. And still pretty sick.”

“Well, then.” She raised her eyebrows. “We can do something afterwards. Just the two of us. A final goodbye.”

Brett shook his head. “I can’t.” He picked up the pile of patient notes he had to complete and sat down. He started flipping through the pages. “I thought you had a new boyfriend anyway.”

“Oh. That’s over. He was *revolting*.” Kelly contorted her face in an expression of disgust. “He kissed like a dog lapping up milk.” She smiled and sat next to him, put her hand on his thigh. “Hey. But my boyfriends have never bothered you in the past.”

Brett picked up her hand, placed it on the table and gave it a gentle, apologetic squeeze. "Sorry, mate. Sarah's pregnant and I really have to concentrate on getting my head around that right now." He sat up straight and put on a serious, headmasterly type of voice. "And distractions of the sort you're offering, tempting as they are, will only lead to trouble." He smiled and spoke normally. "But I still hope you come tonight. You know I hate to look unpopular."

Kelly rolled her eyes. "You? Unpopular? Yeah, right. " She stood up, took her bag from the staff locker and flung it casually over her shoulder. She paused on her way out the door. "You're sure I can't tempt you?"

Brett laughed and shook his head.

She shrugged. "I'll see you later then."

"Cool. See you there."

Brett showered in the staff bathroom and thought about Kelly. He'd been sleeping with her when he first met Sarah, and had slept with her a few times since. She was so cool about it. So casual.

She'd never made any demands of him. Had never suggested that they get more serious. Had never even said anything remotely bitchy about Sarah. She'd been in it for the sex, just as he had.

Before he left work, Brett went back up to the spinal unit. He had some time to kill and there were a few patients to say goodbye to. He wanted a coffee first, so he went to the staffroom. The door was closed and he could hear muffled voices, so he knocked loudly before pushing it open.

He stepped inside then stopped. Kelly and Jane, another nurse, were sitting at the table. Kelly was sobbing noisily, her hands covering her eyes.

Jane put her arm around Kelly's shoulders protectively and glared up at Brett.

He put his hands up. "Sorry. I didn't know you were in here. "

Kelly jumped at the sound of his voice and looked up. "Oh, fuck." She put her head down on the table and continued sobbing noisily.

Brett walked towards them “Hey, Kelly. What...”

“It’s okay, Brett,” Jane interrupted. She frowned and began to indicate urgently with her hands, with obvious irritation, that he should leave.

“Okay.” He shrugged and gave Jane a cold look. He left the room, shutting the door quietly behind him. He walked quickly towards the ward, slapping his hand against his thigh in annoyance. He was irritated with Jane. He’d heard people say she was bossy and interfering, a bit of a bitch, and now he understood why. He could have comforted Kelly if Jane had only let him.

Although, to be fair, she couldn’t know how close they were, that he probably knew Kelly a lot better than she did. He sighed. Poor Kelly. She must have really liked that bloke. The bad kissing story must have been bullshit. Some kind of defensive reaction.

She was such a cool girl, she didn’t deserve to be treated badly.

Brett looked around. The bar was crowded. Noisy. Most of the people there worked at the hospital, but a few of them were old surfing mates and a couple of old friends from school who had also turned up.

But neither Kelly nor Jane had turned up and he was disappointed. He would’ve liked the opportunity to ask Kelly what was up. Offer her his shoulder to cry on and tell her to forget the bastard and move on. Remind her what a gorgeous woman she was.

He stretched his hands around the middies of beer and carried them back to the table.

“Hey. Do you know what was up with Kelly this afternoon?” he asked as he handed out the beers.

“No,” said Laura. “Why?”

“She was crying in the staffroom.”

"I've seen her crying a few times." Damien shrugged. "Ongoing boyfriend troubles, I think."

Laura looked at Brett, raised her eyebrows and lifted her chin suggestively.

"You'd know about that, Brett. Wouldn't you?"

Brett gulped into his beer and felt suddenly self-conscious. He'd thought that nobody knew about his thing with Kelly. He'd certainly never told anyone and he'd assumed that Kelly would be equally discreet.

Laura smirked and looked around at the group, encouraging the others to pursue the conversation. But everyone avoided her eyes, looked into their beers or stared determinedly away. They clearly weren't keen to talk about it, or to persecute him. Brett felt immediately better. Laura always did have a reputation for being a bit of shit-stirrer, the type to put her foot in her mouth without even realising it. He finished his beer in a large gulp and put down his glass.

"It's your shout, Laura," he said.

Brett had never promised Sarah that he'd be faithful. Had never said he wouldn't sleep with other women. He'd been fucking Kelly when they first started going out and Sarah had known.

And he avoided the *I haven't slept with anyone else, have you?* type of conversation as best he could. He'd change the subject, feign complete indifference, or start clowning around. Anything to escape answering when the consequences could only be unpleasant.

Either he could lie and suffer the ensuing guilt. Or worse, succumb to the natural impulse to tell the truth and be tormented by weeks, or even months, of domestic misery. And anyway, he'd made his position perfectly clear early in the relationship when he'd told Sarah he didn't believe in monogamy.

Sarah had invited him to a book group at her place.

He'd said no at first. *No thanks. No way.* He'd assumed it would be a complete bore. And full of academic wankers. Any party that required the reading of a book beforehand couldn't possibly interest him.

But Sarah had begged him. She told him it would be fun, they'd all be drinking and laughing and joking and that it wouldn't be as stuffy and dull as it sounded. She'd asked him to read Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Sarah had an Arts degree and was the only one who had any idea of literary theory or anything like that. So they'd just talked in a general way about the plot, the characters, the philosophy. And to Brett's surprise, he'd really enjoyed himself.

Near the end of the night, when they'd all had a lot to drink, Sarah asked him whether he would describe himself as light or heavy.

"Oh. Light. Definitely. Much more Tomas and Sabina than Tereza or Franz."

David, an old friend of Sarah's leant forward. "Really? Why? I mean, what makes you so sure?"

"Mainly the sex thing, I suppose."

"What?" Sarah punched him on the arm. "So you like to fuck around?"

Brett looked at Sarah. "I don't know if I'd say it like that." He shrugged. "I just understand how he can completely separate sex and love. That he can love Tereza and yet fuck other women."

"But he's hurting Tereza. Destroying her, really. Isn't that a bit selfish?" said Sarah.

"Well, maybe she's the one with the problem. Maybe she should just get over it. Accept that Tomas really loves her and forget what he does in private with his own penis."

Gillian gasped, her mouth dropped open in an exaggerated way. "Right, Brett. So it's just like masturbation, is it? A private thing."

"Maybe. In a way. I mean monogamy is just bullshit, I reckon. It probably does more damage to relationships than good."

Sarah looked upset. "So you think fidelity and faithfulness are meaningless, do you?"

"I suppose I do, a bit. I mean, what's the point of being physically faithful if you spend half your time wishing you could fuck someone else? Isn't that a betrayal anyway?"

"No." Sarah shook her head, her cheeks started to redden. "No. I mean Kundera's basic point is that a life without weight, without such burden or responsibility, is meaningless. Empty. That such burdens fix us to the earth and give our life meaning."

Brett shrugged. "Yeah, well, I don't get my life philosophies from books, Sarah. Kundera's just another bloke sorting out his own shit, isn't he? I mean, it probably makes him feel a whole lot better to say that. He's probably been faithful all his life."

"Yeah." David laughed. "And now he regrets all those missed opportunities."

Brett looked at David and nodded. "Why not? Novels are just people making sense of their own experiences, aren't they? And writers aren't smarter than everyone else. They're just better writers."

Sarah shook her head and stared at Brett, her eyes wide. "Yeah, but they're often very wise people, Brett." Her voice started to sound shaky. "And I wouldn't conclude that Kundera was faithful from reading that book. I'll bet he was a real gigolo. I bet he was like Tomas, and utterly miserable, until he realised that he'd be happier if he stopped screwing around. If he started considering other people's feelings a bit more."

Brett looked at Sarah and smiled. He rubbed her leg. "Hey." She kept her eyes fixed firmly on the floor. "Sarah?" Brett put his head down and tried to get her to look at him. "Hey, Sarah, it's just a book. Let's not fight about it."

Sarah brushed his hand from her leg impatiently and stood up. "It's *not* just a book, Brett. You've revealed a lot about your nature. About your attitude to women." She looked at him coldly and shook her head. "And I'm just wondering what the fuck I've got myself into." She'd turned and walked out of the room.

She'd called him the next day.

"Sorry about last night," she said. "I had no right to get angry with you like that."

"No worries. Let's forget it."

"I won't blame you if you refuse to go to any more book groups with me."

"No. I really enjoyed it actually."

"Except for the ending."

"Well, I like a bit of drama. Makes for better reading, don't you think?"

She laughed. Then there was silence. He coughed.

"What are you doing now?" she finally asked.

"Nothing." He lied. He'd already made plans to see Kelly.

"Do you want to come over?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." She was quiet for a moment. "I missed you last night, Brett."

"Me too. I'll see you soon. I'll bring some beer."

They'd hung up and he'd called Kelly immediately, told her he was sick and wanted to go to bed. She'd offered to come to his house and look after him, bring him some homemade soup, but he'd said no, no thanks, he was really sick, really tired, and he'd call her another time.

Then he'd collected his things, his toothbrush and a change of clothes, and drove to Sarah's.

II

Brett

Brett folded his towel into a pillow and lowered himself onto his back. The warmth of the concrete felt good against his wet skin. He felt a few drops of water splash his legs as Sarah climbed from the pool and dried herself.

"Brett?" she said.

"Mmm?" he answered without opening his eyes.

"I'm having an ultrasound on Thursday. Will you come with me?"

"I can't." He opened his eyes and looked up at her. "I'm working all next week."

Sarah wrapped her towel around her waist and sat beside him. "Can't you swap a shift with one of the other nurses? I'm sure someone would be willing to do your Thursday for a weekend or a night shift or something."

"It's only my second week. It's a new job. I can't do that."

"Of course you can. Just explain the situation. Just tell them about the baby. Everyone would understand. Fathers always go to the ultrasounds. I really want you there, Brett. It's important to me."

"And my work is important to me." He gave an exasperated sigh. "An ultrasound is just another test. It's not really a significant event or anything. I can't commit myself to being available for every little test and procedure to do with the pregnancy. I have a new job, for fuck's sake."

Sarah stared at him, her face arranged in a particular expression of wounded disbelief that she had been making a lot lately. He found it aggravating.

"Right," she said, her voice cold. "So can I expect you at the birth then? Perhaps if I give you notice now? Four and a half months should

be enough. Do you think you might manage to be available for, oh, twenty-four hours or so, sometime around the middle of April?"

Brett closed his eyes. "Whatever." He supposed he should apologise or try somehow to make amends for being unable to go with her, but he was annoyed that she'd brought this up just now. He wanted to relax and enjoy himself. He didn't want to argue.

Sarah started to say something else but was interrupted by the distinctive clap of the back screen door slamming shut. Brett sat up, startled, and they both looked up towards the house.

A tall, blonde woman walked from the back door of their house. She shook her head as she approached. "Don't get up." She was carrying a six-pack of beer and a bottle wrapped in a paper bag. Brett stood up and wrapped his towel around his waist.

The woman smiled. "Sorry to intrude. I was knocking and knocking at the front door. But you didn't answer. It was open so I just let myself in." She put her things down and reached out to shake Brett's hand. "I'm Claudia. I live next door."

"Brett." He shook her hand. Sarah stood up and joined them. "And this is Sarah."

"Hi." Sarah smiled but Brett could tell that she was irritated. Whether it was because the woman had interrupted them, or because she had walked through their house, he didn't know. He was just glad for the interruption.

Claudia clapped her hands together and grinned. "I'm so glad that you guys have moved in here. I've brought something to welcome you." She bent down and picked up the alcohol. She handed the six-pack of beer to Brett. "That's for you." And the bottle to Sarah. "And that's for you."

"Wow. Friendly neighbours. We *are* in the country." Sarah smiled, the irritation disappearing from her eyes, and pulled the bottle from the paper bag. It was a bottle of champagne. Bollinger. "Gosh, Claudia. *Thank you*. But this is just too generous. You shouldn't have."

“Your arrival calls for a celebration. It’s the best thing that’s happened to me for months. Young people in the street! Yippee!” Claudia put her hands in the air and waved her hips from side to side as if dancing. Her voice was high, excited. “And we are going to celebrate!” She stopped moving and looked at them with a mock serious face. “But I have to warn you. You’d better get used to having me around. It’s a prerequisite of living in this house that you share the pool with me.”

After they’d had a few drinks, they decided to order pizza. When it arrived Brett paid the delivery man at the door and took the pizzas through to the house. He’d had a few beers and was feeling pleasantly relaxed. He was glad that they’d moved. It was fun living in a big house, and it was great having their own pool in the backyard. And there was definitely something relaxing about living in the country. It was apparent in the slow way everyone did things. Even the man delivering the pizza had stopped to comment on the heat, and had laughed in an appreciative way at Brett’s offer of a quick dip in the pool. People seemed far less stressed here than they did in Sydney. They had time to say hello and be friendly. Brett liked it.

He balanced the pizzas on one hand and the plates and cutlery on the other and headed back outside. As he approached the pool, he saw Claudia and Sarah standing beside each other talking. Claudia had taken her clothes off and was wearing only a small pink bikini. Sarah wore a modest black one-piece. Sarah was small and very voluptuous. She had a very feminine, very curvy body and the pregnancy had made her even rounder. Claudia was tall and athletic. She was thin and muscular and looked like she did a lot of exercise. Sarah’s skin was pale and creamy, Claudia’s tanned and shiny. Claudia was a lot taller, and Sarah had to tilt her head up slightly to look at her. It made her look slightly deferential, a little meek. Claudia, in comparison, looked like some kind of Amazonian goddess.

He wondered, just for a moment, what it would be like to have sex with Claudia.

They ate the pizza by the pool. Brett drank the rest of the beer and Claudia finished the bottle of champagne after Sarah declined to have

any more than half a glass. Claudia told Sarah and Brett how she had been living in Tamworth for nearly a year and had bought the house next door with some money she'd inherited.

"The money came at just the right time. I really needed to get out of Sydney for a while." She rolled her eyes and grinned. "I was a bit fucked up after splitting with my boyfriend."

"Oh. Were you together for long?" asked Sarah.

"Nearly a year. A long time for me. He dumped me, the jerk, when he met someone else." She made a face. "A medical student. Superior fucking cunt she is, too."

Brett laughed, a little shocked at her choice of words. "Did you know her?"

"I introduced them."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Fucking idiot that I was."

"You must have been really hurt," said Sarah.

Claudia was quiet for a minute. "More angry than hurt, I think. I seriously considered setting fire to his car, killing his dog. Getting my revenge somehow." She laughed. "But then I realised it was unnecessary." She stopped laughing suddenly and frowned, looked angry. "It was punishment enough just to be going out with the uptight bitch."

Brett laughed again then stood up and started packing up the plates and empty beer bottles. He threw the bottles in the bin then went inside and put the dirty plates in the sink. He thought about Claudia. She was good to be with, good company. She was interesting. *Intriguing*. It was unusual to meet someone so beautiful, (and she *was* beautiful, Brett found it hard not to stare and had even noticed Sarah looking her up and down a few times) who was also so open and down to earth. She didn't have the air of superiority that most beautiful women had. The contradictory, almost defensive superiority of beautiful women who were also smart, who wanted to be appreciated for their brains. The confusing way they were obviously conscious of their own beauty, and appreciated

it, *used* it for their own advantage even, and yet at the same time, showed contempt for any man who might put too much value on it, or make too big a deal of it. Claudia looked like she enjoyed her beauty. She looked comfortable in her own skin.

And she'd be good company for Sarah, an immediate and conveniently located friend. She'd already managed to change what had promised to be a tense, miserable night into a happy, laughter-filled evening. Sarah had become relaxed and cheerful in Claudia's company and seemed to have forgotten their earlier disagreement about the ultrasound.

Sarah and Claudia walked into the house, talking and carrying towels and empty beer bottles.

"Shit." Claudia shivered. "It's freezing in here." She wrapped her arms around herself.

"I know." Sarah nodded. She laughed and started hopping on the spot. "It's a really cold house actually. The rooms are all so big and dark that they just don't warm up."

"You're lucky. It can get stinking hot in Tamworth." Claudia smiled. "Well." She picked up her bag. "Thanks for the company. I'd better go and let you guys get some sleep."

"Thanks again for the food," said Sarah.

"Yeah," said Brett. "Next time we'll shout."

Sarah walked Claudia to the door and Brett went to the bathroom. He thought he might have a bath to warm up. He filled the bath with warm water and climbed in.

"Sarah," he called. "Sarah!"

"Yeah?"

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Just getting ready for bed."

"Why don't you get us some drinks and come and join me in the bath?"

"I've had enough to drink." She put her head around the door. "I shouldn't really have any more."

"Ok. Well, get me a beer, woman, then get in the bath and wash my back."

"Yes, master."

She disappeared for a moment and came back with an open stubby of beer. "It's a huge bath isn't it?" She peeled her swimming costume off. "It should be big enough for the three of us."

"What? You, me and Claudia?"

Sarah laughed and climbed into the bath. "I meant the three of *us*." She patted her stomach.

"Oh, right." He picked up a cake of soap and started washing himself. "Yeah." He was tired of Sarah constantly talking about the baby. Whenever she mentioned it, she looked at him expectantly, her eyebrows raised, her mouth slightly open, the corners bent up in an eager smile. It was as if she was continually bringing up the subject of the baby in order to give Brett plenty of opportunity to respond the way she wanted him to. The way she expected him to. As if she thought he was secretly more excited or interested than he let on.

He felt like she wanted him to perform, to display the requisite amount of excitement, of interest. But the truth was that he had nothing to say, and rarely even thought about it, so he constantly felt like he was letting her down. Like he was being tested and failing over and over again.

"Claudia's nice, isn't she?" He changed the subject.

"Yes." Sarah looked at him and raised her eyebrows provocatively. "And pretty."

Brett laughed. "Pretty. Mmm. Pretty is not quite the word I'd use."

"Oh, yeah?" Sarah poked him in the chest. "What word would *you* use then?"

"Stunning." He poked her back. "Gorgeous."

Sarah shrugged and tossed her hair, and pretended to be offended.

Brett laughed. "Are you jealous?"

Sarah was quiet. She parted her legs and stretched them out, one on each side of Brett. Then she leant back and relaxed against the back of the bath. She rubbed her toes against Brett's thighs. "No. I'm not jealous actually. Not at all. "

Brett looked at her doubtfully.

"No, really. I've never wanted to be that beautiful."

"Why not?"

"Because you'd never know the truth about yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Everything would be so easy. And everyone would be so obliging because of the way you looked. I mean women aren't immune to it, either. *I* can see how gorgeous she is. It's very appealing. I'm sure people forgive her a lot of things that they wouldn't if she weren't so fantastic-looking."

Brett shook his head. "For example?"

"Well, take the fact that she'd so weird about her old boyfriend. So angry. Almost violent."

"He dumped her for another woman. Any woman would be angry."

"But imagine an ugly woman speaking about her ex like that. Imagine an ugly woman calling the other woman a *cunt*." Sarah looked at Brett, her eyebrows raised. "Imagine it, Brett. It'd be awful. People would laugh at her. They'd be repulsed. But if Claudia does it, it's fine. Claudia's so completely fuckable that she can behave badly and still get away with it."

"So how is that bad? Sounds like she has an advantage to me."

"Because you would never know what people really thought of you. Why they liked you. You'd never even know if your own boyfriend really loved you."

Brett looked at Sarah and shook his head. "According to you then, only ugly people can know that they're truly loved." He smiled, leant towards her and put his hands on her thighs. "I mean how do you know

if I really like *you*? Is it because you're fuckable? Or because I love your soul? And why is one necessarily better than the other anyway?"

"I don't know." She frowned. "You're taking it to extremes. I just think that if you were *that* beautiful, things would be different. I mean, normal people can seem less or more attractive depending on whether you like them or not. But with Claudia I don't think that could happen. Well, not as easily anyway. She could *never* seem unattractive, could she? And I think that must blind people to her true nature. To some extent at least."

"Maybe."

Sarah shrugged, then reached for the soap and started washing under her arms. Brett watched. Her breasts looked magnificent when she raised her arms, full and round and white, her nipples pink and pointing straight ahead. He reached over and squeezed one gently. Rolled it between his thumb and forefinger.

"You're feeling better, aren't you?" he said, reaching out his other arm.

"Yes." She closed her eyes and smiled lazily.

He licked his thumbs and ran them gently over her nipples. Watched as they responded to his touch and grew larger. He bent forwards and took one in his mouth.

Sarah pushed her chest towards him and moaned softly.

Claudia

The alarm woke her at 5 a.m. She slammed it off, pushed the tangle of sheets from her naked body and stood up. Her head spun and a wave of nausea rose in her throat. She swallowed and clamped her hand over her mouth. She had drunk a lot of wine the night before, maybe a bottle, maybe more, she couldn't remember. She walked to the kitchen and got a tall glass of water and drank it quickly. She thought about going back to bed until the nausea went away but saw the empty packets on the table and decided not to. Rice crackers and hummus dip. Shit. She must have eaten them last night.

She would have to go for a run, and now, before it got too hot.

She walked back to her bedroom and stood in front of the mirror. She stretched her arms up and over her head and bent to the side. A small roll of skin and fat formed above her hip, in the middle of her bent torso. She grabbed it and pinched until tears came to her eyes.

She picked up a pair of stretchy bike shorts from the mess of clothes on the floor and pulled them on. She rummaged through her drawers until she found a T-shirt and pulled it over her head. She checked herself again in the mirror. The T-shirt was too tight. She pulled it off roughly and threw it on the floor.

She took another and tried it on. She sighed, it wasn't great but it would do. She put her socks and sneakers on and went to the door.

It was quiet outside. Still dark. Still cool. She walked past Sarah and Brett's house and stared at their bedroom window. It was black, they were probably still in bed, happily sleeping no doubt, complacent in their coupledness.

She imagined them waking. They would be happy and refreshed. Sarah would look soft and sleepy and would take a while to wake properly.

Brett would bring her coffee in bed.

Claudia turned the corner and started running. She started slowly. After nearly a kilometre, she found a rhythm and went a little faster. She concentrated on breathing, on running smoothly, on landing on the back of her feet and rolling forward. She could feel the strength in her calves and thighs. Once she found the right pace she could run for miles. For an hour or more.

She thought of Sarah. She'd like to become friends with Sarah. Good friends. The kind of friends who could drop in on each other without phoning first. Call into each other's houses for coffee or a glass of wine at dusk. Tell each other secrets and gossip about the other neighbours. Sarah might occasionally complain about Brett, tell her private things about their sex life. Get drunk with her when they fought. Cry on her shoulder.

Brett would get her to help him choose Sarah's birthday presents. He would be surprised at her suggestions but grateful when Sarah was happy. He would tease them about their endless visits. Sometimes three or four a day.

They would get her to water their garden when they went away. Look after the house. She would fill it with flowers and open all the windows just before they got home and Sarah would smile and hug her and say, *we missed you, next time you really should come.*

She wondered what Sarah thought of her, if she liked her. Sarah seemed so self-contained, so content. She didn't have any of the restless energy that seemed to plague Claudia. She was friendly enough and perfectly polite, but she seemed a bit preoccupied and a little distant. It was as if she was completely fulfilled by her own domestic life and didn't need the outside world.

Claudia started to lift her knees higher as she ran. It was exhausting and painful, but made the exercise much more effective.

She thought of Brett. His casual charms and his good looks. She would love to meet a man like Brett.

She wondered if Sarah knew how lucky she was.

Sarah

Sarah opened the fridge door and hid her face. She was embarrassed and could feel her cheeks reddening.

“Oh. So, shouldn’t I come tonight?” said Claudia.

“Of *course* you should. If you want. I just thought you might be busy.” She kept her face hidden in the fridge, moved jars and bottles around as if she was looking for something. The truth was that she hadn’t wanted Claudia to come. She’d been hoping that she wouldn’t drop in through the day and realise that Sarah was cooking for a group of people.

But now she felt mean and a little guilty. Claudia had been very kind to her since they’d moved to Tamworth. She’d shown her around, taken her to the best shops, the most interesting places. Claudia was obviously eager to be friends and they saw each other almost every day.

Sarah reached into the very back of the fridge and grabbed an old jar of tomato paste. She lifted it victoriously, made a show of having found it. “Do come. *Please*.” She turned around and smiled. “Actually, I could do a bit of matchmaking. You and David might even make a good pair.”

“Oh?” Claudia raised her eyebrows. “Really? What’s he like?”

“He’s good-looking. Brainy.” Sarah went to the bench and started chopping vegetables. “He’s really, really nice.”

“Sounds interesting.” Claudia took a piece of carrot and chewed on it thoughtfully. “Sounds just like my type. So, he’s single?”

“He was last time I spoke to him.”

Claudia reached for another piece of carrot but Sarah moved the chopping board away. “Stop it. I hate people doing that.” As she spoke

she felt a sudden sharp pain in her abdomen. The baby. Kicking her bladder.

“What is it? Are you okay?” Claudia looked alarmed.

“Yeah. Just the baby kicking. It can hurt sometimes.”

Claudia tapped Sarah’s belly. “Maybe it’s going to be a soccer player. Sporty, unlike you.”

“I’m not *that* bad.” Sarah frowned. “In fact I *am* quite sporty when I’m not pregnant.” She went over to the pot of curry and stirred. She was irritated that Claudia would make such an assumption. They’d only known each other for a few months and Sarah was already three months pregnant when they met. “I’m just not obsessive like you.”

“Obsessive? Why do you think I’m obsessive?”

“Two hours of running? Twice a day?”

“I just don’t want to get fat.” Claudia shrugged, pulled up her T-shirt and pinched at the skin on her stomach. “I put on weight easily.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Claudia. You’re thin as a rake.”

“But I have to work hard to stay this way. If I stop, I look like a fat pig. And I can’t afford to get any uglier.”

Sarah stared at her incredulously. “You are kidding, I hope.”

“Why?”

“Oh come on, Claudia. You’re beautiful and you know it. You look like a model.”

“People tell me that.” Claudia shrugged. “But I don’t see it. I look in the mirror and just see a whole lot of imperfections.”

“God, Claudia, we all do that. But, really, I can’t believe *you* do. You’re absolutely gorgeous. You look wonderful.” Sarah laughed. “You always look like you’ve just stepped out of a glossy magazine or something.”

“Well, that’s my aim. I’m going to show that wanker next time I go to Sydney.” Claudia looked angry suddenly, spoke viciously. “I’m going to look so fucking good he’ll be sorry he dumped me for that fat bitch.”

Sarah was startled by her vehemence. “You still think about him?”

“All the time, the prick.”

“Maybe you need some kind of distraction to help you forget him.”

Claudia’s face relaxed. She smiled. “What? Like finding someone else? Someone like David?”

“Maybe. Who knows?” Sarah frowned. “But you clearly need *something* to help you forget him.”

“You’re right, he’s not worth it. And you know what? He’s not even good-looking. On a scale of one to ten, if I’m a nine, he’s probably only a three.”

Sarah smiled, amused that Claudia had indirectly just admitted to her own beauty. “Well. There you are. Fuck him.”

Sarah finished preparing the meal. Claudia perched on a stool and watched. She told Sarah stories about her life in Sydney. She’d had a much wilder life during her twenties than Sarah had. Three-day-long parties. Lots of drugs. Lots of sex.

Claudia couldn’t believe that Sarah had only slept with four different men. And Sarah couldn’t believe that Claudia had slept with so many that she’d lost count, forgotten their names.

“You make me feel like a prude,” said Sarah.

“And you make me feel like a slut.”

Sarah laughed. “Slut. What a stupid word.” She preferred the old meaning of the word. The lazy housewife, the slattern. She looked around the kitchen, at the pile of dirty dishes stacked haphazardly in the sink, at the unswept floor. She looked at Claudia and grinned. “In the old sense of the word *I* would be the slut, not you. Your house is much cleaner than mine.”

“But I’m not pregnant.”

“Pregnancy is no excuse. I’ve always been a slut.”

Claudia laughed. “God. Don’t even say it. It sounds ridiculous even hearing the word slut to describe you.”

Sarah stirred the curry, put the lid on the pot and turned the heat down very low. She stretched her arms over her head. “That’s it. It’ll cook

itself now.” She put her arms down and sighed. “I’m tired, Claudia. I’m going to have a sleep before everyone gets here.”

“Good idea.” Claudia nodded.

Sarah waited, expecting Claudia to leave. But she didn’t move. She remained perched on her stool. “Well, I’ll just go to bed then?” Sarah hesitated. “You’ll be okay?”

“I’ll be fine.” Claudia smiled and looked around the kitchen. “I’ll just clean up a bit for you.”

“Oh. No. Don’t, Claudia. *Please*.” Sarah shook her head. “Really. I’ll do it later. Brett will help. Please don’t.”

Claudia stood up and came around to Sarah’s side of the bench. She put her hands on Sarah’s shoulders and pushed her gently towards the door. “Go. I’ll just do a little bit. A tiny little clean up.”

Sarah looked at her. “Promise you won’t do it all?”

Claudia nodded. “I promise.”

Sarah went into the bedroom and took her clothes off. It felt good to be naked, free of the tight restrictions of a bra and pants, of a waistband. She eased herself onto the messy, unmade bed and lay on her back. Dragged out a sheet from the tangle of bedclothes and spread it over herself.

Every room in their new house was large with high ceilings and the overgrown garden protected the entire house from the heat of the summer sun. Sarah loved it. Her pregnancy made the heat unbearable but the house was cool inside. It felt air-conditioned. Brett complained that it was confusing and made him think the weather was pleasant, cool enough for jeans and a T-shirt, when in fact it was scorching outside, too hot for even the lightest clothes.

Sarah felt sleepy and content. She was looking forward to the evening ahead. It would be good to see David and show off her new life to him. And she was glad that Claudia was coming. She’d become a good friend since they’d moved and she was always good company. David would like her.

She sighed happily and closed her eyes.

“Sarah.”

She opened her eyes.

“Come on.” Brett was sitting on the bed, looking down at her. “They’ll be here soon. You need to take a shower. You’re all sweaty.”

Sarah sat up. She felt groggy. “What’s the time? God, it feels like the middle of the night.”

“It’s nearly seven. It’s been pouring. It’s overcast and dark outside so it seems later. Come on, get up.”

She was damp with sweat and her eyes were sticky. The size of her belly made getting out of bed difficult, so she put her hand out and Brett helped. He had already showered and put on a pair of cut-off jeans and a T-shirt. He looked good.

He looked at her. “What are you wearing?”

“God. I don’t know. A tent maybe.” She felt the baby kick and stopped. Put her hands on her stomach. “Quick, put your hand here. It’s kicking...” She laughed, excited as always by the reminder that there really was a baby in there.

Brett smiled, but didn’t touch her. “I can see your stomach moving. I don’t need to feel it.” He turned to the mirror. “You should hurry up.”

“Oh, come on, Brett. Just feel it. Don’t be a shit.” She grabbed his hand and held it firmly against her stomach.

“Nothing.” He shrugged and tried to move away. “It must’ve stopped.”

She held his hand “No. Just wait a sec.” She felt the baby move. “Did you feel it?”

“Yes. Definitely alive and healthy.” He kissed her cheek. “Now let’s get ready.”

Sarah went into the bathroom and closed the door. She wished Brett would take more interest in the baby. Sometimes she felt such an overwhelming sense of pure happiness and almost hysterical anticipation

that she clapped her hands and laughed out loud. She wanted to lie in bed with Brett and make lists of baby names. Laugh together at the more absurd ones. She wanted to imagine what the baby might look like, what kind of personality he or she might have. But whenever she tried to draw Brett into such musings he became distant and his eyes glazed over with boredom. She'd become wary of revealing the true depth of her joy. Slightly ashamed of her maternal sopiness, her burgeoning mawkishness.

She looked at her body in the vanity mirror. Her breasts were huge and veined and her nipples and areolas had grown and changed from pink to brown. She'd let her hair grow. Everywhere. Under her arms, on her legs and across her bikini line. She'd always been vigilant in the removal of stray hair in the past and found her own indifference towards it now quite strange. But it no longer made her feel unkempt and dirty, as though she'd forgotten to brush her teeth or wash her hair. She liked it. It made her feel womanly. Sexy. Powerful. She ran her fingers through her pubic hair, touched her clitoris and moved her fingers down. She was wet and warm.

"Brett!" she called "Bre-ett."

He opened the door. "What?"

"Come here."

He moved closer. "What is it?"

She lifted his hand and put it on her breast. She kissed him on the mouth. He shook his head. "We don't have time."

She pulled him closer and put his hand between her legs, pushed her tongue into his mouth. He didn't resist. She undid his belt and zip and pushed his jeans down, released his cock and caressed him gently. He was already hard. She sat on the vanity bench and leant back against the wall. She opened her legs and guided him inside.

He orgasmed quickly. "Sorry," he said. "I'm distracted. They'll be here soon."

"It's okay. Don't worry. We can try again later." She kissed him and stood up. "I'd better hurry."

She had a quick shower and washed her hair. Then she put on a stretchy black singlet top and a pair of black flares. She tied her hair up in a loose bun and put on a pair of jet earrings that hung almost to her shoulders.

When she looked in the mirror, she was pleased. She was always happy wearing black. It suited her. It showed off her pale skin and long, blue-black hair.

She went to the kitchen. She walked through the door and stopped.

“My God.” She stared at Brett. “Who did all this?”

The room had been thoroughly cleaned. The dining table was set with a tablecloth, matching plates and crystal wine glasses. White flowers and candles were arranged through the middle. Candlelight had transformed the normally shabby room and made it inviting, shadow-filled. A light breeze blew the smell of rain in from outside and stirred up the sweet scent of the flowers from the table.

“Claudia did it while you were asleep. She only left a while ago. She just went home to get changed.”

Sarah raised her eyebrows, looked at Brett. “Wow.” She shook her head. “It looks fantastic in here!” She went to the stove where a pot was simmering gently. “And the food smells divine.”

“Yeah.” Brett went to the fridge and opened a stubby of beer. “Here’s to our incredible neighbour.” He lifted his drink in a toast. “Do you want a drink?”

“Just some juice if we have any. I’ll have a glass of wine later.” Sarah walked outside. She needed to hide her face. Sudden tears were prickling her eyes, threatening to overflow. Her throat was tightening. She had a surprising and powerful urge to scream. To slap Brett’s face. She closed her eyes and squeezed them, willing herself to be calm. Her normal controlled and cheerful self. She had felt so strange lately—emotional and overly sensitive. Since becoming pregnant, she felt as if she’d lost control of her emotions. Every little thing that happened, whether good or bad, made her feel either an irrational, excited kind of delight or, at the other extreme, an almost paralysing sense of melancholy. She could

feel ridiculously happy about the pregnancy one minute, so happy that her eyes would fill with joyful tears, and then in the next instant, she'd be overcome with an overwhelming sadness that the little life growing in her belly might not be fully welcome, entirely wanted.

Could hormones really alter her personality so much? She found the thought depressing. It suggested that she didn't really have a definable personality or soul. She was merely a brain reacting to firing synapses, rushing hormones. A simmering pot of electricity and chemicals over which she—whoever *she* was—had no control.

She walked to the pool, crouched down and tested the water with her hand. It was warm. Inviting. She was tempted to just take off her clothes and dive in. Swim underwater and forget about the stupid dinner party. About Brett. About Claudia.

But she heard voices inside. Laughter. David and his friends had arrived. She took her hand from the water reluctantly and stood up. She walked inside and greeted her guests.

David put his arm around Sarah's shoulders. "You look good, Sarah. Pregnancy really suits you." He squeezed her then dropped his arm. "Sorry to intrude on you like this," he whispered. "To bring all these strangers to your house."

"No. It's fine, David. I *told* you. I've hardly even talked to anyone since we moved. Brett's okay. He meets heaps of people at work." She put her hand on David's arm. "I'm bloody *thrilled* that you're here. The only person I've met here is Claudia, our neighbour."

"Really? A bit of a change from your Sydney life, then. You must be lonely."

Sarah smiled. "The funny thing is that I'm not." She looked down at her belly. "I've got this super-content Zen thing happening. I'm perfectly happy to do nothing but hang about and wait. Getting ready I suppose."

David introduced her to Liz and Craig. They were his colleagues and had been involved together in some research at the university in Armidale. Craig's wife Bernadette had also come. They were all heading back to Sydney the next morning.

Liz shook Sarah's hand and looked down at her protruding stomach.

"What a lovely looking belly. And don't you look smart! We used to wear such ridiculous clothes when I was pregnant with my babies. Huge, frilly, tent-like things. They were hideous." She turned her lips down in distaste then grinned. "Now pregnant girls wear black...and you don't try to hide your gorgeous bumps. It's so much better. You look like you still belong in the real world." She winked at Sarah and smiled. "Even if you don't always feel like it."

Claudia arrived when Brett was pouring everyone a glass of wine. She wore a red floral summer dress and high sandals. Her blonde hair hung loose across her shoulders. She looked beautiful.

Sarah noticed a certain change in the air when Claudia entered the room, everyone became momentarily silent, as if bewildered by the way she looked. Bernadette stood up a little straighter, put her shoulders back. Liz stared openly, her face full of friendly curiosity. The men blinked, then looked at each other and raised their brows. David nudged her with his elbow.

"Wow," he whispered.

Claudia showed no sign of being aware of it. She walked around the room and introduced herself to everyone before Sarah or Brett got the chance. It occurred to Sarah that this made it seem like she was more familiar with them than she actually was. As if she were a very old friend or a relative, who could comfortably look after herself in their house.

When she'd finished saying hello to everyone, she moved to Sarah and kissed her on the cheek. "Feeling better?"

"Fine." Sarah nodded

"Can I help with anything?"

"Thanks. You've already done more than enough."

Claudia leant towards her and whispered, "You're right, he *is* gorgeous."

Sarah felt suddenly protective of David, unusually possessive. "Yes. I suppose he is." She nodded vaguely and moved away.

She wished she had never mentioned him.

Sarah watched Liz while they ate dinner. When she had first seen her, she had thought her plain, unattractive even. Her hair was thin and wispy, she wore glasses and was short and round. No single feature could be described as particularly attractive. But now her cheeks were tinted pink from the wine and conversation. Candlelight shone on the surface of her eyes and they sparkled with a keen intelligence, a lively curiosity. Deep lines ran out from the corners of her eyes into semi-circles. Little engraved smiles. Hundreds of them. She was vivacious. Radiant.

Sarah wondered if she ever had such presence. "So, Liz, what's your PhD about exactly?" she asked.

"Sex," said Craig.

"Well, sex. Yes." Liz laughed. "I guess it is a little. But it's really about feminism and what I see as its failings."

Bernadette frowned. "Failings? Such as?"

"I think women have it really, really hard now. You know, I meet loads of women your age who are hardly coping with the pressure of working and having a family."

Sarah leaned forward. "So what would you suggest?"

"I'm not quite sure. But there has to be some better alternative. Perhaps we need to think a bit about the legacy feminism has left us. And maybe we need to think a bit about men and women...and maybe acknowledge some of our big differences."

"Women have always had it hard, Liz." Bernadette poured herself another glass of wine. "It's hardly a legacy of feminism!"

Liz smiled. "I *do* consider myself a feminist, Bernie. But I also think we need to look closely at how things really are. Even though women can have great careers and command respect in the workplace and all of that

wonderful stuff, we also do the majority of the child-caring and housework and family organising.” She raised her eyebrows. “Don’t you think it’s a huge burden?”

“You’re all just control freaks, that’s the main problem,” said Craig, smiling.

Sarah looked at him and laughed. She liked Craig. He was big and scruffy looking, his longish hair kept flopping in his eyes, making him blink. It gave him an endearing, innocent appeal. He looked like a big cheerful koala.

Bernadette rolled her eyes. She turned her back towards Craig and faced Liz. “That burden is largely the fault of men.”

“Oh, yeah.” Brett rolled his eyes. “Of course it is.” He looked at Craig and David. “It’s all our fault.”

“Not individuals as such, Brett.” said Bernadette. “But the dominant male discourse of our society.”

“What?” Brett spluttered into his beer. “Dominant male discourse?”

“I don’t agree with that at all, Bernadette,” said Liz. “I think women have quite a lot of real power. I feel quite powerful in many different domains of my life and not just at work.” She leant forward and spoke enthusiastically, clearly enjoying the conversation. “I think the problem is that we don’t accept that men and women do have real differences. I mean, like it or not, it is the women who have babies, the women who breastfeed and, in most cases, it is the women who feel the most immediate and life-changing bond with their babies. It worries me that we don’t really...” She pressed her hand to her temples as if searching for the right word. “Dignify or appreciate this unique aspect of women.”

“Because we also have an intellect, Liz, an intellect as good as, if not better, than many men’s.” Bernadette looked at Craig, as if making her point.

Liz waved her hand. “Of course we have an intellect. I would hardly suggest otherwise. I’m quite fond of my own, you know. But is our intellect the most important thing about us? More important than our ability to reproduce? Than our responsibility to our children?”

“And what about men’s responsibility to their children, Liz?” Claudia asked. “Isn’t it equal to ours? Why should women shoulder it all?”

“I’m not sure that it is, actually.” Liz smiled. “To be honest. It seems natural, at least in the first year or so...”

“My God, Liz!” Bernadette interrupted. “And you call yourself a feminist!” She shook her head. “These are *very* dangerous ideas that you are promoting.”

“Look.” Liz shook her head. “I’m not suggesting that women give up careers or work or anything like that. But any decent society should take care with future generations. And to do that, we need to value children. And to do that properly, I think we need to value mothering. I don’t see it as anti-feminism. How can it be? It involves a real appreciation of women and their unique ability to bear children.”

“You know, I’ve never thought of it like that. Isn’t it funny?” said Sarah. “I actually feel a bit embarrassed sometimes telling my friends that I’m not working. Just waiting to have a baby.” She rubbed her belly. “I feel as if I must be weirdly old-fashioned or something.”

Liz smiled. “You’re just listening to your instincts, which are quite naturally telling you to concentrate on nurturing yourself and your baby. There’s nothing weird about it at all. And it’s a sad comment on our society that you should feel embarrassed.”

“Oh, yes. But it’s easy to feel like that now. Beforehand,” said Bernadette. “But wait until the baby is born and you’re swamped with the drudgery of it all. When I had my kids, I just couldn’t wait to get back to work. I hardly felt human at home. I felt like an unpaid slave catering to the constant demands of unreasonable babies and toddlers who, frankly, just don’t give a shit about your needs in return. It can be...”

“Come on, Bernie,” interrupted Craig, putting a hand on his wife’s arm “Don’t paint such a depressing picture of it. Sarah’ll drown herself in the pool if you’re not careful.”

Bernadette shook Craig’s hand from her arm. Her cheeks were growing pink. “Sorry, Sarah. But it’s true.” She glared at Craig. “You

wouldn't really know. You never stayed home." She looked at Liz. "Come on, Liz. You must know what it's like. You've got three kids."

Liz nodded. "Oh, absolutely. It can be awful at times. The most thankless job in the world." She smiled at Sarah. "And also the most wonderful." She laughed suddenly and slapped her thigh. "But Bernie, don't you see! We disagree less than you think. Having children shouldn't *be* so awful. Women shouldn't be going crazy isolated at home with their babies. As a society, we should make sure that this doesn't happen. We should explore ways of making child rearing less lonely. More fun. More of a community thing."

"We already have, Liz!" said Bernadette. "It's called childcare."

"Well, it can't be the best solution. Surely children have the right to be cared for by people who love them."

"God, Liz. What a hypocrite. Your kids were in childcare."

"But I'm not criticising women who use childcare, Bernie." Liz sighed and raised her hands. "Look, I just think it's sad that lots of women are miserable with the choices they have once they have kids. Either stay home and go crazy, or work and take on an incredible load. *And* feel guilty about the kids."

"Perhaps men just need to do more," said Bernadette.

"We probably would...if you'd let us," said Craig. "Shit, Bernie. I couldn't even change a nappy without you telling me it was wrong when the kids were little."

Bernadette glared at Craig. "But you, dear, were particularly fucking useless."

Liz laughed. "But that's such a common complaint, isn't it, Bernie? I reckon, and don't shoot me, that women just have a particular skill for running families. Largely because we care more than men. We care that our kids wear clean clothes. We care that they eat good food."

Bernadette shook her head. "Bullshit. It's just conditioning, Liz. Men just get away with being lazy bastards. I really don't use my vagina much when I wash the kids' clothes. And I certainly don't use it to make peanut butter sandwiches."

Everybody laughed. Bernadette smiled and held out her glass to Brett who was topping them up.

Sarah put her hand over her glass and shook her head. She'd already had two glasses and didn't want any more. She picked up the dirty plates from the table and took them to the sink. She washed up quickly and thought about what Liz had said. She felt absurdly pleased that Liz had seemed to approve of her desire to cherish her pregnancy. Perhaps it wasn't so unusual to be content doing nothing but growing a baby, after all.

When she'd finished, she turned and leant back against the bench. She watched everybody talking. They were talking in smaller groups now. Liz was talking to Craig and Bernadette and Claudia was talking to David and Brett. She could hear Claudia telling some long, involved story about a trip she'd taken to New York, the people she'd met, the places she'd seen. Both David and Brett gave her their full attention, their eyes open wide with interest, their bodies bent towards her. Sarah was surprised that Brett was listening so attentively. He hated travel stories. And he normally disliked people who monopolised conversations with long stories of their own lives. As if they were being interviewed, he would sneer.

And yet here he was encouraging Claudia. Listening to her go on and on. Asking questions and nodding enthusiastically. He looked intrigued. Captivated.

He looked like a fool.

Sarah walked outside, over to the pool and dipped her toes in. It was still warm. She glanced back at the house. She could hear laughter and conversation from inside. No one was coming out and it was dark by the pool, so she pulled off her singlet top and pants and just left her bra and underpants on. Then she sat on the edge of the pool and lowered herself slowly into the water.

She put her head beneath the surface and swam the length of the pool underwater. It was dark and difficult to see and, when she emerged, she found that she had gone sideways and had finished at the side of the

pool, not quite at the other end. She swam the length again, straighter this time and emerged near the corner.

She kicked off from the edge, swam underwater, extending her arms and legs as far as they would go, enjoying the stretch.

Suddenly the underwater lights came on. The pale blue of the pool walls replaced the shadowy blackness of the dark water. For a moment she was blinded, confused, and she swam quickly to the top. Light shimmered on the surface of the moving water.

Brett and Claudia were standing by the light switches, smiling down at her. "We thought you might need some light," said Claudia, staggering a little in her sandals. Brett took her elbow and helped her gain her balance. He looked at her and they laughed, then he looked down at Sarah.

"Why are you swimming in the dark?" His voice was thick. He spoke carefully as if trying to hide the extent of his drunkenness.

"I was just enjoying the peace." Sarah swam to the side and put her hand around Brett's ankle. "Why don't you join me? It's lovely in."

Brett bent down and rubbed Sarah's head. "No thanks. We're still drinking." He smiled and straightened up. "Why don't you come back inside now?"

"I will. Soon. In a minute."

She watched them walk back inside, waited until they were gone until she got out of the pool. She hadn't wanted Brett to see her in her modest maternity underwear. It was pink, floral, and she had thought it was pretty, but if she'd stood up next to Claudia, the contrast would have been stark. Claudia looked sexy and athletic in her short dress. And in comparison, Sarah felt unattractive and overweight.

She pulled a towel down from the fence and bent over to dry her hair, then straightened and wrapped the towel around herself. She heard music coming from the house. She sighed. It sounded like everyone was settling in for a big night.

"Hey." David leant over the fence. "Are you swimming?"

"I was." She walked towards him. "Why?"

"Are you going back in?"

"I will. If you want me to."

David opened the gate. "Come on then. You first."

"Okay." She walked to a dark corner and dropped her towel. Sat on the edge of the pool and eased herself back into the water.

"Is it cold?"

"No. It's lovely."

David took his jeans and T-shirt off. He jumped in feet first, making a big splash.

He swam towards Sarah and then went underwater. He grabbed her ankle and pulled her leg up so that she tipped backwards in the water.

"Hey," she said when he came up. "I'm pregnant. Be careful."

"Fuck, Sarah. I'm sorry." He put his hand over his mouth. "I bloody forgot. Are you okay?"

Sarah laughed. "I'm fine. I was only joking."

They swam to the side and put their backs against the edge of the pool. Sarah lifted her arms up and rested them over the side of the pool so that they took her weight. She stretched her legs straight out in front.

"Thanks for having us. Dinner was delicious."

"That's okay." Sarah started to kick her legs, her feet making small splashes on the surface of the water.

"She's a good cook, then."

"Amongst other things?"

David laughed. "And she looks amazing."

Sarah pressed his shoulder with her hand. "So you fancy her?"

"No." He shook his head. "Not at all."

Sarah looked down at the water and smiled to herself. She felt strangely pleased.

"Anyway." David looked up to the house. The veranda lights were on and everyone had moved outside. Claudia danced alone, under the

lights. Her body was turned towards Brett, who stared up at her, transfixed. “I don’t think I’m the one she’s interested in.”

Brett

Brett opened the door and stepped outside. It was only six-thirty and still cool.

He enjoyed the walk to work each morning. It cleared his head and helped him wake up. All traces of the intense irritation he always felt at having to wake at a prescribed time had usually disappeared by the time he got to the hospital.

He walked quickly and arrived in plenty of time to buy a coffee from the cafeteria. He took it outside, sat on one of the benches and lit a cigarette. He sucked the smoke down deeply into his lungs and blew it out noisily.

He enjoyed this first cigarette of the day more than any other. It was the most satisfying and the only time when the joy of actually smoking a cigarette came close to justifying the anticipation, the constant cravings that went with the addiction. The cigarettes that followed throughout the day were somehow a little disappointing. The taste was a little stale, the smell a bit offensive, the effect of the nicotine mildly nauseating. Smoking this first one, after going all night without, was the only purely enjoyable one of the day.

He wondered if Sarah was awake yet. Normally she would wake up too when he had an early shift. She'd get up and make coffee while he was in the shower and bring him a cup as he got dressed. Unlike Brett, she wasn't irritable when she woke up. She opened her eyes and was instantly awake and alert. And she would happily jump straight out of bed with an energy and enthusiasm that Brett found astonishing.

When they were first together, she'd often wake up and launch immediately into continuing some intense conversation they'd been

having the day before. Brett would grunt and groan. Turn away. He'd even put a pillow over his head a few times to get her to shut up. Eventually she'd stopped, understanding his need to ease himself gently into the day. And now, when she woke before Brett, she'd kiss him gently and leave him alone. So he could wake the way he liked. Slowly. Drifting in and out of sleep until he gradually became more awake than asleep. Letting his eyes open and shut and adjust to the day bit by bit.

But recently the pregnancy had made Sarah tired. She slept much more deeply. Now he could get up in the morning and leave the house without her even stirring.

He was surprised to find that he missed her being awake. He missed her cheerfulness, her gentle teasing and tentative smiles. Her quiet determination to force him into a better mood, to get him to smile, or laugh even. Selfishly, he longed to wake her. To kiss her forcefully or to drop something noisy so that she would be roused.

But he knew she needed the sleep, so he was quiet. He tiptoed around the room in the dark and took his clothes to the bathroom to get dressed. And gently shut the bedroom door so she wouldn't hear him leave.

Anyway, he could hardly wake her after years of insisting on his own right not to be woken in the morning, after years of turning his back on her cheerful morning banter.

He stood up and buried his cigarette in the sand ashtray, blew out the last of the smoke and walked in to work.

Two of the wardsmen were off sick so Brett volunteered to make the beds. Sometimes he enjoyed doing the more mindless physical tasks. Time passed quickly and it gave him a break from the patients and the strain of always being empathetic and kind.

Most of his new patients were elderly and recovering from minor surgery. Their complaints, at least compared to his patients from the spinal unit in Sydney, seemed minor and were usually only temporary. And yet these patients seemed to protest a lot more. Old women grumbled incessantly of the indignity of using a bedpan, of the blandness

of the hospital food, and old men of the bruises caused by invasive medical procedures.

He found it difficult to take their complaints seriously and had to fight off the urge to tell them to stop whining. He could tell them some horrific stories of real misery and suffering. Of young men paralysed from the neck down after being tumbled in the surf, of young women who would never be able to have children. Of people forced to spend the rest of their lives in miserable and undignified institutions because they couldn't afford the enormous expense of living independently.

The majority of his patients in the spinal unit had been mildly or severely depressed and it had been a part of his job to help them recover some sense of hope and optimism towards their futures. Sometimes this involved a long and exhausting rehabilitation, which would finally result in a return to full physical ability, but it more often involved a long and difficult process of learning to live with severe disability.

He'd never failed to be moved by the enormous courage and determination most of his patients displayed in coming to terms with their lot. And it had amazed him how often those with the most severe and debilitating injuries were also the patients who ultimately had the most guts. The most spirit. His job had given him an intimate glimpse into the best aspects of human nature.

And he'd been good at his job. He'd found it easy to achieve the perfect balance between a motivating kind of good cheer and sensitivity to the emotional turmoil most of his patients were feeling. He'd been one of the most popular nurses and had received many personal letters from patients who had spent time with him in the unit. They'd all invariably thanked him for his kindness, his patience and ever-present good humour. And many had said that, during their time in the hospital, they'd come to depend on him and had looked forward to seeing him. And, most importantly, that he'd really helped them regain a sense of optimism. That he'd motivated them and kept them going. That he'd been an essential part of their recovery.

Nursing in the spinal unit had come naturally to him. It had suited him. It was one area in his life where he felt emotionally competent, emotionally responsible.

In his relationships with women, things were different. He found it difficult not to start feeling bored and oppressed in any long-term involvement. And, so far, had found it impossible to maintain enough interest or motivation to make any relationship last. He could hardly see the point of trying to battle through difficult times when simply ending a relationship usually provided a welcome relief. And, what's more, the opportunity of a new and more exciting sexual encounter, free of any of the emotional entanglements and resentments that always seemed to plague long-term relationships.

He'd never found it difficult to meet women and when a woman he was seeing started depending on him too much or expecting too much from him, as they inevitably seemed to do, he would extricate himself as gently as possible and quickly find himself in the bed of another.

Only one of his girlfriends, Jeannette, had actually left him first.

He'd lived with her for nearly a year. She'd been studying medicine and was brilliant and beautiful and he'd loved her ferociously. At least in the beginning.

But their relationship had turned sour and she'd become angry and withdrawn. In the last few months of living together, her lips had always seemed to be pursed. Her brow constantly creased by frowns.

Brett had asked her what was wrong.

She'd put her hand on her hips and looked at him with a bemused expression on her face. "Wow. I'm amazed that you'd even notice, Brett."

He'd shrugged, confused by her apparent anger and spite.

"Well, it's obvious you're pissed off. What have I done?"

"Nothing, Brett," she'd spat. "But that's just it. You don't actually *do* anything, do you? I mean I could quit medicine, start working in a brothel, become a junkie and snort cocaine all day, and you wouldn't fucking notice, would you? And nor would you bloody-well care as long

as I fucked you occasionally and walked around with a cheerful look on my face.”

“Fuck,” Brett had groaned and put his head in his hands. “What the fuck have I done to deserve this?” He lifted his head suddenly and opened his eyes wide. “Oh, that’s right. It’s something that I’ve *not* done. Right?” he sneered, his anger growing. “Well, what is it? What terrible fucking crime of omission have I committed now?”

She laughed bitterly. “I haven’t got the rest of my life to tell you, Brett. But I guess I can sum it up pretty quickly.” She held up her hands and started indicating points with her fingers, her voice getting louder and louder as she spoke. “One. I had my final exams last week. You didn’t even mention them. You failed to even ask me once how they went. The most important time in my life so far and it doesn’t even register in your puny little brain. Two. You never, ever want us to spend the weekends alone together. You would rather be with your mates, or go surfing. I can only conclude that you don’t actually like me much. Three.” She stopped and sighed loudly, then spoke quietly, her voice shaking with emotion. “You are simply not interested in me or in my life. And I am simply no longer interested in you.”

She had walked out then and had only returned to the flat one more time to collect her things.

He’d asked her to stay. He’d tried to make her reconsider. He’d said he was sorry. That he’d make it up to her.

She’d shaken her head sadly and said no, that he’d hurt her too much. That he was neglectful, indifferent. That he’d made her feel lonely and unloved.

He’d been unexpectedly sad. Despondent. He’d gone to stay with his mother in Melbourne for a few days for a change of scene.

“Don’t worry, darling,” his mother had said. “She obviously wasn’t right for you, anyway. If she was, you wouldn’t have let her go so easily now, would you?” She shook her head slowly as if in confirmation of her own words. “When Grahame and I met, we knew, almost *immediately* that we were meant for each other.” Her eyes glazed over with tears. “And

if you don't feel like that, darling, then you'll only be settling for second best. You'll be compromising your whole life. And that, my precious boy, would be a waste. A tragedy."

Her words had reassured him. He wasn't negligent or emotionally inadequate. He just hadn't really loved Jeannette. She just wasn't right for him.

But one day he'd meet the right woman and he'd know straight away.

After work, he went for a drink with some of the nurses at a pub in the centre of town. He sipped his beer slowly, letting the noise of the pub, the voices of the nurses he came with, wash over him. Soothe him into a pleasant state of relaxation. He looked out of the pub window. The heat of the afternoon outside was visible. The road shimmered, people in cars looked irritable, pedestrians kept to the shade but looked sweaty and red-faced anyway. Inside, it was cool and dark. People spoke quietly, slowly, and with a not unpleasant listlessness, as if the heat had drained them of the energy to engage in lively or meaningful conversation.

For the first time since moving, he felt definite that they'd made the right choice to move to the country. He was really happy to be a part of such an easy-going and friendly community. He could sense a real difference in the attitude of the Tamworth nurses towards their work. They were all serious about it, and all good nurses. But, for the most part, they weren't career nurses. They worked their allotted hours and happily went home to what they considered their real lives—their husbands or wives, their kids, their partners, their homes. They didn't go home and study or write essays for postgraduate degrees. They didn't all have their hearts set on gaining further education, a better position, a bigger income. They enjoyed their work, but it wasn't the biggest and most important part of their lives. Work was just a way to make money, a means to an end.

It was an attitude Brett approved of. He'd never been very ambitious about work. He wanted to do his job, knock off, and then forget about it. He'd never had any inclination to get a promotion or be in a position of power. He hated any kind of workplace politics and had no inclination to

complain about or persecute the people in charge. He'd never envied them their authority, on the contrary, he often felt sorry for them.

He understood that this was one of the reasons he was popular at work. He was completely non-threatening and his colleagues respected his refusal to be drawn into arguments. He turned up on time, worked hard, and never tried to shirk any of the harder or less pleasant tasks. And he was flexible with the work rosters and could always be counted on to swap a shift with someone who needed a night off.

He sipped at his beer and continued to stare out the window. He didn't feel like talking, was happy just to sit and enjoy the company of his new workmates. He watched a woman walk out of the bank across the street. He noticed her legs, they were long and tanned. He looked up to her face and recognised her. It was his neighbour, Claudia.

He sat up straight and waved, but she didn't notice him, she was concentrating on the traffic, on getting across the road. He stood up as she started crossing the road towards the pub. He went to the door and stood in the doorway, watching her.

She didn't look his way and was about to turn and walk up the sidewalk in the other direction when he stepped forward. "Claudia."

She stepped back, startled, then recognised him and smiled. "Hello, Brett."

"What are you doing?"

She flicked her head back. "Just some banking. Boring stuff." She looked at his glass of beer. "What are *you* doing?"

"Having a drink."

"That sounds sensible." She blew out a mouthful of air and sighed. Put the palm of her hand against her brow. "It's stinking hot, isn't it?"

"Yep." Brett tilted his head toward the pub. "Come and join us."

Claudia looked back in the direction she had been heading and frowned. Then she shrugged and smiled. "Okay."

"Good." Brett smiled.

They walked into the cool darkness of the pub. Brett saw his friends' heads turn, their faces open with curiosity. He took Claudia to the table and introduced her, then went to the bar and bought another round of drinks.

Sarah

“You’re pissed.” Sarah pushed him. “Get off me.”

Brett sighed noisily, dramatically, and sat up. “What a welcome.” He bent forwards and pulled off his shoes, then stood up and took his clothes off, dropping them in a pile on the floor beside the bed. He lay on the bed next to Sarah, on top of the sheet she had over herself.

Sarah pulled at the sheet irritably, his weight had pulled it tight against her. It made her feel confined. “Where have you been?”

Brett turned towards her. “At a pub.”

He smelt of beer and cigarettes. “Who with? I thought I heard Claudia’s voice outside.”

“We shared a cab home.” Brett put his hand under his cheek and closed his eyes.

“What do you mean?” She shook his shoulder. “Why were you out drinking with Claudia?” Her voice sounded high, accusatory.

He opened his eyes and looked at her blankly. “I wasn’t *out drinking with Claudia*. I went out with some people after work. I ran into Claudia.”

He got out of bed. Sarah heard him go the bathroom and turn the shower on. She got up and followed him. She pulled open the shower curtain and looked at him.

“So what did you talk about?”

“Who?” he asked, clearly impatient.

“You and Claudia.”

Brett shook his head. "I can't remember." He put some shampoo in his hair and made a lather, squeezed his eyes shut. "What's the problem, Sarah?"

"I guess the fact that I'm pregnant and have just spent the night home alone while my partner was out drinking with a beautiful woman." She laughed bitterly. "That would probably sum it up for you."

Brett rinsed the shampoo from his hair and turned the taps off. He reached for a towel, rubbed his eyes dry, then looked at her quizzically. "So you're jealous, is that it?"

"She likes you, Brett. She was all over you the other night when David was here."

Brett put a foot on the bath, bent over and dried his legs one at a time. "No more than David was all over you." He stood up straight and looked at her, his eyebrows raised.

"What?"

"Oh, come on, Sarah. David likes you. Always has."

"Bullshit. We're just old friends."

"And Claudia's just a new friend." He hung his towel over the rail and went to the sink. He spread some paste over his toothbrush. He turned to her and pointed the brush in her direction. "You used to go out for drinks with David all the time. I never complained."

"It's hardly the same, Brett."

"Why not?"

"I've known David for years."

"So what?"

Sarah shrugged, tried to think what to say. "I don't know. It's just different."

Brett shook his head. "No, it's not. It's exactly the same. If you can go for a drink with a friend of the opposite sex, then so can I." He bent over the sink and started brushing his teeth.

Sarah was quiet. She watched Brett. She knew why her going out with David was different to Brett going out with Claudia. The difference

was that David was safe. He posed no threat to their relationship. She would never be attracted to David, no matter what he felt for her.

But what she couldn't say, what she was reluctant to even admit to herself, was that she wasn't sure how Brett felt about Claudia.

* * *

"Two sugars, isn't it, Helen?" Sarah waited for the kettle to boil.

"No, dear. One."

Sarah looked at Helen, "Oh, that's right." She smiled but Helen was busy talking to Claudia. Nodding and smiling. She was unusually animated.

Sarah took the cups to the table, placed one each in front of Claudia and Helen and sat down. She sipped on her tea.

"That's exactly how I see it, Claudia." Helen clapped her hands together and laughed. Then she picked up her mug of tea and took a sip. "Lovely, Sarah, thank you." She smiled briefly in Sarah's direction then turned back to Claudia. "But you'd be surprised how many people think differently." Helen shook her head. "Not everyone is as liberated as we are, apparently."

Sarah stared down at her belly, which looked like a basketball resting on her knees and rubbed it absentmindedly. She avoided listening to the conversation as she didn't want to be drawn into it. She found talking to Helen frustrating and often upsetting.

She thought bitterly of the day before. The day Helen arrived. Sarah had driven to the airport to pick her up. She'd been quite nervous. She'd been anxious that they should get on with each other.

And when Helen had walked into the arrival lounge, she'd looked so warm, so genuinely pleased to see her that her heart had lifted. She'd felt a surprising rush of affection. And she'd instantly resolved to be less sensitive, less critical, to stop always assuming that Helen's intentions were bad and to give her the benefit of the doubt.

But the day spent with Helen had worn down her resolve. It'd only confirmed her worst suspicions about her. Shortly after they'd arrived home, after Sarah had shown her through the house, Helen asked Sarah if she wouldn't mind taking her to the shops. She wanted to buy some things for the baby. *Some clothes. Whatever they needed.* She had waved her arms generously. *A pram or a cot, perhaps.*

Sarah had agreed. It would be fun to go shopping together and pick out some cute baby things. They could get to know each other better and Helen could tell her about Brett when he was a baby. And what it was like for Helen, whether she'd enjoyed being a mother immediately or whether it'd been a shock. Whether she'd worked or stayed home. Whether she'd breast or bottle-fed. Maybe Sarah could even ask her about the birth.

They'd been looking at baby blankets when Sarah asked her what it was like when she'd first had Brett, how she had felt.

"Oh." Helen had stopped still, her arms in mid-air. A baby blanket spread out. She smiled. "It was lovely. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I took to motherhood like a duck to water." She folded the blanket and put it back in the pile, picked up another and opened it out. It was a pale cream, with a finely embroidered bear in one corner. "But I was a natural. Everybody said so."

Sarah smiled, picked up the corner of the baby blanket and rubbed its silky edge. "That one's gorgeous."

"No. Too pale, dear. It'll be filthy in no time." She sighed. "There is absolutely nothing nice here. I should've gone shopping in Melbourne." She folded the blanket and put it back in the pile, picked out a brightly coloured one with stars and moons all over it. "This will do. It'll hide the dirt much better."

Sarah shrugged. "Okay. Good thinking." She didn't like it but wasn't about to argue. She didn't want to complain.

They walked towards the counter to pay. "So you had no problem adjusting to having a baby? No problem breastfeeding or anything?"

“Breastfeeding?” The corners of Helen’s mouth turned down as if she had tasted something bad. She stopped walking, put her hand around Sarah’s arm, then looked at Sarah and smiled artificially. “You’re not thinking of breastfeeding?”

“Well, yes.” Sarah frowned, taken aback. “I’d like to, of course.”

“But it’ll tie you down so much, dear. Nobody can even baby-sit for you while you’re breastfeeding.” Helen waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “All this modern nonsense about breastfeeding. In ten years they’ll be saying the bottle is best again. You’ll see.” She took Sarah’s arm and guided her towards the counter. She rubbed her arm and smiled. “Brett was bottle-fed. From the day he was born. And he’s hardly had a sick day in his life.”

Sarah stopped beside a table full of discounted baby clothes and pulled her arm free of Helen’s. She started looking through the clothes. She looked at Helen and smiled. “Well, I’m going to try anyway.” She picked up a pale yellow jumpsuit. “This is cute.”

Helen took it from Sarah and put it back on the table. “Too pale, dear.” She rolled her eyes. “You really have no idea, do you?”

When they’d finished shopping, they had lunch in a cafe inside the shopping complex.

“So what would you like for dinner? I’ll cook.” Helen leant back in her chair and sipped on her coffee. She wrinkled her nose and put the cup down. “Disgusting.” She crossed her arms and smiled at Sarah, a satisfied look on her face. “But you wouldn’t expect to get good coffee out here, would you?”

Sarah rummaged through her bag and pretended she hadn’t heard. She’d already drunk her coffee. And it had tasted good.

“Really,” Helen went on, oblivious to Sarah’s growing irritation. “This is hardly the kind of place I imagined Brett would ever end up living in. He’s such a cosmopolitan man.” She looked at Sarah, then smiled and leant forward as if about to reveal a secret. “Now tell me the truth. Is he dreadfully homesick for the city?”

Sarah moved back and shook her head. "No. No more than I am." She shrugged. "It's been an adjustment for both of us."

Helen opened her bag and looked through it. She nodded noncommittally. "I suppose so." She took out her lipstick, opened it and looked in a little hand mirror as she applied it. "But it was all your idea, wasn't it, dear? It was what you wanted, wasn't it?" she said, her voice soft, gently inquisitive.

Sarah sighed, could feel her cheeks growing pink. She stood up. She was suddenly flustered, confused. She picked up her bag. "I'll just go and pay."

Helen stopped and looked up at Sarah, her mouth still stretched open in a position for applying lipstick. She shook her head. "Don't be ridiculous, dear. I'll pay. I always pay." She shuddered dramatically. "I *never* let others pay for me."

"I can pay, Helen. You've paid for everything else today." Sarah reached to pick up the bill, but Helen snatched at it, grabbed its corner, so that it tore in two.

"Goodness Sarah." Helen held the torn off piece of paper in her fingertips as if it were dirty, then held it up towards Sarah and turned her face away. "You can pay if it means that much to you."

Sarah took the bill and walked towards the counter. "Such an *odd* girl," she heard Helen mutter to herself.

When they arrived home, Claudia was watering her front garden. She waved as they pulled up.

Helen stared. "Who's that?"

"Oh. That's Claudia. We've become quite friendly. She's nice."

"Isn't she gorgeous?" Helen looked at Sarah and smiled. "She looks like a model." She patted Sarah's knee. "You'd better be careful, dear. She's a bit of competition for you at the moment." She looked pointedly at Sarah's belly. "With the state you're in."

Helen unbuckled her seatbelt and stepped out of the car. She bent down and looked at Sarah before closing the door. "I'll just go over and introduce myself. I'll be back in a minute, dear." She walked over to

Claudia's house, waving her arms about and talking in a high-pitched, animated voice. Claudia smiled and bent forward to shake Helen's hand.

Sarah collected the packages from the boot of the car and took them inside. As she was walking back outside, she found Helen and Claudia coming down the hallway.

"Hi." Claudia smiled.

"Oh, Sarah. I've invited Claudia over for dinner." Helen hooked her arm through Claudia's and led her down the hall straight past Sarah. "We could do with a bit of gaiety. A bit of fun." She looked back at Sarah. "Couldn't we, dear?"

At dinner Sarah couldn't eat much. The baby pressed on her stomach and made her feel full quickly. She ate slowly and sipped on the glass of wine that Helen had insisted she have. *It won't do you any harm*, Helen had glanced over at Claudia and had rolled her eyes and shaken her head almost imperceptibly. *It'll probably even do you some good*. She had smiled falsely at Sarah. *You're always so tense, dear*.

Sarah had looked sharply toward Brett, hoping for some kind of indication that he noticed how his mother behaved towards her, that he recognised the nasty remarks, the frequent slights. But he'd avoided her eye.

"Sarah." Helen waved her hand in front of Sarah's face. "Do you not like it, dear? You've hardly eaten a mouthful."

Sarah smiled. "It's lovely, Helen." She rubbed her stomach. "I just don't have much room."

Helen looked at her. She shook her head. "I was so *hungry* when I was pregnant with Brett. I was always ravenous." She laughed, looked at Brett and smiled warmly. "I just couldn't be satisfied." She took another mouthful of food and looked thoughtful while she chewed and swallowed. "And I firmly believe that's why Brett is so healthy. Why he's always had such a good appetite and has always enjoyed his food." She shrugged. "But *I liked* being pregnant." She looked at Sarah. "I really didn't *fuss* about things so much."

Claudia coughed and asked Helen if she wouldn't mind handing her the salt. Sarah glanced at Brett, but again he avoided her eye. He looked straight down at his dinner plate and kept on eating.

* * *

"Hello in there? Sarah?" said Helen.

Sarah blinked. "Sorry. I was daydreaming." She picked up her tea and sipped. "Did you ask me something?"

"Yes, dear. We were talking about love. About babies and love. Claudia asked you what you thought."

"Oh. I didn't hear." She smiled at Claudia. "Sorry. What did you say?"

Claudia waved her arm and shook her head. "Nothing. It doesn't matter." She grinned at Sarah. "We were just theorising."

Helen tapped her hand on Claudia's knee. "But I'm interested in hearing Sarah's thoughts. Ask her again, Claudia."

"Yes. Go on." Sarah smiled.

"We were just talking about whether or not men and women should stay together for the sake of their children." Claudia shrugged. "I just asked you what you thought."

Sarah bit her lip and thought for a minute. "I guess it would depend." She was silent for a moment, remembering how painful it was when her father married Christine. After a moment, she nodded. "But I suppose I think they should, in general. They should certainly try their very hardest." She shrugged, held her hands up. "Unless of course some kind of violence or abuse is involved."

Helen tilted her head, chin down so that she looked at Sarah over the top of her glasses. "Goodness. What an old-fashioned girl you are."

Sarah looked down and felt herself blush. "Children have the right to a happy, secure childhood," she said quietly.

"And adults have the right to find love." Helen's voice was cold. She pronounced each word crisply. "And children are resilient. Adaptable."

She leant forward and started to speak quickly and with urgency. "And you know what I find *really* strange? That these days we all *fuss* so much about a child's upbringing. About a child's self-esteem." She rolled her eyes. "As if every problem a person has is the fault of the parents. All this *nonsense*. And yet when those very children become adults themselves, they are expected to compromise *their* lives if and when *they* go on to have children. We expect them to stay in miserable marriages, to sacrifice their own potential for love. For the sake of the children." She shook her head. "And all so that those very children can then go on to have miserable lives of their own."

Later in bed, Sarah told Brett about their conversation.

"It was specifically directed at me, Brett."

"What do you mean?" He sounded exasperated.

"What your mother was really saying was that you and I should split if things become difficult between us." Sarah put her hand on her stomach. "Whether we have a baby or not."

Brett shrugged. "Don't take everything so much to heart, Sarah. She's allowed to have her opinion." He turned out his bedside lamp, lay down and put his arm over her. "I'm tired. Let's go to sleep."

Sarah pushed his arm off. The pregnancy made the weight of it intolerable. She lay down and faced him. "But, Brett?"

"Hmm?"

"Don't you think it's important that people try to stay together once they have kids?" she said. "Even if they *do* have to sacrifice a bit of their own happiness?"

There was silence.

"Brett?" She pushed his shoulder gently. "Brett?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you hear me?"

“Goodnight, Sarah.” He leant towards her and kissed her on the cheek. Then he rolled over, turned his back towards her. “I’m going to sleep.”

Sarah lay there in the dark, her eyes open. She hated Brett’s ability to go to sleep so easily. He could fall asleep in the middle of a conversation, in the middle of a fight, before things were resolved between them. It was frustrating. And it seemed cold to Sarah. As if her concerns were not worth staying awake for.

His breathing became deeper and slower.

She kicked him in the back of his leg but he didn’t stir. She giggled softly to herself then kicked him again, more viciously this time, and closed her eyes.

Brett

Brett put his mother's bags in the boot of the car, then walked back inside.

"Okay, Mum. We'd better go." He leant in the kitchen doorway.

"Yes, darling." Helen put down her tea cup and stood up. She smiled at Sarah. "Now, don't get up dear, there's no need for any formalities with me."

Sarah shook her head and stood up. She smiled stiffly. "It's fine, Helen."

They walked to the car. Brett opened the passenger door for Helen, and waited while she and Sarah said goodbye. Their dislike for each other was obvious in the way they kissed each other lightly on the cheek, hugged without their bodies touching, their hands patting each other's backs awkwardly.

Helen closed the car door and put her seatbelt on as Brett reversed from the driveway. She returned Sarah's wave with a dismissive lifting of her hand.

Brett sighed. "I wish you'd both make a bit more effort to get on." He kept his eyes on the road but felt his mother turn to look at him.

"What are you talking about, darling?" She kept her voice light, innocent.

He stopped at a red light and turned to her. Rolled his eyes in disbelief. "You know *exactly* what I'm talking about, Mum."

Helen closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, her eyes were wet. She looked down and spoke very quietly. "I suppose I do,

darling.” She turned her head and looked out her window. “But I try, darling, I really do try.” She sniffed. “Whatever you might think.”

“Sarah’s hardly the most difficult person to get on with, Mum. She’s pretty easygoing.”

“Well,” she spoke briskly, as if offended. “Things aren’t always how they appear, darling.”

The lights turned green and Brett accelerated. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Helen was quiet for a minute then sighed noisily. “I guess I just feel a bit disappointed.” She wiped her nose with a handkerchief. “This baby *will* be my grandchild, you know, Brett.”

“I know.” Brett looked at her, confused. “And?”

“Well.” She put her hand on his leg, and sighed dramatically. “Look. Let’s just forget it, darling.” She smiled and patted his knee. “You know the last thing I like to do is cause trouble.”

Brett drove the car over to the curb, pulled on the handbrake and turned off the engine. He faced his mother.

“Forget what, Mum?” he said impatiently. “What’s wrong?”

Helen looked at him. “Okay then.” She undid her seatbelt and faced him. She sat up straight and lifted her chin. “I guess Sarah just makes me feel a little unwelcome...” She waved her hands as if searching for a better word. “A little excluded.”

“How?” He frowned.

“Well.” She paused for a minute, pursed her lips and held her index finger up. “Just one example.” She cleared her throat. “I offered to babysit the baby. To take it off your hands for a while after it’s born. To give you both a break. Sarah almost bit my head off. You would’ve thought I’d suggested that I adopt it or something.” She gave an exasperated little laugh. “*Most* women would be grateful, Brett. *I* would’ve been. I would’ve *killed* for the opportunity for some free help, for a break, when I had you.”

“God, Mum, is that it?” Brett shrugged. “Give her a chance. She hasn’t even had the baby yet. Don’t worry about it.” He looked at his watch and started the car. He shook his head and chuckled as he pulled out. “She’ll probably be begging you to take the baby in a few months.”

“Well. In any case.” She clicked her seatbelt back on and stared through the front of the windscreen. “It says a lot about a couple when a woman isn’t keen to spend some time alone with a man after nine long months of pregnancy.” She turned to him, pointed with her index finger, and spoke crisply, her voice cold. “And it isn’t good, Brett. It isn’t good.”

* * *

Brett pushed the shovel down with his foot and scooped out a large pile of dirt. “Is this hole big enough?”

Sarah walked towards him, one hand resting protectively over her stomach, the other holding the shrub she wanted to plant. She looked down at the hole and smiled at him apologetically, shook her head.

“A bit bigger,” she said. She put the shrub down on its side, pressed her foot against the plastic pot and rolled it around, loosening the soil. “It’ll fit, but plants like to have some loose dirt around them when they’re transplanted.” She pulled the plant from the pot, and started to free some of the roots. “Then the roots can settle into their new home a little easier.”

Brett made the hole larger. Sarah sat cross-legged on the grass and watched him, her hand over her eyes. “I’m so happy, Brett.”

“Good.” He smiled briefly at her and kept on digging.

When the hole was large enough, Brett sat on the grass. “Okay. Do your stuff.”

Sarah sat up on her knees and put the plant into the hole.

“So, what are you planting?”

“Hydrangeas.” Sarah looked at him and smiled. She wiped the soil from her hands. “This should be a good spot for them. They love the shade.”

“What will they look like?”

“I think they’re really beautiful.” She reached out and touched one of the glossy green leaves. Rubbed her thumb over its surface. “These ones’ll have white flowers next summer. They’re a bit old-fashioned but they’ll look gorgeous against this house.”

Brett stood up. “Good. Have we finished?”

“No.” She shook her head. “It’s just the beginning.” She smiled and reached her hand out to Brett so that he could help her up. “Hydrangeas need a lot of care if you want them to look their best. They need some mulching and a lot of water. And they’ll need some pruning.”

Brett helped her up. He rolled his eyes. “You would have to pick something difficult.”

Sarah faced him and put her hands on his shoulders. “But they’ll be beautiful, Brett. You’ll see. They’ll be worth it.”

Sarah

The pain comes again, harder this time, and she knows immediately that it's the beginning of labour. It's different to the practice contractions she's been feeling for weeks. Deeper and sharper. And it lasts for much longer.

She gets out of bed quietly, she doesn't want to wake Brett yet, and walks into the bathroom. She looks in the mirror and is surprised to see herself look so calm. So ordinary. The emotion that tightens her throat and threatens to overflow into tears doesn't show in her face at all. Only the slight trembling of her hands betrays how she feels.

It has only just passed midnight but she decides, against the advice of all the books that she's been reading, not to go back to bed. She is far too excited.

She wants to enjoy it. She wants to anticipate the arrival of her baby. She wants to be awake and alert and savour every moment.

For several hours she walks slowly around the house, stopping occasionally to sit down and flip through a magazine. But she can't sit still, can't concentrate or relax, and after a few minutes she starts walking again. She goes out to the garden and sits by the edge of the pool. She lowers her feet into it. Although it's autumn and the nights have started to cool down, the water's still warm.

Suddenly a light goes on at Claudia's. Perhaps she's been out and is only now getting home. She hears a man's voice, laughter and the clink of glass. Claudia must have invited some friends back for a drink. Or maybe she's met someone, a new bloke. Sarah shakes her head.

Thank God she doesn't have to do that anymore.

A contraction bites into her belly. She shivers. It's getting cold.

She stands up and goes inside to make a cup of tea.

The pains slowly get worse. By morning she's doubled over and moaning through them. She goes to the bedroom and stares down at Brett. He's still asleep, snoring softly. She shakes his shoulder. "Brett. Wake up."

"What?" He lifts his head from the pillow and looks at her. "What is it?"

She forces a smile. "It's started. We're going to have a baby. Today."

"Really?" He sits up and rubs his eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Yes." She nods, irritated at his question. "Of course I'm sure." She takes out the clothes that she has had set aside now for several weeks, walks to the linen cupboard and pulls out a clean towel.

"Why didn't you wake me before?" Brett calls from the bedroom.

"I thought you should sleep." She grimaces and bends forwards as another contraction starts.

"Are you okay?" Brett is standing in the doorway, watching her. He looks concerned. "Shit. This looks serious, Sarah. How often are they coming?"

She waits for the pain to ease and then straightens up. "I don't know," she gasps. "But they're really starting to hurt."

"Maybe we should go." He puts his hand on her back. "Now."

"Okay. Don't panic." She pulls away and swipes at his hand. "I'm just going to have a shower first." She looks at Brett and frowns. "I've managed fine so far, Brett. I'm not suddenly an imbecile or anything."

Brett nods and puts his hands up in a gesture of apology. "Okay. Sorry. I'll just have some coffee or something. Do you want anything?"

She shakes her head and goes to the bathroom. Another contraction grips her and she stops, doubled over, until it slowly eases off. It leaves a strong residue of pain around her back and in a line through her middle, as if her hip bones are being pulled slowly apart.

She whimpers softly. It really hurts. Throughout her pregnancy she's had a romantic notion that the pain will be different to normal pain, that she'll feel each contraction as a joyful step towards the arrival of her baby.

But it is just pain. An all-consuming, malevolent pain that squeezes her insides so viciously it leaves no space for any thought of the baby. She presses her forehead against the cool tiles of the shower wall and grimaces as she feels the beginning of another one. She's suddenly tired, suddenly sick of it. She should have slept when she had the chance.

She stares through the window as the contraction takes her breath. Maybe she should jump out of it. If she's quick enough and catches it off guard maybe she can leave the pain behind, alone and floundering in the shower.

She could run away.

Run far away.

The midwife fills the spa bath. "Give it a try. It often helps." She rubs Sarah's arm. "Come on. It's good to keep trying different things. I'll help you get in."

Sarah shakes her head. "No. It won't help. I don't want to." Her hair is damp with sweat and it clings to her forehead and the back of her neck. The midwife tries to tie it up, but Sarah tells her to leave it alone. She prefers it loose and hanging, covering her eyes.

Brett pushes her hair from her eyes and looks at her. "Come on. Give the spa a try. Please, Sarah."

She closes her eyes and moves away, bends over the bed, which is adjusted to be higher than normal, and buries her face in the pillows. Maybe she should behave herself. Make it easier for them. Be more docile and compliant. More heroic. But she can't. She doesn't want to have a fucking spa bath.

She is astounded by the enormity of the pain, shocked by its ferocity. She is angry that she has never really been told and feels betrayed by the books that suggest gentle distractions such as aromatherapy and soothing music. What fucking good could a waft of peppermint or lavender do? The soothing sounds of Enya?

She's being torn apart.

Another contraction starts. She bites hard into the pillows, which are already damp with her tears and spit. She wants the pain to stop. To go away and let her lie down and sleep for a couple of hours and gather some energy.

She wants it to stop.

But her womb contracts relentlessly as if it has a malicious will of its own. As if she is possessed by a powerful and sinister force that is deaf to her wishes and her shouts of despair, her messy tears and her roaring demands for a break. For her urgent desire to wait. To change the plan.

And it is a frightening, lonely realisation that this agony can't be stopped at will, that it can't be shared with or handed over to Brett or anyone else. She has to bear it alone. She can no more escape the expulsive, agonising contractions than she can stop the cycle of the tides or the rotation of the earth around the sun.

"No. No. No. No more. Please God," she sobs. The contraction squeezes tighter and she leans into the pillow. "Stop. Stop it. I can't do it."

But she no longer has any say. Her body is master.

* * *

Sarah watched Brett bend over the little bassinette. He scooped up the baby and held him close to his chest, murmured into his ear and kissed him. Then he noticed her looking and smiled. His eyes shone.

"Hey." Brett turned the baby around so Sarah could see his face. "What about his name? Do you still want to call him Joshua?"

“Yes. He looks like a Josh.” She held out her arms. “Let me have him.”

She touched his face gently. Traced her finger around the gentle arch of his brow and along his hairline. She leant forward and put her nose against his. He breathed out gently. So softly, and such a pure sweet air. She closed her eyes and breathed it in.

“He’s beautiful, isn’t he?” she said

“He is.” Brett nodded, spoke in a whisper. “I can’t believe he’s ours.” He sat on a chair next to her bed and put his hand on her leg. “You were very brave, Sarah.”

“Really?” Sarah looked at him, surprised. “I thought I made such a scene. I felt quite hysterical.”

“No.” Brett shook his head “You didn’t seem hysterical at all. You were quite calm, I thought. Determined.”

“Really?” She raised her eyebrows. “And I thought you were distressed.”

“No.” He shook his head. “No. I wasn’t really.” He looked apologetic. “I mean, I knew you were in terrible pain and I felt sorry for you in that respect. But I knew everything was okay because the midwives kept saying so. And the end was amazing. A real high. Sorry.” He shrugged and smiled. “I know it wasn’t exactly fun for you.”

“No. Don’t apologise.” She smiled, happy with the unexpected intimacy of their conversation. She was surprised by Brett’s perspective and his unusual openness. “It’s just bizarre. I mean, I thought the whole thing, until the end, was quite horrible. The books make it seem like its going to be some kind of pleasant, manageable thing.” She shook her head slowly. “But it wasn’t. It just felt messy. And wrong. And unnatural.” She laughed and slapped the side of the bed for emphasis. “And ridiculously bloody agonising.”

“But look what you’ve done.” He touched Joshua gently, opened his eyes wide in awe. “You must feel fantastic.”

“Well, I do now. Now that it’s over. Now that the bloody pain has stopped. Fuck. I can’t believe how awful it was.”

She thought how strange it was that, even while talking about it, she was already starting to forget the horrific intensity of the labour. There were moments in the middle of it where she thought she would rather die than continue. She had even hoped for something to go wrong so that she would be rushed to the surgery for a caesarean, where she could be anaesthetized, put out of her misery.

But now, already, her memory of the pain was fading. If a pregnant woman were to ask her now what it was like, she would answer that it wasn't too bad. That it was bearable. That it was nothing to be afraid of. The shock of it was so easy to forget and had so quickly become of the past. In her mind, it was already becoming a story, an experience to be described to other women, to her children and grandchildren.

And she was left feeling only the elation she had felt since the moment he was born. When the combination of enormous relief and the excitement of meeting her new baby made for a glorious, rapturous joy. The ecstasy of the final moment, of becoming a mother, of finally meeting her own flesh and blood, made the hours of agony seem quite insignificant.

She understood now why women did it again and again. It would always be worth it.

Brett

Brett parked in the hospital grounds and stepped out of the car. It was a beautiful day, sunny but cool. The exhausting dry heat of the summer had finally, mercifully, succumbed to autumn.

He walked quickly, light on his feet. He felt surprisingly happy and excited and had to struggle to resist an urge to sprint across the hospital grounds and run as fast as he could to Sarah and Joshua.

The birth had left him elated. High. Ecstatic. He'd been unable to sleep and had stayed up most of the night drinking coffee and wondering at his own extreme emotions. For the first time, he looked carefully at the baby clothes Sarah had bought. They were so tiny, so soft. He'd rubbed them against his cheeks and had cried happily at the memory of Joshua's neat perfection.

He could hardly wait to see him wearing them.

He was amazed at how quickly he had felt a strong and protective love for Joshua. He knew immediately that he would do anything for him. That he would kill for him. Die for him. His own life had somehow become both less and more. Less, because Joshua's life now seemed far more important than his own, and more because he was also a necessary part of that very life.

Any fear of his own death that he used to have, the fear of the darkness of it, the fear of the unknown of it, the fear of simply ceasing to exist, had vanished the moment Joshua was born. It was liberating.

And now he felt a physical aching to hold Joshua. To wrap his delicate body in his arms and keep him warm. Keep him safe. To let the

very fragility of his son's tiny body fill him with a gratifying sense of his own power, his own masculine strength.

Joshua's birth, at once both magically extraordinary and so commonplace, had given Brett a greater appreciation of the world. It put his own small world, his own petty concerns, into perspective. He was simply a part of a grander scheme. And, biologically at least, he'd now fulfilled his role. His genes, his father's genes, and the genes of his father before him had now been given the opportunity to continue. His father and grandfather were dead—but in Josh they lived on.

The thought was quite bewildering—countless generations of people had gone into the making of this one small person. Joshua would have attributes and physical quirks from people Brett had never known. And it was both gratifying and sad to realise that his own father must have felt feelings very similar to those Brett was feeling now. He must have loved Brett just as intensely as Brett loved Josh. For the first time, having become a father himself, he appreciated the true strength and value of parental love. No one, not his wife, nor Joshua's own children, would ever love Joshua as much as Brett and Sarah would.

He now understood exactly what he'd lost when his father died. He'd lost one of the only two people in the world who loved him unconditionally and unselfishly.

He stopped walking for a moment, tipped his head back and closed his eyes. He could see the weak, early-morning light of the sun behind his eyelids, and he imagined that he was looking into heaven itself. *I wish you were here, Dad, I wish you were here.*

He opened his eyes and started walking quickly towards the hospital entrance. He longed to stare once again at Joshua's amazing perfection, to push his forefinger into the soft mounds of his palm where it would be grasped gently by his tiny fingers, to kiss his soft, downy cheeks and count his fingers and toes. He couldn't wait to breathe in the wonderful scent of fresh new life.

Sarah

Joshua cried out and Sarah woke. For a moment she was disoriented and forgot where she was, she'd been so deeply asleep. Then she saw the gently glowing light above her head, the hospital blanket, her narrow single bed and she remembered. She sat up and reached over to the clear plastic hospital cot. She pulled on it gently and it rolled towards her. She lifted Josh out, wrapped tightly in his bundle of blankets, and put him on a pillow across her lap. She lifted her T-shirt and guided his mouth towards her breast. He twisted his head blindly from side to side, until his lips found her nipple. He opened them and tried to latch on, but seemed to push the nipple from his mouth with his tongue. She pushed her breast more firmly into his mouth as a midwife had shown her earlier but he recoiled and twisted his head away.

She pressed on her buzzer.

"You need some help, sweetie?" A midwife she'd not met before put her head around the door.

"Yes." Sarah nodded. "Can you help me get him to latch on properly?"

"Of course." The midwife, whose nametag read Linda, pushed a pillow behind Sarah's back. "It helps if you sit up a little straighter." She rubbed her hands together to warm them, and then put one hand behind Joshua's head and one hand on Sarah's breast. She took Sarah's nipple between her thumb and forefinger, pushed it into Joshua's open mouth and held his head firmly against Sarah's chest until he latched on and started to suck.

Sarah felt no discomfort or embarrassment at her touch. An unexpected result of childbirth was her new and complete lack of physical self-consciousness. She was happy to expose her bare chest in

front of the doctors and had easily discussed the size of her nipples, their suitability to breastfeeding, with several of the midwives.

Her breasts were now feeding machines rather than sexual organs. No more erotic, or in need of concealment, than an elbow or toe.

Linda stood up straight and grinned down at Sarah. "You've got it," she said. "He's a natural."

Sarah was surprised at the strength of his suck. Despite his tiny size, his apparent helplessness, Joshua possessed a powerful and instinctive will to survive, to feed and take nourishment.

She had a new and unexpected respect for her body. Normally she looked in the mirror and saw an image full of frustrating imperfections. Legs too short, hips too wide, breasts too big. But when she'd had a shower that morning, and had looked in the mirror at her soft, protruding belly and her huge, marble-veined breasts, she'd seen her body for what it really was, a miraculous living organism capable of creation. She'd become suddenly and profoundly aware, for the first time, of what her body was built to do. Of the wondrous female ability to not only create new life, but also to nourish and sustain that new life. And she'd washed her tender body gently, with affection.

She felt important and full of purpose. She had a baby to care for.

And for now, she was all that he needed.

* * *

She turned around in her seat, craned her neck awkwardly to look at Joshua in his capsule.

"Does he like it?" Brett asked.

"I don't think he knows actually." She laughed, looked at Brett. "But it feels strange to me."

He took one hand off the steering wheel and put it on her knee. He kept his eyes on the road. "What does? Driving?"

"Taking him home."

“Why?”

She put her hand over his and squeezed. “I feel like I’m taking home a new toy or something.” She put her finger to her lip and thought for a moment. “Actually, you know what I feel like? What this reminds me of?”

“What?”

“I feel exactly like I did the first day I got my driver’s licence.” She laughed as she remembered. “I was *hopeless* in the test, I drove up on the gutter and nearly killed someone. But the guy felt really sorry for me ’cause it was my third attempt, so he passed me anyway.” She shook her head. “And as I drove home, all alone in a car for the first time, I started laughing. I almost cried I was laughing so much. I was hysterical. I felt like I was a danger to everyone else on the road.”

Brett smiled. “You probably were.”

She nodded vigorously. “Well, that’s what I thought. I just couldn’t believe that they trusted me to drive a car all on my own.” She looked out of the window as Brett pulled into the driveway and turned the engine off, undid his seatbelt. “And that’s exactly how I feel now.” She undid her seatbelt and turned to look at Brett. “Like I’ve been given a licence to do something that I don’t, actually, know how to do.”

* * *

“Goodnight.” She put her hand on Brett’s shoulder and bent down to kiss him.

Brett looked at her. “Already?”

“I’m exhausted.” She showed him a magazine she was holding in her hands. “I’ve got this to read.”

He lifted the remote and pointed it at the television, muting the sound. “Oh, good, some fine literature.”

Sarah rolled up the magazine and hit him playfully on the head. She smiled and walked into their bedroom.

She undressed quietly, with only a dim bedside lamp on, so that she wouldn't wake Josh. She got into bed and looked at him, watched for the gentle rise and fall of his chest, the only visible sign that he was breathing. That he was still alive.

She thought how having him had profoundly altered the way she saw the world and her own part in it. When she was pregnant, she'd been focussed mainly on the birth and could hardly see or imagine life beyond it. She'd even once imagined that she would be satisfied just to give birth and set eyes on her baby, hold him for a moment, see what he looked like and that after that she could have died happy and fulfilled.

But as soon as he was born, everything had changed. She'd become instantly and powerfully conscious of the nature of their relationship. She was his mother. She loved him fiercely and she would love him forever.

The experience of this love seemed to Sarah so profound, so huge and overwhelming, that she wondered why she hadn't been warned, why nobody had told her. But then, after a few days, she realised that in fact they had. She had met lots of women who talked often and openly of their love for their children, of how everything had changed once their children were born, but she had never really listened. Such talk had always bored her in the past. It had always seemed somehow overly sentimental and self-indulgent. The subject matter of a bored and unstimulated housewife.

The love of a mother for her child was so fundamental, so basic and ordinary and such an everyday thing, that it was taken for granted by the world at large. It was so common and so expected that the wonder of it, the beauty and magic of it, was almost invisible. Only mentioned, and even then almost furtively, amongst parents and at mothers' groups. Yet the joy of it was just as powerful, just as exciting as romantic love. And it was infinitely more constant and steady.

Sarah felt like she'd discovered a wonderful secret, a secret that made her an automatic member of a universal community, a kind of cult, for which the experience of motherhood was the one and only condition of membership.

She thought of her own mother, and understood for the first time how painful her death must have been. She had died of cancer and had known she was dying for nearly a year. Sarah had always been conscious that her mother's death was painful to herself, and to her father, and also, of course, to her mother. But she had imagined her mother's pain as a simple fear, as a kind of straightforward sadness at never being able to see Sarah or her father again. But now she understood how agonising it must have been to leave a young daughter, how concerned she must have been for Sarah's future, how tormented at never being able to witness it.

And so there was also a painful side to motherhood, to the experience of such ferocious love, and it made Sarah feel vulnerable, uncertain and afraid. She had never felt so apprehensive about the future, never so aware of all the endless possibilities for disaster that it held. There were so many different ways that Josh could be hurt or injured, both physically and emotionally.

Even the thought of him suffering some small kind of upset like a rejection from a future school friend made her heart ache.

And what if he hurt himself really badly one day? Or succumbed to a painful disease? What if he broke his neck diving into a river? Or became a drug addict or an alcoholic?

What if he died?

Dear God.

What if he died?

She had become obsessed with thoughts of death. With the possibility that *one* day, *one* of them, either Josh or Brett or herself, might be killed accidentally, or die young from some horrible disease.

Josh could be left motherless, or fatherless. And the possibility that he could be so disadvantaged, that his life could be compromised in any such painful way, played on Sarah's mind. It tainted the joy of loving Josh with a melancholy fear, a morbid kind of sadness.

And then there was the miserable certainty that one day they would all die, that one day they would all be separated permanently. Forever. She would never see Josh again.

It was a thought too painful to bear and it had made her wish, for the first time in her life, that she believed in God. Faith in an afterlife would've been comforting.

She thought about it constantly and worried over ways to avoid anything bad happening. She could stay home with Josh for as long as possible, maybe home-schooling would even be a good idea. They could avoid driving long distances, eat healthy food, avoid drugs and alcohol.

But deep down she knew it was futile. She couldn't really protect Joshua from risk or danger without compromising the quality of his life in other ways. But, for the time being, imagining that she had some control over their future made her feel better. And for the time being, she would be vigilant. Tirelessly vigilant.

* * *

"Hello!"

Sarah jumped and turned to look behind her. Claudia was walking through the back door. Sarah smiled at her. "Hi, Claudia."

Claudia pulled up a chair and sat beside her. "Let me see this gorgeous little baby."

Sarah stood up, Joshua a cocoon of blankets in her arms. "You can hold him for me if you like."

Claudia put her arms out. "Ooh. Yes, please."

Sarah bent down and placed Joshua carefully in Claudia's arms. She pulled the blankets away from his cheek so Claudia could see his face.

"Isn't he gorgeous?" Claudia whispered.

"I think so." Sarah smiled. "If you hold him for a minute I'll just go in and make us a cup of tea."

"Okay."

Sarah made a pot of tea and put it on a tray with a jug of milk and a bowl of sugar. She carried it to a table on the veranda and poured the tea into cups.

“So, what was it like?” said Claudia.

“What?”

“Having a baby.”

“Oh. It was amazing.” Sarah shook her head. “Both horrific and wonderful at the same time. If that makes any sense.”

Claudia nodded. She bent forward and put her nose on Joshua’s. “He’s absolutely gorgeous, Sarah.” She looked at Sarah and smiled sadly. “You’re so lucky, you know.”

“I know.” Sarah was quiet for a minute. “And so are you, Claudia.”

“Am I?”

“Of course.” Sarah frowned. “You’re beautiful and intelligent. You own your own house. You’ve got so much potential, so much to look forward to.” She laughed. “You don’t even need to *work* if you don’t want to.”

Claudia shrugged and gave a short laugh. “But all I want is what you’ve got. A man. A man like Brett and a baby.”

Sarah suddenly felt uncomfortable. She didn’t know what Claudia expected her to say and she wasn’t in the mood for any kind of serious emotional conversation with Claudia right now. She wanted to keep the conversation light and cheerful. She remembered the night she was in labour, the male voice she had heard coming from Claudia’s. She smiled. “So what have you been up to? Met anyone nice?”

“Nice?” Claudia sneered. “Nice isn’t an adjective I’d use to describe many men. Except Brett of course.”

Sarah laughed. “And Brett would probably be quite offended if he heard you describe him as *nice*.”

Claudia looked at Sarah, her expression serious. “But he *is* nice, Sarah.” She put her thumb on Joshua’s forehead and rubbed it vaguely

over his hair. "He was so *moved* when you had Joshua. So *concerned* for you and Josh."

Sarah shrugged. "Of course he was."

She watched Claudia's thumb on Joshua's head. It looked to Sarah as if she was pressing a little too hard, as if she was actually pulling on Joshua's hair a little. She stood up and put her arms out.

"I think he's hungry, Claudia."

"Oh. Okay." Claudia lifted Joshua to her face and kissed him on the nose before handing him to Sarah. She sighed. "He is so cute. So adorable. I could just eat him up."

Sarah suddenly felt annoyed by Claudia's professions of affection for Josh. It seemed a little strange and inappropriate in a way she couldn't quite define or understand. The way Claudia looked at Joshua was odd, the way she held him was too proprietary, and it made Sarah feel protective. She hugged Josh close, lifted her top and offered him her breast. He turned away, pursing his lips in refusal.

"He doesn't look hungry," Claudia said. "Maybe he's tired."

"Maybe," Sarah snapped. "I'll just go and put him down."

Claudia stood up and put her arms out. "Let me do it?"

"No. That's okay." Sarah stood and walked towards the back door. "I prefer to do it myself."

As she walked down the hall towards their room, the front door opened and Brett walked in. He saw Sarah, smiled and kissed both her and Joshua on the cheek.

"How was work?"

"Good." Brett sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "I need a beer."

"I put some in the fridge."

"Thanks." He kissed her again, absently, and went past her towards the back of the house.

After Sarah had settled Joshua in his cot, she walked back towards the veranda. She stopped in the doorway and looked out. Brett and

Claudia had moved onto the back lawn, and were sitting down side by side on the grass. They had a bottle of beer each and were laughing comfortably together. Claudia tipped her head back to take a sip of her beer then leant towards Brett. She put her hand on his leg and said something quietly. They both burst out laughing.

Sarah frowned. She wondered when they had become so familiar with each other, when they had become such good friends.

As Claudia tipped her head back to take another sip of her beer, she saw Sarah. She turned to face her and smiled brightly.

“Sarah!” She patted the grass beside her. “Come and join us.”

Claudia

Claudia looked over at the man again. He was still staring at her. She picked up her drink and swallowed the rest of it in one gulp. Then she licked her lips and lifted her empty glass.

He grinned at her blankly. She lifted her glass again and raised her eyebrows, tipped the glass upside down to make her point.

He looked confused, shook his head slightly. Then his face cleared as he understood what she wanted. He smiled and nodded and indicated with the palm of his hand that she should wait.

He turned and walked halfway towards the bar then stopped. He turned again and walked quickly back to Claudia. He cupped his hand over her ear. He said something but she couldn't hear clearly. The music was too loud.

"What?" she shouted.

"I don't know what you're drinking."

"Bourbon." She handed him her glass. "No ice."

"Coke?"

She shook her head. "Just bourbon."

He took her glass and looked at it, raised his eyebrows with surprise. He shrugged. "Okay."

He went to the bar and came back with the drinks. He gave Claudia hers and stood next to her, his back against the wall. He leant sideways, put his mouth against her ear. "What's your name?"

Claudia shook her head, waved her hand dismissively.

The man frowned and nudged her with his elbow. "Come on. What is it?"

Claudia drank her bourbon in one quick gulp. She squeezed her eyes shut as it burned her throat.

Then she turned to the man and pressed her body against him. She kissed him on the mouth and leant back to look at his face. He looked a little startled.

She kissed him again, this time forcing her tongue between his teeth.

She pulled away, and then took his drink from his hand. She finished it in one smooth swallow, grimacing when she tasted its sickly sweetness. Southern Comfort. She hated it.

The man shook his head. He put his hand on her waist and pulled her roughly toward him. "Wild girl, eh?"

Claudia slapped his hand away, put the palm of her hand against his chest and pushed him against the wall. She untucked his shirt from his jeans and put her fingers on the skin of his stomach, caressed the bush of hair near the belt of his jeans.

"Let's go." She moved back, adjusting her dress.

"Now?"

"Yes." She turned and walked out of the nightclub without looking to see if he followed. When she got outside, she walked briskly down the sidewalk toward the taxi rank.

As she was about to open the door of a taxi, she heard footsteps. He was running, breathless. He put his hand around her arm.

"Wait."

She opened the door and looked at him. She indicated with her hand that he should get in first.

He paused. "What's your name?"

"Sarah." She smiled at him for the first time. "It's Sarah."

Brett

When he got home from work, Sarah and Josh were asleep, so he closed the bedroom door, went to the kitchen and washed up. When he finished cleaning, he went to the bedroom to check on Sarah and found her sitting on the bed, breastfeeding Josh. Her face was crumpled with sleep and her eyes were red.

“Hi.” He sat next to her.

“Hi.” She smiled sleepily. “How was work?”

“Good.”

They took Josh into the lounge room and put him on a rug on the floor. Brett lay down on the carpet and played with Josh, trying to get him to smile. Sarah went to the kitchen to make them both a cup of tea and brought them back to the lounge room. She handed Brett his cup and sat back down on the floor, her legs crossed, her hands wrapped around her cup. She sipped at her tea and stared vacantly down at Josh.

“I washed up.” Brett was unable to stop himself from pointing it out. He wanted Sarah to acknowledge it.

She looked at him and shrugged. “I noticed.”

They were quiet for a moment. He considered dropping the point, avoiding a fight, but he looked at her closed-up face and felt suddenly irritated. She looked so sure of herself, so superior. “Well, you could thank me.”

“Why?” she snapped. “You don’t thank me.”

“Because it’s your job.”

“What?” She shook her head, looked incredulous. “What?”

"I mean, if I'm at work for eight hours, it's your job." He sat up defensively. "That's fair isn't it?"

"Jesus. I'm living with a Neanderthal."

"Oh, bullshit." He felt instantly angry. He hated being accused of being sexist. It was such an easy attack for a woman to make when fighting with a man. "It's not a gender thing, Sarah. It's about a simple, straightforward and fair division of labour."

"It's not a gender thing, Sarah," she imitated his voice spitefully. "Don't try to sound clever, Brett, you always fuck it up." She stood up then and placed her cup on the mantelpiece and looked at him as if he were stupid. "Of *course* it's a gender thing, you fucking moron." She started to pace the floor, to walk angrily back and forth across the lounge room. "I'm the woman stuck at home breastfeeding. Only a woman can know what it's like, how exhausting it is to wake every few hours to feed a baby. How *drained* you feel and only a man would expect you to keep the house tidy, to cook his dinner for him, when you feel like that. And only a man would say something as stupid as *I've been working all day*. Only a man would fail to realise that a woman at home with a baby has been working all day, too."

* * *

Brett opened his eyes. The bedside lamp was on and Sarah was sitting up, pillows across her lap, feeding Josh.

"Hey," he said.

She looked down at him. "Sorry, did I wake you?"

"No, don't worry." He sat up and rubbed his eyes. "I'm on an early anyway."

"It's still only four-thirty, Brett."

"Oh. I thought it was later." Brett lay back down and pulled the blankets up. "Josh woke up a lot last night, didn't he?"

“Four times, I think. No, five. I’m not sure.” She put her hand in his hair. “I thought you slept through it all.”

“I tried to.” He sighed and rolled over, turned his back to Sarah and the light. He yawned. “I might just get a bit more sleep before work.”

“Good idea.”

He closed his eyes and tried to sleep. He could hear the noise of Joshua swallowing. It was a surprisingly loud sound coming from such a small person. He and Sarah had laughed when they first noticed it, and had both agreed that it was comforting, reassuring sign that he really was taking nourishment.

He thought about the past few weeks. He had been unexpectedly moved at Joshua’s birth and had been relieved to discover that he was a good father, that he loved Joshua automatically and easily. He missed him when he was at work and always looked forward to seeing him, to holding him and admiring whatever new facial expression he might make, whatever new milestone he might reach.

But often now he arrived home to find the house in a mess, Sarah crying, or red-faced from earlier crying, and the fridge empty of food. It was frustrating and it wasn’t how he’d imagined things would be with Sarah staying home all day.

He pushed at his pillow and moved his head to a plumper, more comfortable part and thought about the day before. He’d gone to work early, already exhausted after having woken up three or four times when Sarah fed Josh, and had come home to find the house in a mess, dirty nappies piled up in Joshua’s bedroom, the previous night’s dishes still dirty in the sink.

He listened to Joshua finish his feed. He felt the shift in the bed as Sarah got up and put him back in his cot.

She got back into bed and pressed herself against his back, put her arm around him, took his hand in hers. He didn’t move, made himself breathe evenly so she’d think he was asleep.

Clearly she was no longer angry, or had forgotten her anger from the night before. But Brett still felt bitter. She had called him a moron, a

Neanderthal. If he had said such harsh things to her there would be hell to pay. She would demand an apology, she would go on and on about it.

And yet she refused to acknowledge how hard *he* worked, how *his* workload had increased dramatically since Joshua's birth. She refused to believe that perhaps he was just as tired as she was.

He sighed with irritation, then moved his whole body towards the edge of the bed, as far away from Sarah as he could get.

* * *

He heard it again, a sharp creaking, the noise of an old hinge opening. It sounded very close, like it came from their backyard. He pushed the blanket off and stood up. He grabbed Sarah's dressing gown from the hook behind their bedroom door and put it on. He looked down at Sarah. She was quiet and still, deeply asleep.

He walked down the hall and stood at the back door. He turned the handle and pushed it open slowly, trying not to make any noise. He looked out at the backyard. The moon was almost full, and lit up the garden, making it easy to see. He looked around, saw the shrubs he and Sarah had planted, the bags of mulch, the shovel leaning up against the back fence.

He looked over towards the pool and saw two people standing inside the pool gate. He was about to shout out, to tell whoever it was to leave, to fuck off, when he recognised the way the woman moved her arms to release her hair from the top of her head. It was Claudia and a man.

Brett stood at the door and watched them. He felt justified in doing so because they were in his backyard and because they were trespassing. They were kissing and hugging, laughing quietly with their hands over their mouths. Claudia whispered to the man to be quiet, put her finger to her lips and said "shh, shh," glancing back at the dark house nervously. Brett could tell by the way they moved, slowly and with exaggerated caution, by the loudness of their whispers, that they'd been drinking.

The man, who was very muscular, bulky, pulled off his T-shirt and stepped quickly out of his shorts. He went to Claudia and put his arms around her. He kissed her, his hands on her back beneath her top. Claudia stepped back and unbuttoned her dress, shrugged it off and let it fall to the ground. With her underwear still on, she sat by the side of the pool, then lowered herself in and swam smoothly to the other side. She climbed out of the pool, turned to face the man, reached behind her back and unhooked her bra. She bent sideways to step out of her underpants and stood there naked, her hands on her hips, posing provocatively.

The man dove into the pool and swam noisily towards her. He pulled himself out of the pool and put his arms around her, picked her up, wrapped her legs around his back and carried her easily to the wooden table. He sat her on it, pushed her gently back, and opened her legs.

Brett watched the man's arse move urgently, aggressively, far too fast, between Claudia's legs. "Idiot," he sniggered. He shook his head and smiled to himself, wondering why Claudia would be fucking such a pig, such a clumsy lover. He took hold of his own erect penis and ran his hand up and down its length. He watched Claudia's face, stared at her breasts, at the bits of her body that he could see around the man's bulk and brought himself quickly to climax.

Afterwards he felt angry, affronted at the invasion. "That's my fucking table, arsehole," he whispered to the man in protest as he turned and headed back to bed.

Sarah

Sarah sat on the lounge and stared blankly at the wall in front of her. She felt awful. She was still in her pyjamas, her hair was messy and in need of a shampoo, and she could smell her own skin. Sweat and breast-milk. Dirt. It was almost four o'clock in the afternoon and she wasn't sure if she had even brushed her teeth. She was so tired. Exhausted. Her eyes were sore and itchy from a lack of sleep and she wanted to close them, *needed* to close them. She wondered when her eyelids had grown so heavy.

She would rest here, just for a moment, but if she let her eyes drop shut she would fall asleep. She would plunge immediately into a deep, glorious, heavenly sleep. It was tempting, so tempting, but she needed to shower. And the water would make her feel better—being clean and fresh would make her feel like a new woman, all the books said so, a new woman, a better wife and mother. But her legs were as heavy as concrete and she couldn't stand. She couldn't move.

Finally, *mercifully*, after fussing and whimpering for four straight hours, Joshua had fallen asleep.

He hadn't been overly noisy, or hysterical, but his distress had upset her and made her anxious. She tried repeatedly to breastfeed him, to rock him soothingly, but he turned away from her and arched his back. She undressed and redressed him several times to make sure there was nothing uncomfortable within his clothes or his nappy, and had tried twice to settle him with a warm bath.

Finally she rang the early childhood nurse, who suggested that if he wasn't hungry or wet, and had been awake for hours, that he was probably just overtired and in desperate need of sleep.

“But he screams if I put him in his cot.”

“Yes, well, babies don’t always know what they need. That’s what makes it all so difficult. And that’s where your job comes in.”

Sarah had started to cry noisily.

“Listen, Sarah. It’s okay to feel overwhelmed sometimes, everybody does.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Now I’ve got a suggestion for you that might help. Wrap him nice and firmly and put him in his cot. Then go and make yourself a nice cup of tea and take it outside. Sit where you can’t hear him and drink your tea. Try to relax a bit. When you’ve finished, go and check on him. I bet you he’ll be sound asleep or almost.”

“Okay. I’ll try that. Thanks.”

“If it doesn’t work, Sarah, call me back and I’ll pop over and see what I can do, okay?”

Sarah had taken her advice and wrapped Joshua firmly and put him in his cot. But she didn’t drink her tea outside, she couldn’t bear not to be near him, not to hear him, so she sat in the lounge room and listened. He cried very loudly for ten minutes and then started to settle, to cry only intermittently, and finally, after another ten minutes, he’d fallen asleep.

But Sarah had continued to cry. She’d started to sob uncontrollably. Suddenly she missed her mother desperately and with an intensity that she hadn’t felt for years. All the anguish and bitterness of becoming motherless at such a young age, the frustrated longing to see her again, to just *have her back*, the bitter wish that it had happened to someone else, to one of her friends instead, suddenly resurfaced. The despair that she had lived with for years after her mother’s death, the sense of terrible unfairness that had eventually diminished and become easier to bear, overwhelmed her again now, as though it had only happened recently.

Sarah imagined her mother, grey-haired by now, but still beautiful, still strong and upright, as if she were still alive. She would, of course, have come to the birth. And now she would be living temporarily with Sarah and Brett, helping them, teaching them. She would know how to

settle Josh, would pick him up when he was screaming and soothe him easily, with gentle murmurs. She would take him for long walks in the pram so Sarah could sleep in the day, or get some housework done. And she would tell Sarah and Brett stories of when Sarah was a baby. Of when she had first smiled, first walked, of how she had loved her baby daughter desperately.

She would kiss Sarah's brow when she went to bed at night and tell her that she was a good mother and that she was proud of her.

Suddenly she heard the front door slam shut and realised that she had almost fallen asleep without realising it. Brett was home. She was slumped on the lounge, her eyes red from crying. Brett walked in and looked at her. He sighed irritably. "What's up?"

She had no inclination to tell him she'd been crying about her mother. She cried so often lately that it wouldn't interest him and would just sound like she was trying to justify her appearance, the fact that the house was messy. He would consider it just another example of what he had called her self-indulgence, her self-pity. She shook her head, stood up and wiped her eyes.

"Nothing. I'm just going to have a shower and get dressed."

"At this time of day?" Brett laughed, and looked pointedly at her pyjamas. "I thought you were *already* dressed. For bed."

"I just haven't had a chance to get dressed yet, Brett. Joshua has been crying for hours." She could hear the defensiveness in her voice, the high-pitched tone of it. She put her head down and made an effort to lower her voice, to sound calm. "I'm just going to have a quick shower and then run down to Coles, get some things we need."

Brett put his hands on his hips. "And you have to go now, just when I get home from work? Thanks."

"He's asleep. I won't be long."

"And what if he wakes up? He'll be hungry." He slapped his hands to his chest. "I can't feed him, Sarah."

"Well, do you want to go then?"

"No, actually, I don't. I just walked in the bloody door, Sarah."

“Well, what do you suggest?” She was angry now and her voice got louder, more strident. “We need food, but you won’t let me go and you won’t go yourself.”

He smiled sarcastically, spoke slowly, clipping each word. “I *suggest* that you stop sitting around all day and get something done while I’m at work, Sarah.” He sat down and picked up the remote control, pointed it at her. “It’s not fair to ask me to go shopping as soon as I walk in the door. I’ve been working. I’m tired.” He pointed the remote toward the TV and turned it on as if to mark an end to the conversation.

She pressed her hands to her eyes and shook her head. She forced herself not to lose control, not to scream at him and start throwing things. She went to the lounge and knelt down, her knees on the floor between Brett’s feet, her body between his legs, her hands on his knees.

“I’m tired too, Brett. I’m exhausted. I haven’t slept for weeks. And staying home with a baby is work too. Very hard work. You have to acknowledge that.”

He looked at her and recoiled slightly and she wondered if her breath stank. She hoped it did. She hated him. Brett blinked, then nodded slightly. His eyes flicked back to the TV.

“Brett.” She squeezed his knees. “Can you just reassure me that you understand? That you really believe that I’m working too?” She raised herself up, so that her head was in his way, so that he was forced to meet her eye. “That looking after a baby is *work*?”

He looked at her and nodded, then leant his head to the side and continued to watch the TV. “Yeah, okay, I know that, Sarah.” He pushed her gently on the shoulder. “Just go, then. Go. Hurry up.”

Brett

Brett put his fork down on the side of his plate. He did it slowly, in a controlled way, so that there was little noise, and cleared his throat. He looked at Sarah. "What?"

"I said maybe you could take a day off work."

He stared at her open-mouthed. "How many people do you think we need to stay home and look after one little baby, Sarah?"

Sarah stood up and started clearing the plates. She did it noisily. He watched her scrape food from one plate to the other as harshly as she could and felt a rush of fierce hatred, a sudden urge to smash the plates from her hands, to push her and slap her face. She dumped the plates in the sink and turned to look at him. She looked ugly in her fury. Old.

"Forget it, then," she spat.

He put his head in his hands and groaned. "No." He shook his head. "No. That's a great idea, Sarah. I'll just quit my job and we'll both stay home."

He stood up, went to the fridge, and took out a bottle of beer. He refilled his glass then turned to face her. He forced himself to smile, to remain calm, to speak gently. "Sarah, why can't you just relax a bit? Try to enjoy it?"

Sarah's face went blank. She stared at him coldly, waiting, daring him to continue. He stared back at her and felt another rush of anger, a sudden overwhelming revulsion for her, for her dishevelled appearance, her inability to cope, her clingy dependence. He wanted to hurt her. To be cruel. "Why can't you just get on with it, for fuck's sake? People do

this every day, Sarah.” He heard the spite and scorn of his voice. “It can’t be that hard.”

She stood completely still, the only movement a sudden blinking of her eyes. He waited for her to defend herself, to tell him once again that she was doing her best, that he had no idea what it was like for her. He waited eagerly, ready and keen to fight. To argue and tell her what *he* thought, how *he* felt. To express some of the frustration he’d been feeling for weeks.

But she didn’t say anything. She just bent her head, nodded almost imperceptibly and walked from the room. He heard the soft click of their bedroom door closing.

He stared after her for a moment then sighed noisily. He no longer felt angry, just tired, uncertain and a little guilty. He went to the sink and stacked the dirty plates, filled the sink with hot soapy water and started washing up.

He wondered why arguing with women always made him feel remorseful and apologetic. As if he had somehow been a bully, and as if he was always, and without question, in the wrong.

Sarah

Brett leant over the cot, then turned to Sarah and grinned. "Quick! Come here."

She got out of bed and stood beside him, bent over the cot and looked at Joshua. He stared up at them. "What?"

"Oh." Brett reached down and tickled Joshua's cheek with his forefinger. "He was smiling." He looked at Sarah and stretched his mouth in a wide smile, his lips apart. "Like this."

"Typical." Sarah leant over the cot and scooped Joshua up. She rubbed her nose against his and laughed. "I look after you all day and you save your smiles for your father. Little rabbit." She handed him to Brett. "Can you just hold him for a second while I have a shower?"

"I was just about to have a swim." He frowned and looked down at the cot. "Can't we just leave him in there for a minute?"

"No." Sarah shook her head and started pulling off her pyjamas. "He's hungry. It's time for a feed. If I leave him there now he'll just scream. I only want to have a shower, Brett, it won't take long."

She showered quickly and didn't wash her hair as she had planned to. She knew that Brett would be angry, resentful that she'd delayed his swim. He'd think she'd done it unnecessarily, deliberately even, out of some kind of malicious desire to make him suffer, or to make some kind of point.

She knew that Brett wondered why she found it so difficult to get anything done during the days she was home alone with Joshua. Even managing to have a shower, get herself dressed and also find the opportunity to eat both lunch and breakfast required a level of

management and skill that, before having a baby, she would never have believed.

When the two of them were home things were a lot easier. There was always someone to hold Joshua, and if necessary, they could take it in turns to have a shower, go to the toilet, eat, make a cup of tea or coffee or run down to the shops for supplies. But when she was alone, things became very difficult, very fraught, and often she wound up feeling incompetent.

She thought of all the fights they'd been having and the frustrating sense she had that Brett would just agree with her, or become quiet, to get her to stop talking, to get her to shut up. She sighed loudly, climbed out of the shower and dried herself. She pulled on an old pair of jeans and a T-shirt and walked out of the bathroom to find Brett.

She found him in the garden. He was sitting in the sun, his uniform already on.

"Aren't you going to have a swim?" She sat down next to him, lifted her top and reached out for Josh.

"No. I'd better go." He stood up and placed Josh in her arms, then bent over and kissed her cheek, touched Josh gently on the head.

"See you later."

"But, Brett." She turned to look at him, twisting her neck, but he'd already reached the back door and was disappearing inside. "You've still got forty minutes. There's still plenty of time."

Brett

"I don't particularly want to go out, Brett. I can't anyway. What about Josh?"

"Express some milk. We'll get a babysitter."

"But I just don't *want* to. I'm not ready to leave him with anyone." Sarah tossed the magazine she was reading down impatiently and stood up. She faced him and frowned. "He's only four months old, for God's sake."

"So? What are we supposed to do?" He gestured with the remote control. "Stay at home and watch TV every night?" He rolled his eyes. "What a life."

Sarah paced the floor. Put her hands over her eyes and sighed loudly. "Yes." She nodded into her hands. "Yes. Why not?" She took her hands from her eyes and looked at Brett. "We've just had a baby, Brett." She sat next to him on the lounge and put her hand on his knee. "Why can't you just accept that things have changed? Why can't you just be happy being with me and Josh?" She shook her head. "Honestly. I'd be happy not to go out at night for the next year." She leant heavily back against the lounge. "At least."

Brett stood up and walked towards the kitchen. He stopped in the doorway and looked back at Sarah. She was slumped in the chair. She looked pale and exhausted. It bothered him that she was so willing to let it show, that she made so little effort to dress nicely or do her hair or be attractive. It was undignified, repugnant and he felt mildly ashamed of her. "You know, someone should warn men of all this before they become fathers."

"Of all what, Brett?" She looked up lazily, frowning.

"That their rights get completely forgotten once a baby is born." Brett's voice got louder. "That anytime they ask for something for themselves they can expect to get told that they're selfish, that they want too much."

He left the room and went to the kitchen.

Sarah followed him. "Brett." He could hear from her voice that she was angry. He'd obviously said something she found particularly offensive. He seemed to do it a lot lately. "How do you think I feel? My life has changed a hell of a lot more than yours has." She went to the fridge and looked inside, sighed and slammed the door shut. She turned and faced him. "I'm with Josh twenty-four hours a day, Brett. Every day of the week. All day and all night. My life has changed completely."

"I know, Sarah." He nodded. He spoke quietly and tried to keep the impatience he felt from showing in his voice. "That's why I'm suggesting that we go out. That you have a break. That we *both* have a break."

Sarah squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her clenched fists into them. Then she breathed out loudly and spoke quietly. "No, Brett. You're misunderstanding me. I'm not complaining that my life has changed. I'm happy to accept that. I like it. I love being a mother. I *love* it." She walked closer to him. "But *you* don't want *your* life to change. You think everything should go on just as before. And that's the problem, Brett. Your life needs to change too."

Brett stared at her, felt his lip curling up in anger. "That's the most ridiculous thing you've ever said, Sarah. How the fuck can you say my life hasn't changed?" He leant towards her, his fury growing, his voice rising. "You make it sound like I don't do anything."

Sarah stepped back and wrapped her dressing gown tightly around herself. "Calm down, Brett. You'll wake Josh." She looked at him coldly. "I'm not talking about *doing* stuff or looking after Josh. I *know* you do all that. I'm talking about an attitude change, Brett. A different way of seeing your life. Our life. "

Brett stared at her and laughed bitterly. “What the *fuck* are you on about? So I’m *doing* everything right. I’m just not *thinking* about it right. Is that it?”

“You make it sound absurd. But yes. That *is* it, I guess. Come on, Brett. You’re so bloody restless whenever you’re at home. Your boredom is palpable. You practically run out the door to work.” She laughed sadly. “You can hardly wait to get out of here.”

There was a silence. Brett stared at her quizzically. He was momentarily bewildered. Then he blinked and shrugged.

“You’re right,” he said.

And she *was* right. He hated being at home lately. Sarah had become so slovenly, so careless. She slopped around most of the day in pyjamas and slippers and there was usually breast milk on the front of her tops, baby mucus on her shoulders.

“I *can’t* wait to get out of here,” he continued quietly, shaking his head slowly in dawning comprehension. “I mean *look* at you.” He pulled on the lapel of her gown. “You’re in your pyjamas most of the time, you never go anywhere, you just sit around waiting for me. To be honest, Sarah, it’s bloody awful. It’s suffocating. You’re suddenly so fucking housebound and dependent.”

Sarah stepped back as if she’d been hit and stared at him. Her face paled for a moment and then started to redden. “Oh.” Her voice was hoarse. “Oh.” She shook her head slowly, as if dazed, and started walking slowly from the kitchen. She leaned on the benches for support.

Brett stared at her. “Sarah?” She ignored him. He suddenly regretted his words. They were too harsh, an overreaction. “Sarah?”

She looked at him, her eyes wet with tears. “No, Brett.” She shook her head and put her hand up as if to ward him off. She walked from the room. “Just leave me alone.”

Sarah

Sarah pushed the pram down the supermarket aisle. She stared blankly at the food on the shelves. She couldn't think what to buy for dinner. The only things that appealed would be too much trouble to cook. Too hard. Too much chopping and preparation. Too much washing up.

She was exhausted. Waking up to feed or settle Josh continually throughout the night was taking its toll, but all the fighting she and Brett had been doing made it so much worse. She barely had enough energy to push the trolley down the aisle and she knew that by the time she got home and had unloaded and put away the groceries she would be completely defeated by her miserable weariness. This dreadful inertia meant that she hadn't cooked a proper meal for weeks, and on the occasions when she had planned to cook a decent dinner, even if she'd already gone out and bought all the ingredients, she would put Josh to bed, then slump on the lounge too tired to get up again. The thought of all the work involved in cooking would fill her with a sense of great despair. So she'd open a can of baked beans, scramble some eggs or make some cheese on toast. Something easy.

She lifted the cover over the pram and checked on Josh. He was sound asleep, his thumb hanging loosely from his half-open mouth.

She stared vaguely over at the fruit and veggie section and wondered if she should get some mushrooms and make a Boscaiola sauce for pasta.

She saw a man standing near the mushrooms. He was young and handsome. He had a small baby strapped against his chest in a papoose. And he stood there, in the middle of the supermarket, oblivious to the

people around him, and kissed the top of his baby's head. Jiggled his body gently up and down. His lips moved soothingly next to the baby's ear.

A woman came up next to him and showed him something in her hand. It was a fruit or a vegetable of some sort. He interrupted her and pointed to the baby, moved his body lower and bent his knees, so that she could get a better look. They stared at their baby and stroked his face gently, looked at each other and smiled. Then the man bent down to the woman and kissed her tenderly on the mouth. Let his hand linger on her cheek. They walked away holding hands.

Sarah stared after them and felt a rush of bitter envy. She hated them for their smug, domestic happiness and momentarily wished that something bad would happen to them, that their baby would scream for hours on end, keep them awake all night and tense and angry all day, that they would become frustrated and tired, depressed and angry, that they would end up hating each other.

She decided just to buy a selection of frozen meals and some fresh fruit. When she was standing at the checkout, Joshua started to fret in the pram. He turned his head from side to side and pressed his closed fist hungrily to his mouth.

By the time she'd put him in the car he was screaming loudly.

"It's okay, Josh. We'll be home soon. It's okay, sweetie."

He screamed even louder.

As she drove, she hummed the tune to a nursery rhyme. She'd noticed that if she sang, or sometimes even just talked, it helped to settle Josh. He would stop crying, stop moving, and lay completely still, his whole body intent on listening to the sound of her voice. But today it had no effect. His screams got louder and more hysterical as she drove.

"Lullabye, rockabye, na na na na na." She continued to sing through the noise of his screams. She could feel her jaw getting tight, her teeth clenching at the back of her mouth.

She looked at her hands and saw that her knuckles were pressed white against the steering wheel.

Brett

He walked out of the hospital grounds and started the short walk home. It was early, just past seven, but the sun was already hot. He could feel its mild sting on his shoulders, on the skin on his face. The glare of it irritated his eyes and he shaded them with his hand. The night shift had been unusually busy and he was tired. He longed for sleep.

He stepped into his driveway and saw that the car was gone. He stopped and frowned, then walked quickly into the house. He was suddenly alarmed, afraid that something bad had happened to Josh. He checked the bedroom first. It was empty and the bed was unmade, the quilt bunched up unevenly to one side. Joshua's cot was bare and the side was down, his stuffed animals and favourite blankets gone.

He went to the kitchen, looked around for a note, or some kind of clue as to where they might be. There was nothing, only a messy kitchen. Last night's dishes were soaking in the sink.

He picked up the phone and dialed Sarah's mobile.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Sarah. Where are you? What's wrong?"

"We're in the car." She spoke very quietly. "On our way to Sydney."

"What?"

"Look, Brett. We'll talk later okay? When I get there. I want to keep driving while I've got the chance. While Joshua's still asleep."

"Right." His voice was cold. "Great. Good move, Sarah. Thanks a fucking lot."

He slammed down the phone, picked it straight up again and threw it hard against the wall. He sat and put his elbows on the table. Rested his

head on his hands. He was angry, furious at Sarah. A sharp pulsing, the beginning of a headache, bit into his temple.

He stood up and walked outside. The sun was higher in the sky and burning hot. He took off his clothes and dived into the pool. He swam fast, his arms splashed furiously, up and down the length of the pool. Lap after lap after lap.

He saw a shadow move across the water and stopped swimming. He raised his head, saw Claudia standing by the edge of the pool, and swam to the edge.

She looked down at him. "Is everything okay, Brett? I noticed Sarah going out before. Is Josh okay?"

He squinted up at her, it was difficult to see her face. The sun was glaring and she stood in its shadow. "Josh's fine." He pulled himself out of the pool, grabbed a towel from the back of a chair and wrapped it quickly around his naked waist. The sun was now behind him and shone directly on Claudia. She was covered in a thin film of sweat, which made her skin shine. He could see her nipples through the clinging fabric of her T-shirt. She blinked. She had seen him looking.

"Sarah's gone to Sydney. With Josh."

"Oh." Claudia frowned. "Shit. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Pissed off." He shrugged. "But that's nothing new."

"What happened?"

Brett sat on one of the chairs. "We had another fight last night, before I went to work."

Claudia looked down. "So what will you do? Go to Sydney?"

He shook his head. "No. I mean, I don't know. I don't even know where the fuck she's going to stay."

Claudia sat down next to him and put her hand over his. Brett looked away and stared at the water moving in the pool. "You poor thing." She lifted his hand and wrapped it in both of her own. "Look. Don't rush into anything. You're tired and you need some sleep. Why don't you go to bed and get some rest? And I'll bring you over some dinner later."

Brett looked at her and shook his head. "But I..."

She squeezed his hand hard and interrupted. "Brett. Just take some time and think about what you're going to do next. You certainly can't drive to Sydney today. You'd just be angry and end up having another fight when you get there. And that won't help anything." She leant forward, so close that Brett could smell her shampoo. "Do yourself a favour, and Sarah too, and leave her alone for a while. She'll probably appreciate the space. You've both been so tense since Josh was born."

Brett nodded. Claudia was right, things had been tense. In fact, since Josh had been born, things had been awful. But Sarah was probably hoping he'd drive down to Sydney immediately. Pursue her and show how much he cared. Prove his love. Prove his devotion.

Well, fuck her.

Claudia was right. He needed a break. They both needed some space.

Sarah could wait.

Sarah

Sarah pulled into David's driveway and parked under the carport. David rode a motorbike and didn't have a car, so he'd told her to park there, close to the house, so that getting Josh and all his stuff out would be easier.

She unbuckled her seatbelt and sat staring through the windscreen. Now that she'd arrived, her leaving seemed a lot more real, more serious somehow. She felt suddenly, painfully, homesick.

Now, she would have to unload all her things and set up a portable cot for Josh. They would have to settle into a strange routine—the apologetic, tip-toeing routine of a self-invited houseguest. She looked back at Josh. He was sound asleep, so she left the car door open and left him there. She found the key that David had hidden, opened the front door, and took her things inside.

There was a note on the kitchen bench.

Welcome Sarah and Josh,

Take the spare room, the one with the computer in it.

Relax and enjoy the view. Help yourself to whatever you want. There's cold wine in the fridge.

I'll bring us home some Thai dinner.

See you around 6.

David

The house was spotless. She wondered if it was always like this or if he'd run around cleaning up last night after she'd called.

Sarah and David had shared a flat when they were at University and David had been notoriously untidy. All his friends had teased him about being so fastidious and diligent towards his studies, but so slovenly in his personal habits. He would emerge from his bedroom—a place of filth and squalor—triumphantly waving a scruffy, tattered handful of paper. He would staple it all together and hand it in as an assignment. He always got the best marks.

She strolled around the living room and looked at the books on his bookshelves. She found an old framed photo of herself and David and picked it up. It had been taken the day he went to Japan on a research scholarship. She had gone to the airport to see him off with his parents, who had driven in from the country specially. It was the first time she'd met them and she'd been touched by David's open affection for them and by their own obvious love and admiration for him.

They had stood in the airport lounge looking quite bewildered and out of place. His mother kept touching him, hugging his arm and reminding him, very quietly, almost whispering, *to keep in touch, to ring them as soon as he arrived, to remember to eat properly, to take a gift for his hosts...* They'd been so proud and so quietly in awe of their brilliant son.

David was excited, edgy. He kept smiling at his mother and patting her arm vaguely. *Don't worry, Mum. I'll be fine*, he reassured her.

He asked Sarah to take a walk with him.

"I can stay if you want. I don't have to go." He'd looked at her hopefully, lifting his feet off the ground in jerks, almost hopping, full of nervous energy.

"What are you talking about, David? Don't be ridiculous. Of course you have to go. It's going to be great. The best time of your life. Don't be dumb."

She remembered feeling relieved when he finally went through customs. She hated long, drawn-out goodbyes, the anxious foot shuffling, the jerky smiles, no one knowing what to say.

And friends had been waiting for her. She'd had a party to go to.

* * *

"He's asleep now, I think." She leant forward and carefully let Josh's open mouth fall from her breast. He whimpered softly and closed his mouth, but didn't wake. She stood up slowly, careful not to make any sudden movements or loud noises, and tiptoed to the spare room and put him gently in his cot.

She straightened up and noticed the pleasant wine-induced fuzziness in her head. She wondered if Josh would be affected by the alcohol. Normally she would be anxious about it. She would look up all the information she could on the Internet and agonise over each mouthful. But the wine and David's company had made her relaxed. She no longer felt homesick. She felt happy, carefree and optimistic. What harm could a bit of wine do?

It would probably just help him sleep.

Her T-shirt was now damp with breast milk so she pulled it over her head and grabbed a clean one from her suitcase.

When she had pulled the clean T-shirt over her head, she noticed her mobile phone lying on the floor. She picked it up and checked the screen to see if Brett had somehow called without her hearing. She'd called him at home and left a message earlier. She'd told him she'd arrived in Sydney and had asked him to call back as soon as he got the message.

But he hadn't.

Bastard.

She turned the phone off and threw it into the clothes in her suitcase. He might try to call her now, but too bad. He should've called earlier. He should've been home. He should've been waiting for her call.

She wondered where he was and what he was doing. She wondered why he hadn't bothered to call.

He might have been asked to do another shift at the hospital. She smiled bitterly to herself, of course he would do it, her leaving wouldn't make any difference, and he would never let his work mates down.

Or maybe he wasn't working at all. Perhaps he was angry and ignoring her calls.

Maybe he'd gone out with some of his friends for a drink. She pictured him drunk and unhappy at a bar, his friends telling him not to worry, that he would get her back and that everything would be okay.

Or maybe he wasn't out. Maybe he was on his way to Sydney right now.

She poured the rest of the wine into her glass. She'd just about finished the whole bottle and was feeling decidedly tipsy.

David had asked her what she was doing, why she'd left. She'd avoided answering and had instead come inside to get them more drinks.

She couldn't answer him because she didn't really know what she was doing, or why she was there. It wasn't like her to run away from her problems or to create dramas. She didn't normally try to seek attention.

She had tried to talk to Brett, but he'd been impatient. He dismissed her concerns as trivial and had refused to listen to what he called her morbid thoughts. Her depression—or obsession, as he referred to it—had repelled him, had made him angry and frustrated. He constantly told her to be rational, to get over it. He said that she needed to get out of the house more, and that she should go and meet some new friends. He suggested that she stop sitting around feeling sorry for herself.

But she hadn't wanted to get out of the house. She'd wanted to stay home where she felt snug and safe, where she could protect Josh and keep him close. And she wasn't feeling sorry for herself, nor was she depressed or obsessed, she was just deeply and profoundly affected by the birth of their first child.

And why shouldn't she be able to show Brett this other side of herself? The frightened, vulnerable side, her more needy self. Could he offer her no support, no comfort? Could he only love her when she was at her most capable and confident?

He had made her feel ashamed, pathetic.

He'd made her feel unloved.

She sighed loudly, went to the fridge and got another beer for David. She carried the drinks back out to the veranda.

David's house faced east and looked out over Palm Beach. It was a small, old weatherboard and was built on a slope, so that the veranda was raised high on stilts. It was so enclosed by trees and shrubs that Sarah felt like they were in the bush.

"It's beautiful here, David." She handed him his drink. "So quiet and peaceful. It's hard to believe we're in Sydney."

David nodded. "Yeah. It's good isn't it?"

She stood near the rail and looked out at the view.

David stood next to her. "You took a long time."

"I was thinking about your question."

"Oh." He put down his drink, turned towards her and leant against the railing. "And?"

She blinked. "I don't really know, David. I'm not sure *what* I'm doing."

"Did something happen?"

"No, not really. Well." She shrugged. "Something." She rolled her eyes and laughed at herself. "No. Nothing *happened*." She pressed her bare foot down on some small stones and rolled them around under her heel. She found their sharpness comforting. She looked at David and smiled unhappily. "I guess sometimes I feel like Brett doesn't really love me. And it makes me really bloody miserable." She looked down, kicked some of the stones and watched them roll off the veranda. "Perhaps I'm expecting too much."

He took hold of her shoulders and turned her so that they faced each other. He pulled her towards him and hugged her tightly, then leant back

and held her chin up so that she was forced to look at him. "You're hardly expecting too much by wanting to be loved, Sarah."

She pulled away and sat heavily in her chair. "But things are a bit different once you have a child. Your priorities really *do* change. I know it sounds like a stupid cliché, but it's true."

"You're confusing me, Sarah." David shook his head. "Who're you trying to persuade, me or you? *You* left, Sarah. You said you left because you felt unloved. And then you say that your priorities have changed." He looked at her quizzically. "So *how* have they changed? I assumed by saying that, you meant that you expect less for yourself now. That you'd sacrifice your own happiness for Joshua's." He sat in his chair, leant towards her and smiled kindly. "But you left because *you* were unhappy, not because Joshua was unhappy. It doesn't really seem like you're all that willing to be miserable for Joshua's sake to me."

She nodded. "I'm contradicting myself."

"A bit."

She looked at him and frowned, then crossed her arms over her chest in mock irritation. "So what am I doing here, then?"

"Trying to make a point maybe?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Getting attention, you mean?"

David nodded. "Maybe."

"God." Sarah leant forward in her chair. Put her hands over her eyes. "I think you're right. How pathetic."

"It's hardly pathetic, Sarah." David laughed. "People do it all the time. And sometimes it's a necessary way to get the people who love you to stop and think a bit about how they treat you. It's quite a useful and evolved behaviour, really."

Sarah stared at him for a minute then put her hand on his knee. "How come you're so smart?"

He paused, and then spoke quietly, without the tone of joking lightheartedness that he'd been using all night. "I'm not, Sarah. I can

only see things clearly when it comes to other people. I'm hopeless at my own life, at my own motivations for the things I do."

"Well, you always help clear things up for me. You're excellent at helping me sort through all the shit."

"And that's why you love me." He laughed self-mockingly.

"Yes." It occurred to Sarah that she really did love David. That he'd always been a really kind and dependable friend. She looked at him now—he was peeling the label from his bottle of beer and avoiding her gaze, and noticed how handsome he'd become. His face, which had been too soft, too unformed, almost feminine, in his twenties, had become squarer and more masculine, more rugged as he got older. "I *do* love you, David."

He looked at her sadly. "But not like I love you."

Sarah stared at him. She'd always wondered if David loved her in a romantic way, if he'd hoped for something more than friendship. But they'd never talked about it and she'd always carefully changed the subject if it seemed like they were getting close to a discussion about their feelings towards one another.

She realised now that she could probably kiss David, that he would be only too happy to make himself available to her. He'd probably have sex with her, if that was what she wanted.

The thought aroused her, made her feel strangely exhilarated, more attractive and sexually confident than she'd felt for a long time.

She reached out and took his hand in both of hers, pressed it to her lips then held it against her cheek. David stared at her, but left his hand limp, moveable. He remained passive, and made no move either to encourage or stop her. She reached over and took his face between her hands, pulled him towards her and kissed him on the mouth.

Brett

The music was loud. Thumping. It made Brett's heart feel strange, as if it was beating out of time. He looked around for Claudia. She'd been gone for ages, a lot longer than it could possibly take to get drinks. He pushed through the crowd and walked to the bar until he was pressed hard against it. He looked down its length, left and right, but couldn't see her.

"Hey!" He heard a shout close to his ear.

He turned around. Claudia stood there smiling, moving in time with the music. She pushed her pelvis back and forth, from side to side, and smiled. He smiled back, relieved, and grabbed her elbow. She tried to say something, but he shook his head to indicate that he couldn't hear and steered her away from the bar, to the less crowded area where there were seats and tables and it was a fraction quieter.

"Where *were* you? I was starting to get worried," he said. Now that the initial feeling of relief was over, he felt irritated that she had left him alone for so long. She hadn't even bought the drinks.

She pouted and flicked her hair back behind her shoulders. "Diddums." She shrugged. "Poor Brett."

He smiled, a bit embarrassed. "I was waiting, Claudia. You said you were just getting drinks. You must have been gone for half an hour."

"Sorry," she said coldly and turned away. She stared towards the dance floor for a moment and then turned back to face him. Suddenly she grinned and held out her closed fist towards him. "But look what I got us. Better than drinks, Brett, *much* better." She moved her hand closer. "Take a look."

“What is it?”

She shook her head, waved her hand in front of his face. “Take a look, I said.” She stamped her foot impatiently. “Open my hand.”

“Well, obviously you’ve got drugs.” He pried open her fingers and saw two little white pills. “But *what* drugs?”

She smiled. “Ecstasy.” She wrinkled her nose. “A bit old-hat, I know. But we *are* in the country.”

Brett crossed his arms across his chest. “Well, well, well. You bad girl.”

Claudia laughed then put her hand to her mouth, threw her head back and swallowed one. “I know.” She pressed the other pill into Brett’s palm then pushed his hand up towards his face. “Come on,” she urged. “Take it.”

* * *

Brett took his keys from his pocket and tried to insert one into the lock. “Fuck. I’m too wrecked to open the door.” He handed Claudia the keys. “Here, you do it.”

Claudia pushed the key in and twisted it. The door opened easily and they walked inside, laughing and stumbling, their arms entwined, their bodies bumping and rubbing.

They went to the kitchen. Brett poured a tall glass of water from the tap and drank it down quickly. He was thirsty. He’d forgotten how Ecstasy made you thirsty.

He didn’t really like drugs much, only alcohol. He liked the taste of it, the slow spreading warmth, the gradual, easy decline into relaxation and then drunkenness. When you drank, you could stop as soon as you’d had enough so there was at least some measure of control. Taking a pill was always such a gamble. You could never really know exactly what or how much you were taking, or for how long you’d be high. It was a bit like jumping off a cliff.

He heard the clink of glass from the lounge room. Claudia must be making drinks and there were only spirits in the lounge room. Gin or whisky. Jesus, he shook his head, she had a lot of stamina. He and Sarah hadn't had such a big night in years.

"Hey." Claudia walked back into the kitchen holding two tumblers of whisky and handed him one. She took his hand and dragged him into the lounge room. "Have you got any good music?"

Brett nodded and walked over to the stereo. Sarah had already put all the compact discs in a cabinet with child-proof doors, getting ready for when Josh started walking around, pulling things out of shelves and knocking things over. She'd been so protective of him. Overly alert to all the possible, and mostly improbable, dangers that were present in any household. Power points, table corners, scissors, cleaning fluids. They had all become a source of anxiety and worry to her. As if their very existence was proof of their sinister intentions.

He'd tried to persuade her that everything would be okay and that babies managed to survive, despite the dangers, all over the place. He'd told her that they could protect Josh, as all parents did, by adapting the environment around him, day by day, as he grew and changed.

Now, he sat heavily on the lounge, cradling his tumbler of whisky but not drinking any, and stared up at Claudia. She had put on some music and was dancing slowly around the room, her eyes closed, her lips upturned slightly in a small, seductive smile.

He could see her nipples pressing against the thin fabric of her dress and wondered if she was aware of it. He wondered if it was a deliberate provocation, a conscious attempt to attract and seduce men and concluded that it probably was.

His thoughts reminded him of a day when he was shopping in the supermarket. An attractive woman had bent over right in front of him. She'd been wearing a short skirt and he'd seen everything, her bare arse and the soft mound of her vulva barely hidden by a brief g-string.

He'd been certain that it was a deliberate act. She had wanted him to see, for some reason she had some kind of erotic thrill from it.

He'd told Sarah about it later the same evening and she'd laughed at him. "Bullshit, Brett. I bet she'd die if she knew. She probably just wasn't thinking. Sex is the last thing on a woman's mind when she's at the supermarket."

Brett had shaken his head in disagreement.

"What? So you think she wanted you to take her out to the carpark and fuck her brains out? Come on, Brett." Sarah had laughed and looked at him as if he was mad. "I doubt it, Brett. I've never met a woman like that. Sex and love are usually interconnected for a woman. Inseparable. And I bet that any woman who says otherwise is just pretending. Lying. As an act of self-preservation, probably."

Brett had shrugged. "Maybe. But maybe some women are different from you, Sarah. Maybe some women *can* separate sex from love."

He looked again at Claudia. She was one of those women Sarah thought didn't exist. She was different from Sarah and would want sex whether she was in a relationship or not. She would be able to keep love out of it. To fuck just for the way it felt.

She was staring down at him now, her hips swinging and her body swaying in time with the music. He stood up and faced her and started moving his body beside hers. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pressed his pelvis into hers. She smiled and pushed forwards in response.

One strap of her dress hung loosely off her shoulder and exposed the rounded top of her breast. Brett put his thumb on the soft skin and rubbed it gently, then pushed her dress down until her entire breast was exposed. He cupped it in his hand. Her nipple was pink, erect. He bent down and licked it lightly.

She put her hands on his chest and pushed herself backwards, out of his embrace, and pushed her dress down over her hips. She stepped out of the dress and then pulled firmly on the side strap of her brief underpants. They snapped off easily. She smiled and tossed them aside. She stood there with her hands on her hips, naked except for her high-heeled shoes. She looked beautiful.

She put one hand on each of Brett's shoulders and pushed him down so that he was kneeling in front of her, his face close to her pubic hair. It was blonde and neatly trimmed. She was so well-groomed, so perfect. He reached up and ran the palm of his hands up the front of each of her thighs. They were smooth and slightly glossy, lightly tanned.

He kissed her and stretched his tongue between the split in her labia. He could smell her perfume, something musky and strong, and he could smell her wetness. A sweet, rich, earthy smell. His erection rubbed against the inside of his jeans. He grabbed the cheeks of her buttocks with his hands and squeezed them as he started sucking firmly on her clitoris.

She moaned softly, her voice deep, and put her hands in his hair.

Sarah

The baby is stuck on the bottom of the swimming pool. She can see the terror in his wide-open eyes and she can hear him clearly, even though he's deep down in the water and she is looking at him from the side of the pool.

She is terrified and can hear her own heart pounding. She wonders how he got there, and is suddenly very angry at herself for being careless. For being so stupid. So foolish. For letting him out of her sight for even a minute.

The baby screams louder.

Suddenly she is in the water too, she is swimming towards the baby, but her arms and legs are heavy, leaden.

The water is thick, heavy, almost impossible to swim through.

She can hardly move.

The baby is crying louder now. He is screaming.

She is desperate to reach him, but she knows she mustn't panic—if she panics everything will get worse. She will drown and then so will he.

She mustn't panic.

She must be calm.

Sarah woke up to Joshua's hysterical screams.

She stood up quickly and scooped him up from his cot, hugged him tightly and patted his back.

“Sorry, Josh,” she whispered. “Sorry, baby. Mummy’s here now. Everything’s okay.”

She sat back down on the bed and put his head on a pillow across her lap. He turned his face, open-mouthed, towards her breast, eager for milk. He latched on firmly and sucked, and after a few moments she felt the sharp, stinging pull of the milk being released and then heard the satisfying sound of Joshua swallowing. He drank thirstily, in great gulps, straining to keep up with the sudden flow of milk.

He kept his eyes closed and patted the top of her breast rhythmically with his open palm. It was a soothing gesture, and oddly paternal, as if he knew she was upset and wanted to reassure. It felt like he was trying to tell her that everything would be okay.

That he would forgive her.

She was relieved that she and David hadn’t had sex. They were about to, they had even started removing their clothes. But after her day in the car she’d felt less than fresh and had gone to have a shower.

She’d taken her clothes off and stepped beneath the water. She looked down at her body as she soaped it—the breasts that Brett had kissed a million times and that so miraculously fed Joshua, the still-soft stomach that had stretched to accommodate and nurture a life, the milk-white thighs that shook with pleasure whenever Brett made her come—and she burst into tears. Any desire she’d had to fuck David disappeared in an instant. She wanted Brett.

David loved her but she didn’t love him back, at least not romantically, and to have sex with him would be both sordid and cruel. She felt bitterly, bitterly sad for Josh, for having parents who couldn’t even stay together until his first birthday. If she had sex with David, her relationship with Brett would be well and truly over and Joshua would be effectively homeless at less than six months of age.

She’d gone back to the lounge room after her shower, dressed modestly in her flannelette pyjamas, and sat next to David.

“Sorry, David. I shouldn’t have started all that. I’m really, really sorry.”

David put his arm across her shoulders. "It's okay." He laughed. "Your pyjamas have turned me right off anyway."

David had been kind, but she could tell he'd been disappointed, a little embarrassed even. He'd kissed her cheek and had gone to bed almost immediately.

She regretted her behaviour now and felt ashamed of herself. She'd humiliated David. She'd used him because she knew how he felt towards her, because she'd felt hurt and unloved. She'd used him to make herself feel better.

She looked down at Josh. He turned towards her and beamed, flashing the buds of his new white teeth. She smiled and tickled him. He laughed loudly, a joyful, throaty belly laugh. It was so easy to make him happy.

Her leaving suddenly seemed ridiculous, an act of pure selfishness. Joshua was thriving and perfectly happy. He loved his father and Brett loved him back. Any problems she and Brett had were insignificant, minor, easily solved with a night alone together and a bottle of wine. Why had she run?

No wonder Brett hadn't called. He must be incredibly pissed off, and with good reason.

She looked down at Joshua, who turned his head, twisting her nipple, and smiled up at her. She put her hand on his cheek.

"I'll take you home tomorrow, Josh," she whispered. "First thing."

Brett

He woke to the sound of the vacuum cleaner. He kept his eyes shut and let its droning, comforting hum lull him back to sleep. *Fuck*. He sat up quickly. Sarah must be home.

Cleaning? *Fuck*.

Claudia.

He pushed the blankets from his body and stood up. He looked at himself in the mirror. His eyes were bloodshot and his face was creased with the lines of a face-down, too-deep sleep. There was also a large purple love bite on his upper thigh.

He pulled on a pair of boxers and walked quickly to the lounge room, his heart pounding.

It was Claudia. She was vacuuming. She looked ridiculously fresh considering the night they'd had. She was wearing one of his T-shirts.

She saw him, smiled and kicked the vacuum off with her foot. "Hey, lover." She walked towards him and wrapped her arms around him. He hugged her quickly and then stepped back, shaking his head. "Don't worry about cleaning up." He felt a rush of irritation that she was even still here, that she presumed to wear his T-shirt and vacuum his floor, but he forced a smile. "You must be buggered. Why don't you go home and get some sleep?"

He saw a little frown crease her forehead for a moment and, just as quickly, disappear. She stretched her arms up over her head and spun around on one of her feet. She wasn't wearing underpants.

"I feel great. Fantastic. I've already had a swim." She pushed him playfully in the chest. "You should try it. Swimming is the *best* hangover

cure.” She moved closer to him so they were only centimetres apart. “And I know another great hangover cure, too.” She picked up his hand, lifted it up under her T-shirt and placed it on her breast. She put the palm of her other hand on his stomach and wriggled her fingers under the elastic of his shorts.

“Claudia, I don’t think...”

“Good. *Don’t* think,” she interrupted and, in one quick movement, crouched down on her knees, tugged his shorts down, and took his limp cock in her mouth.

His cock pulsed immediately with pleasure. He looked down, watched Claudia’s full lips moving back and forth along the length of his growing erection and wondered what the hell he was doing.

* * *

“Oh, by the way, Sarah called.”

He sat up abruptly and pushed Claudia’s arm from across his chest. “What? When?”

Claudia put her hands behind her head and lifted her legs in the air. She stretched her arms out and grasped her toes, making the stretch easily.

Brett stared at her. “When, Claudia? When did she call?”

Claudia stood up and looked down at Brett, her eyes narrow. “I don’t know, Brett.”

She grabbed Brett’s T-shirt from the floor and pulled it over her head. She stared at herself in the mantelpiece mirror and started brushing her hair with one of Sarah’s brushes. “Do you want coffee? I made a pot earlier. But it’s probably best if I make a fresh one now.” She put her face close to the mirror and inspected it, turning from side to side and lifting her skin from the edges of her eyes. She noticed Brett staring and smiled happily back at him. “Fresh coffee’s better, don’t you think?”

Brett shook his head, impatient. "Claudia. I don't really give a fuck about the coffee right now. When did Sarah call?"

Claudia turned her head to the side and looked at Brett as if he were an obtuse child. "I don't *know* when she called, Brett. I already told you that."

She walked out of the room towards the kitchen. Brett stared after her then jumped up, pulled his shorts back on and followed her.

"Claudia, what do you mean you don't know? You just told me she called." He fought hard to keep his voice even, to control his growing anger.

Claudia busied herself making coffee. "She left a message on your machine. She didn't mention the time."

Brett frowned, walked over to the machine and pressed the replay button. The machine told him there were no new messages. Claudia must have listened and then erased the message. He faced her, his arms crossed against his chest. "What exactly did she say?"

Claudia spoke cheerfully. "Oh. Just that she'd arrived safely and that you should call her mobile if you wanted to speak to her." She shrugged. "Nothing much. She sounded fine."

Brett stared at her and frowned, rubbed his eyes. "Why did you listen to my messages, Claudia? I mean, for fuck's sake, it's a bit fucking intrusive, isn't it?"

Claudia stopped making the coffee and turned towards Brett. She looked angry. Brett noticed for the first time how small her eyes were. How narrow and colourless, how cold.

"What's a bit much, Brett? I'm not sure I'm getting this. I mean, we make love all night, get as intimate as it's possible for two people to be, and you're upset that I listened to one of your stupid messages?"

"Yeah, I am." He nodded angrily. "It's a fucking invasion of privacy, Claudia."

"Privacy?" Claudia said, her voice now high-pitched. "Invasion?" She slammed the palm of her hand down hard on the kitchen bench. "You

bastard. So I can suck your cock for you, let you stick your prick in every hole in my body, but I can't listen to your fucking messages?"

Brett shook his head slowly, stunned. He blinked then stepped back and held his hands up. "Look. Forget it. I'm totally fucked and I'm not up to this. I'm going back to bed. Maybe you should go home and do the same."

Claudia placed the palms of her hands on the kitchen bench and looked down. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, visibly calming herself. She lifted her head and smiled at Brett. He noticed a tear caught on one of her eyelashes. "I'm sorry. Maybe you're right. I probably shouldn't have listened." Tears started to flow steadily from her eyes. She swiped at them impatiently with the back of her hand. "Can we just forget this? Start the day all over?" She smiled at him hopefully. "Have a coffee together?"

She walked towards him and put her hands around his waist, buried her face in his neck. "Please, Brett. Don't humiliate me."

He could feel the wetness of her tears, smell the shampoo in her hair. She was so persistent. He found it exhausting.

He wished she would just go home and leave him alone. He would be perfectly happy never to see her again in his life. He just wanted some sleep, some time alone to think about what was happening with Sarah. He was so tired, so hungover, he could hardly think straight.

But Claudia obviously wasn't going to leave voluntarily. He sighed. He would have a coffee and then get some more sleep. He could sort things out with Claudia later. "Sure." He forced himself to smile. "Let's have a coffee."

* * *

He opened his eyes and saw Sarah standing in the doorway holding Josh. He felt so happy to see her, so relieved that they were both home. He started to sit up, to reach out to her. And then he noticed Claudia asleep beside him.

“Sarah.” He pressed his hands into his eyes and tried to clear the fuzziness from his eyes, the effect of alcohol and sleep from his head. When he opened them, Sarah was gone. He jumped out of bed and started to follow her, then turned back to put some shorts on. In the midst of his panic, it seemed suddenly important to hide the fact that he’d been naked.

He reached the front door just as she was backing the car out of the drive. The interior light was on and he could see her face clearly. Her mouth was grim, set in a straight line, and her forehead was creased, her brows pressed firmly together. As she changed gears from reverse back into first, she glanced back at the house and, before she took off, their eyes met for a brief moment. Brett was mortified, his heart pierced by the misery and desperation in her eyes.

He ran back up the stairs to the bedroom.

“Wake up, Claudia.” He shook her shoulder firmly but she didn’t wake, just grunted, rolled onto her side and curled her legs up into foetal position. “Claudia!” He pushed her harder.

“Mmmm?” She reached up to him, her eyes still closed.

He took hold of her arms and held them aside. “Wake up.” He was shouting now.

She opened her eyes and sat up. She looked at him coldly. “What is it, Brett?”

He moved away from her and stood in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest. “I thought you said you were going home.”

“Well, I didn’t.” She rolled her eyes. “So what? What’s the problem now?”

He pressed his hands together and pointed them towards her. He spoke quietly. “The problem is that Sarah just came home.” He stretched his lips in a bitter smile and shook his head. “She saw you.”

“Oh.” Claudia opened her mouth and put her hand over it. Brett noticed that she was covering a small smile. “Brett.” She reached out and stepped from the bed, then came towards him. “I know it’s hard.” She

stood in front of him, put her hands on his shoulders, and tilted her head to the side in an artificial gesture of sympathy, of condolence.

“What’s hard?” He shrugged her off and started pulling his jeans on. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re on about.” He picked up her clothes from the floor and held them out to her. “Here, put these on.” He walked from the room and switched the light on as he passed. “You really should go now, Claudia.”

“Brett.” Claudia followed him, her clothes in her hand. “I know you feel bad, but it’ll be okay. This doesn’t have to wreck us.”

Brett turned back to face her. He shook his head. “Us?” His voice was soft, incredulous. “Claudia, there is no *us*.” He stepped towards her, pulled her clothes from her hand and pressed them against her chest. “Get dressed. Go home.”

He turned away from her again and headed toward the kitchen. He stopped in the kitchen and waited, listening. He could hear her crying quietly, moving around. He hoped she would just get dressed and leave.

A few minutes later, she walked into the kitchen. She had put her clothes on and her face looked as if she’d washed it. Her eyes were red. She stood next to him and put her hand on his arm. “Brett?”

He pulled his arm abruptly from her hand. “Claudia.” He was angry and spoke viciously, his top lip curled up spitefully. “Go home.” He pointed toward the hall, toward the front door. “For fuck’s sake, just go away.”

“You prick.” She stepped back and put her hands on her cheeks as if trying to hold herself together. “You fucking bastard.”

Brett nodded and pushed his face towards her. “Yeah. I *am* a prick. I *am* a bastard.” He spat. “Now fuck off.”

Claudia

She poured a glass of white wine. It wasn't really cold enough but she didn't care. It would still have the desired effect. She went into the lounge room and started rifling through her CDs. Something loud and pumping. Something to help her take her mind off everything. Off her life. Her fucked-up failure of a miserable life. She found an old U2 album from the 80s and put it in. She clicked it to a track she liked and started swinging her hips along with the strong, pounding rhythm.

She picked up the paper insert and found a picture of Bono. She licked the black and white image of his face and pressed it hard up against her open lips. She grasped it to her chest and rocked as if dancing intimately with the photo.

"But I still haven't found what I'm looking for. But I still haven't found what I'm looking for," she shouted along with the music. She rubbed the photo gently around her breasts in a figure eight. Then slid it down further, under the elastic waist of her track pants. "Lick me, suck me," she whispered, unable to hear her own voice over the throbbing music. She slid her back down the wall until she was sitting on the floor, then lifted her hips and slid her pants down to her knees. She licked her fingers and pushed them inside herself. Water flooded her eyes and ran silently down her cheeks.

Afterwards, she felt the familiar hollow feeling in her chest. An empty sadness, tinged with self-disgust. She felt foolish splayed down on the floor with her pants twisted around her legs and her face wet with tears and snot.

"Another drink please, sweetie," she whispered in a hoarse voice.

"Of course, my love," she answered herself.

She stood and pulled her pants up. She went to the mantelpiece and picked up the half-empty bottle of whisky. Poured a generous amount into her wineglass and gulped it down, wincing as it burned her throat. Then she poured another glassful to sip slowly. I need more than this, she thought, alcohol isn't enough tonight.

She went into her bedroom and pulled out the green shoebox from under her bed. She'd cut down on drugs since she'd left Sydney. She'd left to get away from the drugs. To get away from the life where she was always high, always out of it. Where her friends expected her to make a fool of herself and, in lots of ways, enjoyed seeing her humiliation. She was always good value like that. She could always make her friends feel better about themselves. They compared themselves with her and came out shining and sensible. Sober. Positively wholesome. Just like brown rice, she sniggered, healthy but boring. Totally fucking boring.

She opened the shoebox and smiled at the choice of drugs available. Prescription drugs, all of them. Temazepam and Valium, of course. But also some heavier stuff, OxyContin tablets and Fentanyl patches—synthetic Morphine, which if used the right way, would give her a powerful high.

She picked up the plastic container with OxyContin tablets inside. 40 mg should be more than enough. It was meant to be swallowed whole so the drug could be released slowly over a twelve-hour period and ease whatever physical pain it had been prescribed for. Her pain was in her head. In her heart. The pain of failure and self-loathing. She put the tablet in her mouth and chewed it firmly, releasing all of the drug immediately. She waited for the drug to take effect. To smooth down all her edges. To wrap her in a soft cocoon of cotton wool and let her believe that she was happy.

She returned to the lounge room and started looking through the shelf of compact discs. She threw them down carelessly in a pile on the floor as she searched.

“Something a little more mellow, now, please, darling,” she purred.

“My thoughts exactly, my love,” she answered herself. “Aha! REM. Perfect.”

She put the disc in and clicked it to track 11. “Nightswimming.” Her favourite song.

She grabbed her glass of whisky and sat down on the floor. She could feel the drug starting to take effect. “I’ve missed you,” she whispered.

She sipped at her whisky and listened to the simple melody of the piano.

She closed her eyes and leant her head back against the seat of the lounge. Her hand brushed against the pile of discs on the floor. She picked up one of the plastic cases. It was broken, its edges sharp. She pressed the point of it into the tip of her finger. It left a deep dent. She pressed harder and a neat, perfectly round ball of blood appeared on her fingertip. It grew larger until its own weight forced it to fall and roll down the inside of her finger. She sucked the blood off. She lifted her hips and pushed her track pants down. Her thighs were brown, hair free. She traced her finger along the long, white scars hidden around the inside. They were pale, barely visible. She liked their neatness, the uniform spaces between them, their bumpy feel if you ran your fingertips down towards her knees. She pressed the sharp point of the plastic into her thigh at the end of an old scar. She dragged the plastic in a line across the front of her thigh, making the old scar longer. A thin line of blood emerged in its wake. She took a big gulp of whisky and pressed the point in again. At the next line. Harder this time. She dragged it around the front of her thigh, parallel to previous, shallower cuts.

She sucked her teeth and cried out from the pain. This time the blood came faster. She leant her head back against the lounge and let it come.

Sarah

“Thanks, Dad.” She smiled at her father.

He smiled back, tenderly, the concern obvious in his face, and he put the cup of steaming tea down on the bedside table. “That’s all right. I’m off to work now.” He sat down on the edge of her bed and rubbed her leg under the blanket. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Dad.” She looked down as she reached for her cup. Blew on the top of it. “I might take Josh down to the river again if it’s warm enough.”

“Well.” He stood up. “It looks like it’s going to be a lovely day.”

Sarah looked at the sun shining on her bed through the window. “It does, doesn’t it?”

When she finished her tea, she got out of bed and walked through the house to the back door. She stepped outside and stood on the veranda. Christine was hanging clothes on the line and watching the twins take turns pushing Josh in the swing.

Josh had his eyes closed. His head was tipped back in delight.

“Good morning.” Christine smiled.

Sarah stepped off the veranda and walked over to Christine. She picked up a wet T-shirt from the basket, shook it out and pegged it to the line. “Thank you for taking Josh this morning. I haven’t slept so much since he was born.”

Christine shook her head. “It was nothing. He’s an absolute delight, Sarah. He’s so cute.” She looked at the children and smiled fondly. “And the twins adore him.”

Sarah put her hand on Christine's arm. "How about I take the twins to the river today with Joshua? Give you a break?"

Christine shook her head. "Don't be silly, Sarah. You don't need to repay me."

"But I'd like to."

Christine was quiet for a moment. She picked up a wet pair of jeans and shook them out. Hung them on the line. "I've got a better idea. Why don't we pack a picnic lunch and all go to the river together?"

"Okay. That'd be lovely."

Christine's kindness made Sarah want to cry. She felt the now familiar pain of grief rise in her chest and constrict her throat. She swallowed to try to control it, blinked hard, and looked down to hide her face.

Christine reached out and put her hand on Sarah's chin, lifted it gently so that she had to look up. "Sarah," she said. "Just let it out. You need to cry."

Sarah started to sob. "I do cry. That's *all* I do. I'm just so bloody *sick* of it." She sank to the ground and sat with her knees bent up, her head forward, her face in her hands. Christine crouched down beside her and rubbed her back. Sarah felt her shoulders heave beneath Christine's hand.

She forced herself to stop. She wiped her eyes and looked up. The twins had become subdued and looked a little anxious. They were still pushing Josh, but without enthusiasm now. Josh continued to squeal with pleasure as he swung through the air, happily oblivious to his mother's misery.

Christine smiled and handed her a clean tissue.

Sarah took it and pressed it to her eyes. "I hate him, Christine. I hate him." She blew her nose. "I hope he is suffering as much as I am. I hope it hurts."

"I'm sure he *is* suffering, Sarah. Terribly."

Sarah took the tissue from her face and stared at Christine. She stood up. "But I can't *bear* it." She clenched her fists and hit her thighs furiously. "I can't *bear* for him to suffer. I love him, Christine," she hissed bitterly. "I fucking love him."

Brett

Brett took his keys from his pocket and rifled through them. It was dark, and he'd forgotten to leave an outside light on, so he had to try a few keys in the lock before he found the right one.

He stepped inside, turned on the lights, took his jacket off and threw it over the back of an armchair. Then he went straight to the answering machine and checked it for messages. When he saw the red light blinking, his heart started to beat faster. He smiled and put his hands up momentarily in a gesture of prayer. "Please," he whispered. "Please."

It was a man's voice on the phone. He asked for Sarah and said that she had some library books that needed returning. Brett felt the corner of his mouth turn down with bitter disappointment. He slammed the machine off before the message had finished.

He went to the kitchen and opened the fridge door. There was nothing appetising inside, only the bare carcass of a chicken he'd roasted a week ago and had been eating frequently since, a carton of milk, and a few bottles of beer.

He grabbed a beer and pushed the fridge door closed with his foot. He twisted the lid off, put the bottle to his lips and took a long, noisy drink. He sighed and looked around the kitchen. It was tidy, only a single coffee cup upturned on the sink. He rarely bothered to cook proper meals, so there was never much mess to clean up.

He went to the lounge room, turned on the television, and flicked through the channels with the remote. Nothing interested him. He turned it off and tossed the remote onto an armchair.

He went to the bathroom and filled the bathtub. He got in and stretched out, rested his head against the back of the bath, and closed his eyes.

He wondered what Sarah was doing. Josh would probably be in bed now, sound asleep, and Sarah would be relaxing, reading a book or watching television. Maybe she was even eating dinner with her father and Christine. A proper meal, with vegetables and a salad, eaten at the table with glasses of wine.

He imagined Sarah talking to her father and Christine. Her face open and warm, her eyebrows raised and her forehead wrinkled the way it always was when she listened.

Then another image came to mind, a more likely scenario. Sarah's skin blotchy and red from crying, her eyes bloodshot and her face drawn. Sarah's father and Christine being sensitive and kind, bringing her dinner in bed and telling her that she *must* eat, she must keep up her strength. Then meeting in the hall with worried faces and saying "*Poor Sarah, what is she going to do?*"

He found the thought of Sarah's grief unbearably painful. And he was surprised to feel such an unfamiliar emotion, surprised to feel such anguish over the suffering of someone other than himself. The fact that he had made Sarah unhappy tormented him. And kept him awake at night. It was more agonising than his own pain, his own grief. His own sadness he could bear, but the thought of Sarah's he could not.

He bent his legs at the knee and let his head slide down the back of the bath and under the water. Then he sat up and wiped the water from his eyes, picked up a shampoo bottle, and washed his hair. As he lowered himself back down into the water to rinse his hair, the phone rang.

He quickly got out of the bath, grabbed a towel and wiped his face dry as he ran to the phone. He picked it up.

"Hello."

"Brett? It's Mark from work."

"Oh. Mark. What's up?"

Mark laughed. "Don't sound so pleased, mate."

"I was just in the bath."

"Sorry, I'll keep it quick." Brett could hear other people in the background, someone shouting, a woman laughing. "We're all down at the pub and a couple of us are going down to the Chinese for dinner. We thought you might want to come?"

"No. No, mate. Thanks anyway."

"Oh, come on, Brett. It'll do you good."

"No. I don't want to. I'm buggered."

"You sure?"

"Yep." Brett heard a woman's voice close to the phone. He heard her questioning Mark. He heard Mark tell her that no, Brett wasn't interested in going out, then he heard the woman's voice demanding the phone.

"Brett. It's Jen. Why don't you come?"

"I don't want to, Jen." He sighed. "I'm in the middle of a bath and I'm cold so I'm going to hang up now."

"All right then." She sounded a little offended.

"I'm sorry, Jen. I just want a quiet night, okay? I'll come next time."

He hung up and started to walk back to the bathroom. He thought how unusual it was that he didn't want to go out. The whole idea of being with a lot of people—all the noise, all the small talk—now seemed so unappealing, such an unnecessary effort. He couldn't imagine ever wanting to go out at night again.

He was about to step into the bath when he stopped. He picked up the towel again and walked back to the phone. He opened his phone book and checked the number, then pressed it in quickly, so that he had no chance to get nervous and change his mind.

It rang three times before the machine answered. He listened to Sarah's father's voice.

Hi, thanks for calling Christine, Perry, Jack, Jessie, Sarah and Joshua.

We aren't home at the moment. If you would like to leave a message for one of us, please do so after the tone.

Brett hung up without leaving a message.

Perry's words played on his mind. For some reason they had made him feel even worse.

Then he realised what it was that had upset him. Perry had used the words *us* and *we* to include Sarah and Joshua. They were now more a part of Perry's life than they were of his. Brett could no longer say *we*.

He had no *us*.

He sank to the floor and put his head in his hands. He began to weep.

III

He wakes early and swims laps in the pool. Afterwards he has a shower to warm up. It is almost winter and the pool is icy. He goes to the kitchen and makes a coffee. He drinks it standing, his hands wrapped around the mug to warm them.

He looks at the clock. It is still only 7:30, but probably late enough to call. She'll be up by now and Josh will have finished breakfast.

He calls the number, as usual a little anxious about how his call will be received. She might be busy, irritated at the intrusion. Or maybe she'll be in a mellow mood, enjoying a lazy morning with Josh, laughing at his antics, and pleased to be able to share them with someone just as interested as she is.

Sometimes now, he has noticed, she enjoys his calls.

He gets the busy signal. Someone is using the phone. He wonders who it is, probably Perry or Christine, or maybe even one of the twins.

But it may be Sarah.

He becomes convinced that it is Sarah on the phone and wonders who she could possibly be speaking to. It would have to be someone very close. Someone intimate enough to call so early in the morning.

He feels irrationally angry and jealous. He is frustrated that there are aspects of her life that are no longer any of his business. That she can speak to someone else at seven-thirty in the morning, another man perhaps, and he can't even ask her about it.

Another man. He can hardly bear the thought.

He dials the number again, a little impatient now, and is relieved when he hears it ringing.

"Hello?" It is Sarah.

"Hi." He smiles. Just hearing her voice, always so calm and cheerful, so strangely soothing, lifts his spirits and reminds him why he calls her every day.

Why he keeps trying.

"Hi." She sounds happy. Pleased to speak to him. "I was just thinking of you. Josh is being so cute and I was wishing you were here to see it."

“Really?” He is filled with gratitude. “Me, too.” He hears Josh in the background and he feels keenly the fact that he can’t see him, or touch him. “What was he doing?”

“Playing with the phone. He was pretending to talk on it and making really hilarious gestures. He looked just like an adult having a real conversation.” She laughed. “He must’ve been imitating me.”

Her laughter trails off and then stops. There is a silence. Brett wishes he could think of something to say. Something magical that would erase the past and make everything better. Something that would bring her rushing back.

But for now it is better to stick to practicalities. “I’ve booked my flight. I’ve got five days this time. Are you sure it’s still okay if I stay at your father’s place?” Brett has been flying to Brisbane when he has enough days off. He has been staying in cheap motels and spending the days with Josh. Last time he went, Sarah said that he should stay at her father’s place and that motels were a waste of money.

He’d been ridiculously happy at the invitation.

“Brett, I already told you it’s okay. Don’t keep asking.” She sounds impatient now. A little distracted. She probably needs her hands free to tend to Josh.

“Okay.” He forces himself to sound light, cheerful. “I’ll let you go. Have a great day.”

“You, too.”

Sarah hangs up before him. She always does and always abruptly. It’s as if the end of the phone call, the necessary breaking of the connection, reminds her of what he has done, reminds her that she is angry and that it is his fault they need to communicate by phone in the first place.

He stands up, sighs and puts the phone back on its base.

He rubs his arms. It is cold in the house, but he tries to avoid heating, as it is expensive and he needs a lot of money for the flights to Brisbane.

He doesn’t mind, though, it is usually warm outside in the sun and he spends his days at home gardening.

*Looking after the trees and shrubs that Sarah planted.
He has learnt a lot about mulching. About watering and fertilising.
About tending to living things.
And the plants are thriving.*

About the Author

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They walk away from the wreckage of an airplane, but their hearts and lives will never be the same.

Never the Same

© 2007 Diane Craver

When fashion buyer Kimberly Collins and high school senior Tori Moorhead escape a burning plane, both women make radical decisions that intertwine their lives forever.

Kim's priorities change, especially in the bedroom. She's thankful to be taken to another world—one of love and romance, not of smoke and death. When she decides she wants another child, her husband reveals his own shocking plans for their family.

Pregnant teenager Tori is on her way to get a secret abortion when the plane crashes. The baby's teen father wants to get married. Her dad pushes for adoption. Caught between the two men she loves, Tori struggles to make the right decisions for her baby and the future she dreamed of.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Never the Same*:

Victoria Moorhead stood in front of her full-length mirror. She looked the same. She placed her hand over her stomach. It felt the same.

But it wasn't the same. Her baby was growing inside her. Why had she and Ryan celebrated their victories so intimately that fateful night? As co-captain of the football team, he was excited when his team won the league championship. Her soccer team had also won their league, so they'd drunk a little too much beer and lost all control.

She glanced in the mirror a last time before climbing into bed. She was wearing the University of North Carolina T-shirt her dad had bought for her on their last campus visit.

“Well, golden girl, you did it,” he’d said, using the expression he’d begun to use after the accident that killed her mother and paralyzed him. At first she’d thought he called her that because of her blonde hair. Later, she realized she was his golden girl because the accident had left her uninjured. “God has something special in mind for you,” he reminded her often.

Her cell phone rang and she answered it.

“Tori, I can’t sleep,” Ryan said. “I keep thinking about tomorrow.”

She sat on her oversized blue-and-white striped beanbag chair. “I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep, either. I’m scared.”

“Does your dad suspect anything?” Ryan asked.

“No, he thinks I’m going to New York so Blair can help me find a dress for the sweetheart dance.” Her half-sister Blair worked for the airlines and she’d booked the flight for her. She felt guilty about lying to her dad, but she couldn’t tell him about the baby.

“I don’t want you to have an abortion. I’ve been thinking we can get married. I’ll still go to college, and after I graduate and get a job, I’ll pay for you to go.”

“We’re too young to get married now and...” She hesitated because what she’d just said troubled her. How could she be too young to be a wife, but old enough to kill her baby? “I can’t lose my scholarship. My dad would be heartbroken. He’s lived for the day I go to college and make something of myself.”

“I know I’m asking a lot, but please don’t go through with it.”

“If I stay pregnant, I won’t get to go to UNC.” Tori sighed. “It’s not fair. You won’t have to give up anything. Guys never suffer when they get girls pregnant.”

“Honey, I’m sorry about everything. I know how much your scholarship means to you. You did get an academic scholarship at Loyola. You could go there and live at home. We could hire a babysitter while you’re in class.”

“My dad and I always dreamed I’d play on the women’s soccer team at the Olympics someday.”

“Whatever you do, I love you.”

Her eyes teared. “I love you, too.”

“I’ll drive you to the airport.”

“Maybe the plane will crash, and I won’t survive. Everything will be out of my hands and I won’t have to go through with the abortion.”

“Don’t say that. Flying to New York is dumb anyhow. Since you’re determined to have the abortion, you should just go to a clinic in Chicago.”

“I can’t take a chance that my dad or anyone learns I’m pregnant.” A thought occurred to her. “You didn’t tell anyone, did you?”

“I promised you I wouldn’t and I didn’t. It’s been hard not telling my parents, because I think they should know.”

“I wish you could tell them, but I’m afraid if they know, they’ll try to stop me.”

“I’m not sure what they would do.”

Weighted down with adult responsibilities, they became quiet. Creating a new life when both of them were kids had been a stupid thing to do.

The only thing left to discuss was when to leave for the airport in the morning. Ryan sounded so sad, Tori was relieved to say good-bye.

After crawling into bed, she held her beige teddy bear next to her chest. She’d slept with this bear for years. Before her mother had died, they’d made a hat and dress out of blue and red material for the bear. The finishing touch was a little heart necklace.

If only she could talk to her mom. What would Mom tell her to do?

She didn’t have to think long. Her mother had often told her how thankful she’d been to have Tori. Her mother’s physician had told her she might never have a child.

Clutching her bear, she could almost hear her mother’s gentle voice saying, Victoria, having you was a miracle. A child is such a precious gift.

She would tell her to have the baby. The realization startled her and she trembled. But her mother was dead and couldn't help. Tori didn't have a choice but to have an abortion.

Maybe after the abortion, God would somehow see to it that her mother could welcome the baby into heaven.

Her tears fell on the bear.

Mudpacks, murder, deceit, betrayal and tattoos—how much can a friendship sustain without cracking?

La Bella Luna

© 2007 Bobbie Cole

Try telling your best friends that your husband is leaving you for another man, or that you've slept with one of their husbands and have borne his child. Better yet, let them know you've just committed murder or that you're dying.

Ann, Eazy, Merry and Leta Lou—all four of the Oklahoma City socialites, having spent years merely scratching the surface of their friendship, are thrust into an emotional tornado and left with the devastating ruins of aftermath as the secrets they've kept surface. Ann wants to help them rediscover their dreams, but before she can do that, she must first destroy their illusions.

Money can't buy happiness, forgiveness, or peace, but it can sure make life...and death...a lot more interesting.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *La Bella Luna*:

"I want you to be as naughty as you please tonight," Ann told her three guests the next afternoon after the last two had arrived. "That's why I told you to rest before you got here. Because, ladies, we are going to eat, drink, smoke and do it all tonight. Before you fill your plates, I want each of you to take one of those pens and a block of paper I've cut out, and list your secret naughty pleasure. Something you've never done that you want to do or be or have."

Merry and Leta Lou each tentatively accepted the slips of paper Ann held out, locked glances and then slid the paper back onto the counter with nervous laughs, shaking their heads. Ann gave a sigh, chastising them with a mock glare. "Just do it."

"A secret desire, hm?" Leta Lou asked.

“Something deliciously naughty,” Ann said with a wink.

Eazy rolled her eyes and groaned. “Bullshit. I’m not telling any of you something that private.”

“Yes, you will. If you don’t, I’ll make something up and embarrass the hell out of you,” Ann told her. “Everybody has to play.”

“What are we going to do with these?” Eazy asked, still obviously not convinced that she was in safe waters.

“We’re going to discuss them one by one after dessert. C’mon. Write!” Ann ordered.

When they’d done as she’d asked, Ann gathered the snippets of paper and tucked them under the phone for later. While the rest of them chatted over jalapeño chicken and sautéed mushrooms, Eazy’s eyes kept glancing over at the telephone.

“What is said in this house stays in this house, right?” she asked.

“Why are you so worried?” Ann couldn’t help but laugh as she watched Eazy’s face.

“Because I can’t believe I just bared my soul like that.”

“How about whatever is written down, we all do?” Ann asked. “That way you won’t be the Lone Ranger.”

“Do?” Eazy had a stricken look on her face. “I thought you said we’d *discuss* them.”

“Well, let’s take it a step further. Let’s all do whatever’s written down.”

Leta Lou and Merry laughed. Eazy blanched.

“Yeah, right,” she said. “I can just see this.”

“What are you afraid of, Eazy?” Leta Lou asked. “I’m game if you are.”

The rest of them looked at Merry.

“Sure,” she said.

After that, nothing they talked about could hold their interest as the tension built around those small pieces of paper. Often, when they had girls’ night out at Ann’s, she would challenge them to do something different. Once they played a game of Truth or Dare as they played

bridge, and the one who failed to be honest had to drink a shot of tequila. Another time they went bowling and were sore for weeks afterwards. And one Christmas they went Christmas caroling and visited other country club friends and got them to join in.

"How about what you want, Ann?" Leta Lou asked, stabbing the air between them with her fork.

"Mine comes last. But we *all* agree to do whatever is written down."

"Then write yours down as well," Eazy told Ann. "I'm not doing it unless it's written down. You're such a bully. I'll bet even the boys were terrified of you when you were growing up."

Ann challenged her with a cackle. "Promise that you'll do it?"

Eazy looked around at the rest of them and nodded. "I will if you will. But even you may balk at doing a couple of things."

"Never." Ann put down her fork and looked at the others who stared back at her expectantly.

"Well, this is getting us nowhere," Ann commented. "We're going to be starving later, but I doubt any of you have even tasted your food for the past ten minutes."

Wordlessly, they filed back to the kitchen and set their plates on the counter. Ann wrote down what she wanted then pulled out the slips of paper, placed hers on bottom, and with ceremonious deliberation selected one of the other three.

"I'd recognize this chicken scratching anywhere. Eazy wants a vibrator."

Ann almost felt sorry for her. Almost. It took them a few seconds to recover from the shock.

"A dildo?" Merry asked.

"I've been single a long time," came Eazy's defensive response. "And I've always wondered what the...big deal...was."

Everyone sniggered then burst into laughter.

"Some of them *are* pretty big," Merry said with a laugh.

“Leave it to you to already be intimate with something like that. Well, if you’re just going to make fun of me,” Eazy said in a huff, “I might as well...”

“Oh, Eazy!” Ann cried, throwing an arm about her shoulders. “I’ve never had one either, so this could be fun. Let’s go shopping!”

Amidst Eazy’s furious blushing and Merry’s shrieks, they all gathered their purses and jackets and headed toward Eazy’s car, piling in like sorority sisters.

“You’ve probably never needed one,” Eazy grumbled.

“I’ll have you know that I was celibate for several months after all my husbands’ deaths,” Ann said, climbing in beside her and fastening the seat belt. “There’s no shame in acknowledging you have needs. Besides, this could be fun.”

* * *

Christy’s Toybox on North May wasn’t deserted, as Eazy had hoped. But there were only a few customers milling about. And rather than waste time fording through a sea of feather boas and a mountain of shocking videos while looking for dildos, to Leta Lou and Merry’s amusement and Eazy’s chagrin, Ann nabbed the sales clerk immediately and asked her to direct them to the vibrators.

“What do you suggest?” Ann asked, once they’d arrived at the displays at the back of the store that wrapped around them on three sides.

The gum-smacking clerk blew a bubble, popped it and gave Ann a blank stare. “Why, whatever trips your trigger, sister,” she said noncommittally. “You want motion in the ocean, I’d say the Eager Beavers or one of the Power Bunnies. For variation in size, the row behind you goes from magnum to derringer, and there are more over there by the cock rings and flavored lotions.”

Eazy picked up what looked like a large water pistol. “What the hell is this thing?”

"It's a dildo, like the others," the clerk said. "The little thing right there that you're using as a trigger...it does look like a gun, doesn't it?" she continued. "But that's for your smaller hole. You know—your asshole."

Eazy dropped it as if it had bitten her, triggering a wave of laughter throughout their end of the building.

"You're shittin' me."

"Nope. Some women get off on that sort of thing. Men, too."

"But it has water in it," Eazy said in her own defense. "The thing has water. What's a dildo doing with water in it like a squirt gun?"

The sales clerk recovered it from the middle of the rack where Eazy had dropped it and pushed a button, turning it on.

"See?" She held it up for them all to see. "Bubbles."

"But who's gonna watch it?" Eazy asked with a perplexed frown. "I mean, it goes...well, you know."

"Sometimes there's a man down there, honey," the clerk said, unblinkingly. "And the bubbles are there for a reason, for *her* pleasure. Makes the thing throb very gently, not like someone hammering you."

Eazy still wasn't satisfied. "Where do the bubbles go?"

The clerk sighed impatiently and explained. "They don't go anywhere—they are regenerated by the battery. Bubbles equal satisfaction. Like a hot tub for your pussy."

By the time they'd all recovered, they were only halfway through with their shopping. Each of them found *the one* they wanted, along with either a bottle or tube of flavored lotion or gel, a video or two, and even a deck of playing cards.

"Another fantasy of yours?" Ann asked Eazy, eyeing the black Eager Beaver contraption she'd selected as they prepared to pay for their purchases.

"Hey, this is as close as I'll ever get, so why not?" she reasoned. "Besides, the only other one they had this size was purple. That would be just too weird for me."

Ann was thrilled that the shopping trip had turned out to be so much fun, and even though she was starting to feel a little tired, she knew that she had to make it through the rest of this night.

“What’s next?” Merry asked, once they were settled back into Eazy’s Cadillac.

Ann reached into her purse and pulled out the slips of paper she’d brought with her. Closing her eyes like some swami or fortuneteller, she chose one.

“This must be Leta Lou’s,” Ann said. “Looks like the next thing we’re all doing is getting tattoos!”

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