The Narrator and Child’s Consciousness in Fiction

A Novel for Adults Narrated Via a Child’s Consciousness and An Exegesis, which is an Examination of the Relationship Between the Creation of a Child’s Point of View and Narrative Devices in Two Works of Fiction

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The Birthday Wish – A Novel

A novel submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing)

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DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Signed: ____________________________________________

Debra Ellen Nielsen

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The Birthday Wish

Ellie Nielsen

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There was nothing. No cars. No people. Not even a train chooing along the track across the road. The sun was shining, though, and the clouds were running around the sky. Margot looked down at her shadow. It looked like a fallen puppet, flattened on the footpath, waiting, like she was, for her birthday to begin.

Of course her birthday had started hours ago, in the half-dark morning, when she slid out of bed, crept past her sleeping brother and sister, and tiptoed to her parents’ room.

She stood in the doorway and watched them. Jim, her father, curled round the sheet with his hands covered up and his toes sticking out and Catherine, her mother, flat on the other side of the bed, as far away on the edge as you could be, without falling out. Catherine was wearing her pink rosebud nighty. The one with the lace around the neck and around the arm-holes too. The one where you could see the hairbrush hair, curling out under her arms. That hair made Margot back away but Catherine’s eyes flew open and she said, ‘Happy birthday, love,’ so Margot stopped backing away and stayed instead.

Margot tried to pretend she couldn’t see her mother’s hairbrush arm. She tried to look at the wall but Tommy’s cot was next to the wall and he was still asleep in it, sideways, down the wrong end, without his blankets on. His nappy was wee-thick and she could smell his sicky baby smell. She screwed her face shut. She agreed with Daddy. He said Tommy was a little beggar. He said he was always crying or hungry or calling out. Sometimes when Tommy cried, Catherine cried too. It broke her heart she said, to see her baby hungry and if the chemist hadn’t given her some formula they’d probably both be dead.

Margot smiled at her mother’s happy birthday face and decided to start again. She was thinking the wrong things for a birthday. On a birthday you had to
think nice, birthday thoughts, things that helped you not to cry – because – cry on your birthday and you cry all year round. That’s what Catherine told Margot last year and that made her stop crying straight away. She’d dragged her tears across the back of her hand and shuddered. She had that awful, something-bad-is-going-to-happen feeling. The feeling you had when you were waiting for the wind to change.

All year round. That was a long time. That’s what the wicked Godmother would have wished for Sleeping Beauty – if she hadn’t thought of the needle first.

A van came backwards out of the garage next door. The van belonged to Mr Beckett and the garage belonged to his dry cleaners, where Jim worked. Margot waved at the driving Mr Beckett but he didn’t wave back. Maybe he couldn’t see her. Maybe (and this might have happened because she’d wished it lots of times) she’d become invisible. She looked down at her hands. Could you still see your own hands if you had become invisible?

Catherine had already been into the drycleaners. She went in after breakfast and Margot went too. They went to tell Mr Beckett Jim wasn’t going to work. Catherine said she was sorry but this time it was Margot’s birthday and Mr Beckett said that wasn’t anything to be sorry for. Margot told him it was her first birthday party and Mr Beckett said she looked much older than that. He laughed with his teeth shut and told them he was very good at jokes, he always saw the funny side, even when there wasn’t one. Margot said that was funny but Mr Beckett put his pointer finger across his lips and said no. That wasn’t a joke. That was just the truth.

Mr Beckett shook Margot’s hand and said goodbye. Catherine said she’d do some extra deliveries next week and Margot said yes – she would help too.

Mr Beckett’s brother, the butcher, had some spare chops. Next week he was going to bring some in. Catherine said thank you to that but when they walked out of the dry-cleaners she leant close to Margot’s ear and said, ‘the way that man carries on.’
Margot jumped up on the gate. Her puppet shadow jumped up with her and together they watched Mrs Coates, marching her way down the street towards them.

‘Well, well, well,’ said Mrs Coates, ‘if it isn’t the birthday girl herself.’

‘Hello Mrs Coates,’ said Margot jumping off the gate and holding it open for her, ‘I was invisible but I’m not now.’

‘No. I can see you’re wearing a nurse’s uniform. Birthday present?’

‘Yes and I got a necklace making set and some pencils too.’

‘You’re a lucky girl.’

Mrs Coates’s voice was big. Big like her shiny shoes and her lady bosom. Margot loved watching Mrs Coates’s bosom – the way it marched her along and made her look important. She was dying to touch that bosom because you couldn’t tell close up, whether it was hard or soft.

‘Well, here’s another one for you, pet,’ said Mrs Coates, holding a present out towards Margot, ‘happy seventh birthday.’

Catherine lined Margot and Lewis and Julie up along the couch.

‘Why don’t you let me take it and then you can be in it too?’ said Mrs Coates pushing the collar on Julie’s dress away from her chin.

‘For goodness sake, Vi, who’d want a photo of me?’

‘I would,’ said Margot but Catherine didn’t hear. She was fiddling with the camera, moving sideways and backwards, trying to find the light. ‘Ready?’ She looked up and then she pressed the Box Brownie camera hard against her chest and looked down again. ‘Julie. Stop screwing your face up. Look at the camera and smile.’

‘Say cheese,’ said Margot, ‘Mum, you say, say cheese.’

‘Cheese.’ Catherine pushed the button. Then she smiled too. She smiled like she was having her photo taken.

Jim walked into the lounge room.

‘Here’s Daddy,’ sang Margot, jumping off the couch and skipping around him. ‘Take another one. Take one of me and Daddy.’

‘Later,’ said Catherine, ‘when we have the cake and the candles.’
Jim was wearing his jacket. He was holding a giant piece of paper and an orange crayon. ‘Righto, Tiger, look lively we’re going to make pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey.’

‘Now?’ said Catherine. ‘But the party will be here any minute.’

‘Better get cracking then,’ said Jim.

‘It’s too late for pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey.’ Catherine sounded a bit cross.

‘Anyway, I’ve already made pass-the-parcel.’

‘And I’m going to win,’ said Lewis, wriggling off the couch. ‘I’m going to win that Dad.’

‘That’s the way Lew.’ Jim knelt on the floor and held the crayon in the air.

‘Which way does a donkey go?’

‘Me know Daddy,’ said Julie waving both her arms in the air, ‘me know donkeys.’

‘Mum! Mum!’ Margot raced into the kitchen and danced the orange crayon in the air. ‘There’s a knock, Mum. There’s a knock at the door.’

‘Shhh.’ Catherine put the last plate of fairy bread on the party table and threw her apron on a chair. ‘Alright. All ready.’

Audrey Fish and her mother stood in the doorway. Audrey was in a lemon dress. It was a party dress, like Margot’s, with puffed sleeves and a gathered waist and lots and lots of material.

‘What a pretty dress,’ said Catherine.

Mrs Fish looked at Audrey’s dress like she was trying to decide.

‘Mummy made my dress and she made me some doll’s clothes for Wendy and she doesn’t even have a sewing machine,’ said Margot.

‘Goodness,’ said Mrs Fish, blinking into the passage, ‘imagine that.’

‘I wanted to give you a Hula Hoop,’ said Audrey handing Margot a thin, flat present, ‘but Mum said Fuzzy Felts are nicer.’

Margot grabbed Audrey’s hand and pulled her along the passage. ‘I love Fuzzy Felts. Come and look at this. Dad’s making pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey.’

‘Is that it?’ asked Audrey as they stared at the corner of paper sticking out from under the couch.
Margot scratched the skirt on her dress and tried to think. ‘It’s not finished yet.’ She pulled the half-finished donkey out from underneath the couch and tried to smooth the creases away. ‘It doesn’t matter. We’ve got pass-the-parcel and Daddy gave me a badge with seven on, look.’

Catherine stood in front of the smiles balancing pass-the-parcel in her hand. ‘To the one with the biggest smile,’ she said again and Margot thought Catherine should win because her smile was beaming the most.

‘What about, Terry,’ said Mrs Coates. ‘He’s got a lovely smile.’

‘Hmmm,’ said Catherine moving past him, ‘he does.’

‘And me,’ said Julie.

‘You’re a bit little to have a big smile yet.’ Catherine looked at the twins and squeezed her own smile into a thinking face. She walked up and down the line of stretched lips and jumbled teeth and looked for the best. She looked at Shona and Sharon. At Lewis and Julie and Terry. And Audrey. Audrey already had the biggest eyes, the longest fingers and the prettiest freckles. She could stand on one leg all day and say Peter Piper Picked a Peck of Pickled Peppers best too.

‘Mum.’ Margot tried to talk without moving her lips. ‘Mum, my face is hurting.’

‘You won’t be in it if you’re not smiling,’ said Catherine. ‘Now. I think…I think I’ll choose…’

She wasn’t choosing on purpose. Margot knew that. It was the last turn and everyone knew the winner of the last turn got a prize. Something you could take home, or eat, or show off to everyone. Everyone wanted that prize because a real prize was better than just being the best.

‘Shona Green,’ said Catherine at last and the smile on Shona’s Green’s face disappeared.

‘Me?’

‘That’s right.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘What’s not true?’ said Catherine looking at Margot when she should be looking at Shona.

‘It’s me and Sharon. We’ve got the same smile.’
‘You might be the same height,’ said Catherine, ‘but I’m afraid you can’t have the same smile.’

‘But we do, Mrs Lovelock. We do, don’t we Sharon?’

‘Yes,’ said Sharon, ‘see?’ and she stretched her smile across her face as far as it would go and Shona did the same.

‘They are,’ said Margot, ‘they are the same.’

‘They might look the same but they’re different.’

‘Yeah,’ said Terry.

‘What would you know? You haven’t even got a smile.’

‘Margot!’ said Catherine crossly.

Margot’s face went red. She didn’t mean to say that. She didn’t know she was going to say that. She looked down at the floor. Her throat started stinging and the backs of her eyes stung too and the birthday crying rule popped into her head and everything went red.

‘Perhaps you should give it to Audrey,’ said Mrs Fish, ‘she’s never won anything for smiling before.’

‘She’s won everything else,’ said Catherine, ‘I suppose she may as well win this too.’

‘That’s not fair,’ cried Terry.

‘Fair’s got nothing to do with it.’ Catherine dropped the parcel in Audrey’s hand and then folded her arms together.

‘There’s two prizes,’ said Audrey as the last piece of newspaper fell from her hand.

‘Two?’ said Shona and Sharon together.

‘A little clacking clown and a White Knight lolly.’

‘I got one of those clacker things in my Christmas stocking from Auntie Vi,’ said Terry.

‘Me too,’ said Lewis. ‘Hey! That is mine.’

‘It’s Audrey’s now, isn’t it Mum?’

‘It is not. Father Christmas brought…’

‘Lewis, stop arguing with your sister on her birthday or you won’t get any birthday cake.’

‘What a good idea,’ said Mrs Coates. ‘Why don’t we go and do the cake now? Everybody’s getting a bit hot.’
‘The cake.’ Margot pulled at her seven badge. ‘We can’t do the cake until Daddy gets back.’

‘Margot…’ Catherine bent down and took her hand. ‘I think it’s time now, love.’

‘No!’ Margot yanked her hand away from her mother’s ‘You promised. You promised we could do our song after the cake so how can we have the cake now?’

Catherine made a loud breath and made her face into a smile. ‘You can’t do the song if Daddy’s not here. Can you, love?’

Margot looked around the room and everyone looked back at her.

‘I mean we don’t know where he’s gone. Where he is.’ Catherine raised her eyebrows and her shoulders too. ‘I mean if he’d said how long he’d be, we could wait…but we’re all getting hungry…and it’s getting late…’

‘Perhaps we could have the food first and do the cake last,’ suggested Mrs Coates.

‘Yes,’ said Catherine nodding, ‘perhaps we could.’

‘It’s all the same to me,’ said Mrs Fish and she stood up and put her hand on her jiggling teacup. ‘Besides, you shouldn’t upset yourself on your birthday, Margot. That’s bad luck.’

‘She knows that, Joy,’ said Catherine, ‘and what’s more she’s at the age where she believes every word you say.’

Margot’s eyes hurt again and she closed them tight and held her mouth closed too.

Mrs Fish clicked her tongue. ‘Look at that. What you wouldn’t give to be seven again.’

‘Yes,’ said Catherine but she didn’t sound sure.
Two

Margot skipped along the street singing. ‘Slide and slide down someone’s cellar door…are you listening Mum? Slide and slide till our pants got tore. Mum!’

‘Don’t sing in the street, love, someone might…’

‘I’ll just sing this last bit. Ready Mum? Oh boy! What joy!…’

‘Shhh,’ said Catherine, ‘we’re here now.’

‘Where?’

The tiny shop was so dark and full of so many things it was hard to see what anything was except for the man at the counter who was wearing a dark apron and counting some numbers in a book. As they walked towards him through clocks and watches and medals and old coins and past a genie bottle, he kept counting. He was still counting while they stood in front of the counter waiting and Catherine looked at Margot and coughed quietly into her hand and the man looked up and said, ‘hello again Mrs Lovelock.’

Catherine and the man started whispering then and Catherine pulled something out of her handbag. It was a hankie. She held it in her hand and said something about it being her best one. Margot tried to listen to what the man said but there were so many clocks ticking and tocking it was hard to hear anything but clocks.

Margot looked around at the tall glass cases that took up all the space. She stared at the medals and the faded coins but then she noticed there was jewelry too, lots of it, locked inside glass cases that ran along the wall.

She put her hand on the glass door and traced a finger around the outline of a beautiful shining necklace.

‘Hey!’ cried the loud voice, ‘don’t touch.’
Margot jumped away from the necklace and Catherine’s hankie jumped too and two sparkly earrings fell out of it and rolled along the floor.

‘Now look what you’ve done,’ said Catherine.

‘I’ll get them,’ cried Margot and she fell to her knees, crawled after them and trapped them with her hand.

‘Put them on the counter. Now,’ said Catherine, in a shaky voice.

Margot looked down at the earrings in her hand. They looked like two tiny stars that had fallen down to earth. She tried to walk them over to the counter but a little bit of earring had jumped into her eye and it was hard to do as she was told.

‘This is not a place for children,’ said the man, talking in his quiet voice again.

‘I know,’ said Catherine, ‘I’m sorry.’ She walked over to Margot and took the earrings out of her hand. ‘Go and wait near the door,’ she whispered, swallowing her lips, like she did when she was upset.

When she got back to the man her proper voice came back and she said, ‘and don’t touch anything else, please.’

Margot looked out at the street. They didn’t have to growl like that. She wasn’t going to break anything and she saved the earrings and what were they doing anyway, those earrings in a hankie?

A lady who looked like Mrs Coates walked past and Margot pressed her face to the glass on the door to see. When she stopped searching, she saw herself, outlined in the glass, looking back into the shop with a frown across her eyes. She pulled her frown face into a big-eyed surprise and then she squeezed her lips into a beak and made a bird face. She thought about Lewis then, he loved her bird face.

When her bird lips started to hurt, she stretched her mouth open as wide as she could and tried to see the bottom of her tongue. She thought about Red Indian then and she squashed her lips into the sort you put lipstick on.

‘Red Indian, please.’ Margot remembered Catherine saying that and telling the lady at Coles, ‘it’s my husband’s favourite.’

Coles was Margot’s favourite. She loved all the beautiful ladies in their musk stick uniforms with their hair pinned high on their heads and their bright lipstick lips smiling all over the Starlight counter.
‘My husband,’ said Margot again, squeezing her lips together and using her finger to paint them Red Indian red with her Red Indian lipstick.

She took a step back from the door and rubbed her lips together, they way Catherine did, when she was putting her lipstick on.

‘What do you think you’re doing,’ asked Catherine, pushing the hankie inside her handbag and looking ready to go.

‘Nothing,’ said Margot hiding her hands behind her back.

‘Nothing. What have you got in your hands?’

‘Nothing.’ Margot held out her empty hands for her mother to see.

Catherine snapped the clasp on her handbag shut.

‘I was just pretending.’

Catherine sighed. ‘It’d be a shame if you pretended to do as you’re told for once.’

Margot ran her tongue across her lips. Maybe the lipstick was real after all. Maybe a genie….

Margot dragged her sandal across the cracks in the footpath sideways. It wasn’t fair. Catherine was cross and now they were walking along without any talking. Without any noise. Walking past the post office and the telephone boxes and the State Savings Bank and the fruit shop. ‘That lady waved at me.’

‘Hmmm.’

‘The fruit shop lady.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s nice of her to give you a wave.’

‘But she’s a stranger, isn’t she?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘And you’re not allowed to talk to strangers are you?’

‘No.’

‘What about waving?’

Catherine stopped outside a blue door, covered in curly, gold writing.

‘Now,’ she said taking a deep breath, ‘I was going to keep it a surprise but then I thought you’d probably like to choose your own material.’

‘My own material?’
‘For a party dress.’
‘Mum!’
‘No one is going to say my daughter goes without.’ Catherine twisted her engagement ring around on her finger.
‘But Mum…what about…about the earrings.’
‘Forget about them. That’s just between you and me. A secret.’
‘What about…’
‘It’s got nothing to do with anyone else. The man…the man’s just minding them.’
‘How?’
‘It’s difficult to explain, Margot, but if I give something to the man, then he gives me some money and when I give the money back to him, he gives me the earrings back.’
Margot squinted up at her mother, ‘and that’s the secret?’
‘That’s right.’
‘You’re not allowed to have secrets are you?’
‘This is different, you’re allowed to have secrets between mothers and daughters.’
‘I didn’t know that…is that true?’
‘For goodness sake Margot, I wish you wouldn’t ask so many questions, a child your age shouldn’t have a worry in the world.’
‘I don’t Mum.’ Margot pressed her lips into a smile. ‘See.’
Catherine rubbed a hand over her eyes. ‘That’s better. I’m sorry, love, I wish…’
‘What? What Mum?’
‘Nothing. It doesn’t matter.’
‘Nothing?’
‘It’s gone now.’
‘Gone?’
Catherine squeezed Margot’s hand. ‘Is there an echo out here?’ Her hair blew across her face and she pushed it out of the way and when she could see again, she pushed the blue door open.
Margot stood in front of the counter and smelt the cotton and the buttons and the zips. There was material everywhere, stacked up in rows of colours and stripes and checks and flowers. There were beads and *pom poms* and *ric rac*. There were circles of lace and hundreds and hundreds of cotton reels.

‘A party dress,’ said the shopkeeper when Catherine told her what they wanted, ‘that’s special. That’s very special.’

The material was wound around flat pieces of cardboard that jumped across the counter and left wide ribbons of colour behind. Margot watched the shopkeeper unwind pink and green and blue and lemon. She called out the names of the materials as she went and held the really special ones, like the shimmering mauve lace, out on her arm for Margot to see.

‘It’s a hard choice,’ she said, holding a pale pink satin across Margot’s arm, ‘what colour do you like?’

‘What colour do you like, Mum?’

‘They’re all nice. You choose.’

‘The pink’s nice,’ said Margot.

‘Hmmm,’ said Catherine.

‘Or lemon,’ said the shopkeeper. ‘You can’t go wrong with lemon.’

‘She’s already got a lemon party dress.’ Catherine picked up the mauve material and the pink one too, ‘what do you think, Margot?’

Margot was thinking what did it mean - a lemon party dress? She couldn’t remember a lemon party dress and yet it didn’t seem like the kind of thing you would forget.

‘Margot,’ said the shopkeeper. ‘That’s unusual.’

‘It was my grandmother’s name. She was French.’

‘Fancy that. What about blue?’

‘What about blue, love?’

Margot looked up from thinking about the lemon party dress and watched the shopkeeper throw a wave of ice blue material across the counter. ‘Oh! It’s princess material. Like in Cinderella.’

‘Organza.’ The shopkeeper, looked at Catherine. ‘*French organza.*’

Catherine leant over the material. ‘May I?’

‘Of course.’
She slid her handbag off her wrist and draped the French material across her bare arm. She ran her fingers across it and danced it around her wrist. ‘It’s beautiful.’

‘You look like Cinderella Mummy,’ said Margot as she watched her mother’s dancing arm.’

Catherine shook her head. ‘Sometimes I feel like her too.’ She took her arm out of the material and said, ‘French silk. Imagine that.’

‘You must have been very young,’ said the shopkeeper.

‘Young?’

‘When you had her.’

Catherine and the shopkeeper turned to look at Margot. ‘I suppose I was.’

‘Young love. There’s no telling young love is there?’

Catherine’s cheeks went pink and she bit her Red Indian lips and looked down at her engagement ring.

The shopkeeper spread the silk along the counter and the cardboard thumped backwards shortening the material like footsteps coming closer and closer behind you. She put the folded silk away, under the counter and pulled another blue material off the shelf. ‘The new nylon. You can barely tell the difference now.’ She tried to unwind it from the cardboard but it stuck to her hand and to the counter too.

‘Pretty,’ said Catherine, ‘very…pretty.’

The shopkeeper nodded and did her best to make the new nylon dance.

Catherine held a piece out for Margot to touch. ‘What d’you think, love?’

‘Oooh…’ Margot wasn’t sure what to say. She looked for clues on Catherine’s face. ‘It’s soft.’

‘Do you like it?’

‘Do you like it?’

‘It’s not up to me. You’re the one who has to wear it.’

‘I think it’d look very pretty on you, dear.’

‘Mum?’

‘Blue’s a nice colour,’ said Catherine.

‘It is nice,’ said Margot.

‘Alright. We’ll make do with this one.’
‘With a pretty girl like your daughter wearing it, no one will know the difference.’

‘I’ll know,’ said Catherine quietly, then she laughed a little bit and said, ‘everyone knows the difference, don’t they? Between a silk purse and a sow’s ear.’

Out on the street, the summer sun stung Margot’s face. She tried to take her mother’s hand but Catherine said, ‘if you want to hold onto something you can carry the material,’ and Margot couldn’t think of what to say next so she took the material and they walked down the street not talking.

‘There’s no point moping about the silk,’ said Catherine after a while, ‘it was too dear and that’s that.’

‘I wasn’t moping.’

‘Well that’s what it looks like. That’s all the thanks I get for spending money I don’t have. On dress material. You - walking around with the longest face I’ve ever seen.’ She sighed then and walked down the street so fast Margot had to run to keep up.

She wasn’t meaning to mope. She was thinking about the material and the lemon party dress and lots of other things that didn’t make sense. She wanted to ask about the earrings and the money and the man but she knew Catherine wasn’t in the mood for asking. Margot asked too many questions. Catherine always said that. She didn’t mean to. But when you wanted to know things – questions just seemed to pop out. ‘Mum?’

‘Hmmm.’ Catherine’s mouth made a sort of humming noise, which was probably the only sound you could make if you tried to talk with your mouth shut.

‘I was thinking about your earrings.’

‘Well, don’t. They’re gone now and that’s that.’

‘But you said you’ll get them back.’

‘I will. I’ll try to.’ Catherine slowed down. ‘Anyway, I don’t want you to think about it anymore, alright?’

‘Yes, Mum.’

‘It’s not everyday your little girl turns seven. Besides where on earth am I going to wear diamond earrings?’

‘Diamonds!’ Margot sparkled all over the footpath.
‘Well, I’m not sure if they were really good diamonds but they were close enough.’

‘They were good Mum. Good and sparkling. I didn’t know you could get bad diamonds.’

‘Yes, well, it doesn’t matter now. Coles. That’s where we’re going now.’

Or had you forgotten that?’

‘No,’ said Margot skipping along beside Catherine, ‘I hadn’t forgotten Coles. I hadn’t forgotten about that, Mum.’
Mrs Coates thrust a glass into Margot’s hand. ‘Here you are pet. This’ll cheer you up.’ She leant into Margot’s ear and whispered, ‘it’s real. Real lemonade.’

‘Not homemade!’

‘No. I went down and bought that myself. Tarax.’

‘Oooh.’ Margot lifted the glass to her mouth and shivered as the bubbles tickled her nose. ‘Oooh,’ she said again.

‘She’ll never drink my lemonade again, Vi,’ said Catherine as she handed Tommy a piece of fairy bread.

Lewis held a smiley biscuit in front of his face and called across the table, ‘look at me. I’m a biscuit head.’

Terry smirked and held a piece of fairy bread against his head, ‘I’m a triangle then.’

‘You are not,’ said Audrey. ‘You’re a fairy.’

The twins spat cake crumbs into their plates.

‘Boys can’t be fairies,’ said Mrs Fish.

‘Elves,’ said Shona, ‘they have to be elves.’

‘Or imps,’ said Mrs Coates.

‘Don’t eat all the eyes off them.’ Catherine took a biscuit from Julie and shook her head at Mrs Fish.

‘See no evil,’ said Mrs Fish.

Catherine bit into the biscuit and turned to Margot. ‘Aren’t you eating anything, love?’

‘Yes. I’m doing twenty seven chews for every bite.’

‘Why don’t you take a picture of the table?’ said Mrs Coates. Before they destroy all your hard work.’

‘Yes. I suppose I should.’
‘You could take a picture of me being a biscuit,’ said Lewis.

‘Mum?’ Margot fiddled with her birthday badge.

‘Yes,’ said Catherine again, ‘you can still do your song. Even if…’

‘Even if he’s a little bit late,’ said Mrs Coates. ‘Doesn’t matter a jot. We’ve got all the time in the world.’

‘Hmph,’ said Mrs Fish. ‘Time waits for no man.’

‘Least of all Jim Lovelock.’ Mrs Coates grabbed the Tarax bottle out of sink and plonked it down on the table, ‘real lemonade.’

‘Tarax,’ said Margot, pulling the bottle towards her.

‘That’s right,’ said Mrs Coates, ‘the birthday girl can pour it.’

Margot straightened her seven badge and held the lemonade bottle in the air.

‘Girls first.’ Her eyes flicked across to Lewis and Terry and watched as they swallowed their cordials and waited for their turn.

Catherine fiddled with the Box Brownie. ‘Everyone lift your glasses up so I can see the bubbles.’

‘Can you take a photo of bubbles?’ asked Audrey.

‘Of course you can,’ said Margot and she held her glass up near her face.

‘Ready? Lewis, move yours down a bit, I can’t see Julie.’

‘Terry.’ Mrs Coates was using her I’m-not-putting-up-with-any-nonsense voice. ‘Move your glass out of Sharon’s…or Shona’s, face. Now please.’

‘Just joking Auntie Vi.’

‘There’s a time and a place for jokes.’

‘Exactly,’ said Mrs Coates.

‘Say cheese,’ said Catherine and the Box Brownie flash bulb sparked across the table.

‘Oh boy! What joy!’

‘Daddy!’ Margot danced herself around the table.

Jim skipped past the window tapping his hands on the glass like he was playing the drums.

‘He’s here! Daddy’s here!’

‘Oh boy!’ Jim banged through the backdoor and danced across the porch.

‘We had in barefoot…daysssss…’ He held the note for a long, long time and then he held out his arms. ‘Come on then. Come on Tiger. Let’s give ‘em what they came for.’ He fell towards Catherine and said, ‘lit any candles yet?’
‘Jim!’ Catherine’s face went white and she brushed her hands down the front of her dress as though she was wearing her apron.

‘I’m taking my shoes off Dad, to get ready,’ said Margot.

‘Good idea. Good idea.’

‘I think perhaps we should be going,’ said Mrs Fish. ‘Time…and all that.’

‘But we haven’t had the cake,’ said Margot hopping about on one leg trying to pull her second-skin socks off her feet, ‘or the song’

‘If Mrs Fish has to go,’ said Catherine talking in a hurry, ‘well…you’re taking the twins too, aren’t you?’

‘Then there’ll be nobody left Mum!’

‘Fair go missus, you can’t take the party home before the party’s started.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Fish. ‘I thought it was finished.’

‘Now where’d you get that idea? Come on everyone, into the lounge room…and you Violet…you and your school teacher look can come too.’

Mrs Coates turned her bosom around to face Jim.

‘Just joking. Just a joke.’

Jim fiddled with the mantelpiece and waited for everyone to fit into the lounge room. ‘That’s the way. Sit yourselves down. Now what about…,’ he leant across to the window and grabbed at the blind cord, ‘…a little bit of atmosphere.’ He pulled the blind down and the lounge room went shadowy.

Catherine walked in carrying Tommy. She was bouncing him up and down on her hip. She looked sad and a bit cross too. It was the same face she had on when Margot told her about the Little Red Hen.

‘I was chosen,’ she told Catherine. ‘Chosen to play the Hen.’

‘Probably because you’re the smallest in the grade.’ Catherine put the dishes away loudly. She didn’t look pleased or happy. She didn’t seem to understand what Margot was telling her. ‘It’s the best, Mum. The Hen is the best.’

Catherine made a horse noise with her lips. ‘The best. There’s no point thinking things like that. You’re no different to anybody else, Margot, no different at all.’
But when Margot pulled on the red jumper Audrey’s mother had lent her and the red tights Catherine said were an early Christmas she did feel different. She felt very different and special too because that, of course, was exactly what the Little Red Hen was.

Miss Eddy said she’d have to have make-up. Lipstick make-up. It was going to be red like the hen – bright, bright red.

Margot decided not to tell Catherine about the lipstick. Talking about lipstick made Catherine cross. Instead she said again and again how nice it was of Audrey’s mother to lend her one of Audrey’s jumpers until Catherine said she was sick to death of hearing about Audrey and her mother and how there was a lot more to life than red jumpers and red hens. She didn’t say anything about the lipstick. She hadn’t guessed there would be lipstick and the more she didn’t guess the more Margot worried that she would. She worried someone would see her grownup lips and tell or she might have an accident in the middle of the play and be rushed to hospital wearing lipstick or it might become magic or evil and dye her lips and never, never come off.

*Liar, liar pants on fire!* That’s what she felt like, even though she hadn’t said anything…not one little lie.

‘It’s this play business,’ said Catherine, turning on the light and shaking Margot awake and showing her there were no cruel cut-out dolls snipping scissors around her head, ‘that’s what it is. Turning us both into nervous wrecks.’

On Little Red Hen day Catherine kissed Margot on the head and said, ‘break a leg, love. Break a leg’s what they say.’

‘Take a deep breath,’ said Miss Eddy.

Margot scratched at her tights and picked at the sleeve on Audrey’s jumper and watched Miss Eddy take a deep breath for her. She wanted to say something Miss Eddy would like. She wanted to tell her about ‘break a leg’ but her body was full of butterflies and butterflies stopped words coming out.
Miss Eddy pushed her head through the split in the red velvet curtain. ‘The audience is in. Are we ready? Is our Little Red Hen ready?’

Margot looked down at her Red Hen legs. ‘What if I forget something?’

‘You,’ said Miss Eddy, shaking her head, ‘you never forget anything. Not like me. I almost forgot this.’ She put her hand inside the pocket on her skirt, pulled out a lipstick, slide the top off it and twisted it up in front of Margot’s face.

‘Red Indian,’ said Margot, rubbing her lips together as though the lipstick was already on, ‘that’s my Mummy’s lipstick.’

‘Is it?’ Miss Eddy waved the red stick around Margot’s face. ‘You can give it to her afterwards, if you like. It’s a bit too red for me.’

‘Too red.’ A voice inside Margot’s head kept saying that. ‘Too red. Too red.’ And the cut-out dolls too. The ones that lived inside her head. They were cutting and snipping. Stopping her lying tongue.

‘Open your mouth and hold still,’ said Miss Eddy.

Margot tried to open her mouth. She tried to hold still. She saw Miss Eddy’s hand and the thick red finger getting closer and closer until everything started to look red. Red Indian red. The colour of blood. Running out her nose and down, down her face.

‘Righto, Tiger. Look lively.’ Jim spun Margot around in front of the fireplace. ‘Let’s start with a joke. Will you remember me tomorrow?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will you remember me in one week?’

‘Yes.’

‘In one year?’

‘Yes.’

‘In ten years?’

‘Yes. Yes.’

‘Knock. Knock?’

‘Who’s there?’ said Lewis.

‘I thought you said you’d remember me,’ said Jim, pulling his face into his upside down smile.
‘We will, we will.’
‘I won’t,’ said Mrs Fish. ‘I can’t remember jokes.’
‘Some jokes are not worth remembering,’ said Catherine looking at Margot with sad, blinking eyes.

Margot stood in front of the mantelpiece and danced the skirt on her new blue party dress around her legs. Catherine should be happy. Happy Jim was back. Happy Margot was going to sing and dance their dance. It was her seventh birthday and this birthday was going to be…

‘Righto Tiger. Big voice now.’

‘Slide and slide down someone’s cellar door. Slide and slide till our pants got tore…’ Margot’s voice was big. As big as the twirls and skates and jumps they danced around the lounge room. She felt chosen then. She felt like the most chosen girl in the world.

Audrey and Shona and Sharon joined in with the, ‘Oh boy! What joy!’ bit and Mrs Coates sang, ‘we had in bare foot days’ in a booming church-voice. Catherine rocked Tommy on her knee but she didn’t look at Margot. Not once. And she didn’t sing anything either, even though Margot had practised it with her lots and lots of times and she must have remembered some of the words.

When they got to the end, Jim kicked his legs so high in the air, Julie squealed and Mrs Fish’s teacup fell out of her hand and smashed into a million pieces on the hearth.

In the kitchen Margot grabbed hold of her father’s hand and danced herself around him. ‘Can we do it again, Dad, after the cake, can we?’

‘One song per birthday, Tiger, that’s enough.’

‘I wish we could do it again. I wish we could sing it everyday. I wish…’

‘That child will wish her life away,’ said Mrs Fish.

‘Always leave ‘em wanting more, Tiger, that’s the way.’

‘Next year then. On my next year birthday. Promise, Dad, promise?’

‘Fair go, Tiger,’ said Jim staring across the kitchen with his eyes switched off.

‘Dad!’ Margot waved her hands in front of her father’s face, ‘Dad are you listening?’
‘Course, I am,’ said Jim, pushing his glasses on properly and leaning on the ice chest, ‘course I’m listening to my birthday girl.’

Catherine carried the cake in from the porch and put it on the table in front of Margot. The seven yellow candles sparkled like starlight and Margot did too.

‘I want to stand next to Margot,’ said Audrey, pushing past Terry and standing in front of the cake.

‘Me too,’ said Terry squashing up next to Audrey.

‘And me,’ cried Lewis, running around the table and squeezing himself in front of Julie.

‘If you don’t hurry up there’ll be no candles left to blow out,’ said Catherine, ‘ready? Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you!…’

Margot listened to the birthday song and looked at all the singing faces. It felt like the whole world was singing then, singing just for her. She wanted to dance around the kitchen, around the whole house and sing out too, ‘Happy birthday dear Margot!’ But you couldn’t do that. You had to stand still and wait until the singing was finished and get ready to blow all the glittering candles out.

‘Hip, hip, hooray! Hip, hip, hooray!’

That was the end. Margot stood up as tall as she could, filled herself up with air and blew around the patient cake.

‘This one doesn’t want to die,’ she said laughing at the single, shining candle.

‘Oooh,’ said Mrs Fish, ‘that’s awkward.’

‘Go on, love,’ said Catherine, ‘blow it out. It’s melting all over the seven.’

Margot was so filled up with joy, she could hardly fit another breath in but then Terry said he’d do it and Margot blew a breath so big at the tiny candle she nearly blew it over.

‘Make a wish. Make a wish.’ That’s what everyone sang next as Catherine handed Margot the bread knife, decorated with a bright, red-ribbon-bow.

Margot held the knife up like a wand over the top of the cake and beamed across at Jim.

‘I don’t know if she’s allowed to make a wish,’ said Mrs Fish and Margot’s smile went out like a candle.

‘What do you mean, allowed?’ said Mrs Coates.
‘Well, it’s just…you’re only allowed to make a wish if you blow all the candles out at once.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ said Catherine.

Margot lowered the knife and looked at her mother. Catherine never said words like ‘ridiculous’. Words like that could get you into trouble.

‘Well it is a wish,’ said Mrs Fish, ‘and a wish is not to be sneezed at.’

‘I think we all know that.’ Mrs Coates drew in her breath as though she was going to blow something out too. ‘I think we all know how important a wish is.’ She leant over to Margot and nodded, ‘go on, pet, make your wish,’ then she turned back to Mrs Fish and said, ‘you deserve it.’

‘I didn’t say she didn’t deserve it.’ Mrs Fish pointed her chin at Mrs Coates.

‘It’s just…I’m not exactly sure about the rules.’

‘What rules?’ said Jim, banging his hand down on the icebox. ‘What bloody rules are you talking about woman?’

‘Jim!’ Catherine's hand flew up to her face.

You can’t hide a whole face with one hand. Everybody knows that, but as Margot looked at her mother she wondered if she was wrong. Catherine held onto herself with one hand and covered her face with her other hand and she was hard to see standing there like that.

‘The wishing rules,’ said Mrs Fish. ‘I was talking about the wishing rules.’

Jim looked over at Catherine. ‘Christ!’ he said.

Mrs Coates put two hands on her bosom and held her breath again.

Catherine took her hands off her face and leant on the kitchen table. ‘It doesn’t matter. None of it matters.’ She closed her eyes and Margot wondered if she was wishing for something too.

‘Go on Tiger,’ said Jim, ‘it’s too hot to keep everyone standing here.’

Margot lifted the knife again and pushed it slowly into the cake’s spongey heart. She snapped her eyes shut and held it buried there. She tried to make her wish but the wrong wishes kept popping into her head. Wishes like – a bell for her pedal car or wishing her doll, Wendy, wasn’t lost or wishing for a new doll if she stayed lost. Her eyes wanted to open. She could feel the waiting in the room. She wished her real wish would spring into her head but it was gone.

‘That’s enough,’ said Catherine, ‘how many wishes are you going to make?’
Margot opened her eyes and squinted around the kitchen. Everyone was looking at her. Everyone except Jim, who was staring out of the window with a lost-wish look on his face too.

‘What did ya wish for?’ asked Terry.

‘Not telling,’ said Margot fiddling with the doily on the cake plate, ‘otherwise it won’t come true.’

‘That’s right,’ said Mrs Fish. ‘That’s exactly right.’

Catherine spread the cake bags out on the table and dragged the knife out of the cake. ‘As long as you know what you wished for. That’s the main thing.’

Margot nodded. Then she pulled at the badge on her dress and burst into noisy tears.

‘Now what?’ said Catherine as she lay the knife on the cake and put her hand on Margot’s shoulder. ‘What on earth’s the matter now?’

Margot cried louder and harder at her mother’s question. Mrs Fish said really she had to go cake or no cake and the twins were expected home an hour ago and at the end of the day after all the trouble you went to children were always ungrateful.

Jim said they weren’t the only ones and then he slammed the back door and disappeared.

Catherine bent down close to Margot’s face and patted her again. Margot felt the breath from her mother’s lips playing with her ear. She swallowed a sob and waited for comfort.

‘You stop your sniveling right now my girl or this will be the last birthday you’ll ever have.’

Margot stopped. Everything stopped. She shook herself better, wiped her eyes on the back of her hand and stretched her mouth into a smile.

‘What do you say?’ said Catherine.

‘Thank you. Thank you for coming.’

Mrs Coates grabbed Margot’s hand and held it high in the air. ‘All for one and one for all,’ she said. ‘It’s a big day for a little girl.’
Margot traced her plastic sandal toe around a lino square and listened to the front door goodbyes. She looked down at Tommy’s dribbling mouth and his just starting hair, and wondered how he could sleep like that, in a chair, in a squashed-cake covered plastic bib, with his head falling backwards and his neck looking broken.

She took a smiley face biscuit off the table and put it front of him. ‘You’re too little,’ she said in a whispery voice. ‘Too little to remember anything.’ She pulled a glazed cherry eye off the biscuit and put it into her mouth. Poor little beggar. He wouldn’t remember pass-the-parcel or her song or the candles shining on her birthday cake.

She looked out of the kitchen window and squinted at the brightness. February’s the hottest month. Catherine was always saying that. Catherine didn’t like summer. She liked autumn when the leaves were red and yellow and you could keep your cardigan on. Margot pulled at the elastic on her sleeve. The sleeve was stuck to her skin like a transfer. Ahhh! A transfer! That was it. That was the wish. It was back inside her head. Her wish was a room. A room for her pedal car and her dolls house and Wendy and transfers. Lots and lots of transfers of horses, galloping horses, pasted on the walls of her room, her own room, that was what she meant to wish for and now…

She turned around and looked at her birthday cake. It was cut in half. Cut through the middle of the red-icing seven. The wrong-wish breadknife and the dead candles lay next to it. She heard the front door close and the voices disappear and Tommy was still asleep and it wouldn’t take long, one more candle wouldn’t take very long at all.
She picked up one of the half-burnt candles and stuck it into the cake. She dragged a chair next to the stove, climbed up on it, looked back over her shoulder and made a quick grab for the box of matches. The box made her hand shake but the lady with bright red hair and bright red lips was smiling at her and she climbed off the chair and tiptoed back to the cake.

She opened the box and took out a match. *Liar, liar, pants on fire.* She wasn’t allowed to play with matches but no one would know. Not if she was quick. A match only took a second.

She held the match in front of her chest and scraped it across the box. She scraped it again and again but it wouldn’t come alight. She threw it on the table and took out another match and another one until there was a spark and then a bright burning flame running down the stick to her fingers.

She screamed at the match and it jumped out of her hand and dropped on the floor and the red hair lady dropped down too and then there were matches everywhere rolling around the lino looking like they were going to light themselves.

She heard Catherine calling Julie to come inside and as her mother walked into the kitchen Margot fell down with the matches and tried to hide them in her hands.

‘What the devil!’ Catherine grabbed Margot by her wrist and yanked her up off the floor. The matches fell from her hands and tumbled down the front of her party dress.

‘What the devil, do you think you’re doing?’

Margot closed her eyes and put her arm over her head.

‘Answer me!’ Catherine shook Margot so hard she couldn’t answer.

‘Answer me!’

The pain in Margot’s wrist was so hot it felt like the matches had caught her on fire. ‘You’re hurting me Mummy! You’re hurting!’

‘How many times have I told you not to play with matches?’

‘I wasn’t. I wasn’t.’

‘Don’t you tell me lies! Lies! Lies!’

‘I wasn’t.’

‘Do you think I’m stupid? Is that what you think?’

‘I wasn’t, I wasn’t playing.’
‘Just like your father, always sneaking around, going behind my back. I know what goes on. You might think I don’t know but I know everything, my girl. Everything you do.’

‘I know Mummy, I know. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t. I just wanted to make another wish. See? See Mummy? I was going to wish something… for you.’

Catherine spun around and saw the cake and Tommy with his wide-open eyes, looking at it too.

She let go of Margot’s wrist and gripped the table instead. ‘I should give you a good hiding,’ she said in a hardly there voice, ‘that’s what I should do.’

‘I won’t Mummy I won’t do it again I promise, I promise.’

‘Stop it! Stop promising and just do what I’ve told you. A hundred times. I must have told you a hundred times and the minute my back is turned…and in that dress. You could have been…you could have been…’

‘I know, Mummy. I know.’

‘I don’t understand why you do this to me Margot.

‘And I don’t too.’ Margot rubbed her burning wrist. ‘I try to be good but….’ She looked down at the spilt matches and her words shuddered away. She just wanted it to be over. All of it. Everything.

‘Ungrateful, that’s what you are,’ said Catherine when Margot tried to touch her hand. ‘Off you go.’ She bent down to Tommy. ‘Off you go before I change my mind.’

Margot stood at the backdoor. She hated that door. She hated the whole house. She hated everything and everything hated her.

She ran into the backyard. She ran past Julie on her tricycle and Lewis shooting his popgun at the shed. Past the Hill’s Hoist clothesline with its squeaky, turning song, past the long snaking hose and the sprinkler, down, down to the back fence and the tall, skinny gum tree, down to where no one could see her, and cried.

She didn’t care if she cried for the rest of her birthday. If she cried for the rest of the year. She kept crying until some ants came running around the trunk of the tree, bumping into each other, getting stuck on pieces of bark, going around and around in circles and then starting all over again.

Terry popped his head up over the back fence. ‘I can see your undies.’
‘Go away,’ said Margot pulling her dress down to her sandals and sticking out her tongue.

Terry kicked the fence and poked his tongue out too. ‘Make me.’

Margot looked up at the greying sky. She put her hand on the tree, stepped over the ants and ran. She ran faster and longer than she’d ever run before. Around the house and around and around it again. She kept on running until her tears dried up and her wrist stopped hurting, until running was the only thing there was.

‘Hey,’ said Lewis, as she ran past him again, ‘where are you going?’

‘Away,’ called Margot, ‘and I’m not stopping till I get there.’

‘Margot.’ Catherine’s voice sailed out of the front door and into the sun setting sky.

Margot tossed her head into the wind. ‘Yes.’

‘Don’t be too long, it’s past seven o’clock.’

Margot jumped up on the gate and looked out at the street. A train’s whistle called across the warm, windy night. She flicked her head towards the sound and wondered where it was going that speeding away train.

She leant over the gate and looked up into the sky. A few early stars looked back.

‘I made the wrong wish,’ she said.

‘Make another wish then,’ said the first star.

‘Another wish, another wish,’ echoed the other stars.

‘I can’t,’ said Margot. ‘It was a cake wish.’

‘Ridiculous,’ said the first star. ‘Cake wishes hardly ever come true.’

‘Don’t they?’

‘Don’t they? How much brighter is a star than a candle?’

‘Much,’ breathed Margot, ‘much, much brighter.’

‘That’s why star wishes are the best. Especially if you’re a good wisher.’

‘I am,’ said Margot, ‘I’m a very good wisher.’

‘Well, go on then,’ said the first star, ‘wish away.’

Margot closed her eyes and made her birthday wish on the first star. The wind danced her dress around her legs. A few small raindrops fell on her face. Thunder hummed somewhere in the distance and everything seemed alive.
She opened her eyes. Catherine’s voice floated to her side and took her by the hand. ‘Time to come inside now, love, it’s getting dark.’

‘Coming,’ said Margot looking up into the swirling sky, ‘coming.’

Five

Mrs Coates snapped the book shut and gave it a pat.

‘Read it again Mrs Coates,’ said Margot, ‘read that bit again.’

‘That’s enough musketeers for today. Let’s go and see if little Tommy’s awake.’

‘Just the last bit. Please. That bit about galloping away to the distance. What is distance, Mrs Coates?’

‘Distance? Distance is…it’s somewhere in the future.’

Margot screwed her face up. ‘Where?’

‘It’s hard to say where. It’s a space. It’s the space between say, you and’ – Mrs Coates looked around the room and patted the book again – ‘me.’

Margot shook her head. ‘I don’t think D’Artagnon was galloping away to you Mrs Coates.’

‘More’s the pity. Anyway up we get.’

Margot leapt off the couch and held her hand out in front of Mrs Coates. ‘All for one and one for all,’ she said in a deep musketeer voice, ‘I wish we had another musketeer. You’re supposed to have three.’

‘You can get Lewis and Julie to play, when Mummy brings them home.’

Margot scoffed at that. ‘They’re not musketeers. Julie hasn’t even got a horse.’

‘Well,’ said Mrs Coates, ‘you are supposed to be recovering from the mumps. You don’t want to be rushing around too much.’

‘I wish I had a proper cape,’ said Margot ignoring Mrs Coates, ‘instead of just the one from my nurse’s uniform.’
‘You’ll be wanting a sword next,’ said Mrs Coates and she marched into the bedroom to find Tommy.

Except for the hat, it was good having mumps. It was good staying home from school with Mrs Coates, reading stories and playing games and talking about dress-ups and horses and far away lands, like England, where Mrs Coates lived when she was little.

Margot pulled her mump hat off her head and put her hands behind her ears. They were still there, those hot red bumps that the doctor put his hand on when he was trying to find where the sickness was.

‘Two weeks home from school,’ he said, ‘and make sure she wears a hat.’

Margot watched Mrs Coates lift Tommy out of his cot. ‘I don’t like the cat’s ears.’

‘Your Mummy went to a lot of trouble to knit that hat. A lot of trouble with everything else she has to do.’

Margot spun the hat around like a propeller. ‘I like the wool though and the way the pom poms tie up. I like everything else.

‘That’s true,’ said Mrs Coates, ‘there’s not many things you don’t like. It’s nice to be like that.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s nice to have someone who appreciates things. Someone who sees…’ Mrs Coates held Tommy up in front of her face, ‘…joy. That’s a funny word isn’t it,’ she said, shaking her cheeks at Tommy, ‘not at all what I was going to say.’

‘What were you going to say?’ asked Margot chewing the strap on her hat.

‘Get us a clean nappy, would you pet.’

‘A clean nappy!’

‘No, no,’ she said talking to Tommy again, ‘that wasn’t it was it? I was going to say something like…I’m not sure now…someone who sees…the good side of things.’

Margot skipped over to the giant wardrobe and opened the door onto the tower of nappies. ‘Sometimes I can see the bad side too. My new teacher, Mrs Black, she says there’s good and bad in everything.’

‘I suppose that’s true.’

‘Even in tiny babies.’
‘Well I don’t know about that.’
‘There is Mrs Coates. We learnt all about it at church. Some babies are evil.’
‘Margot!’
‘And some children too and you can’t tell by looking at them. Only God can. Here you are.’ Margot handed Mrs Coates a clean, white nappy.
‘I think I’ll need two,’ said Mrs Coates, lying Tommy on the nappy and looking down at him.
‘I don’t think Tommy’s evil though, do you?’
Mrs Coates put her hand on her bosom and said, ‘please stop it pet. I don’t know who told you those things but it’s not true. Babies can’t be evil or bad. They’re just babies.’
‘What about when they cry or when they scream?’
‘That’s not bad, that’s normal.’
‘Oh,’ said Margot, watching Mrs Coates wrap the new nappy around Tommy’s bottom, ‘I didn’t know that.’
‘Well now you do,’ said Mrs Coates and she sounded just like Catherine.
Margot looked around for something to say. Something to make Mrs Coates sound like Mrs Coates again. ‘I’m putting my hat back on,’ she said, ‘and I’m going to keep it on now.’
Mrs Coates turned to look at Margot holding a nappy pin in her hand.
‘Oooh,’ said Margot pulling her hat down to her eyes, ‘oooh, I can’t look. Nappy pins make me feel sick.’
Mrs Coates waved the pin at her. ‘Well, you’d better get used to them. You’ll have your own children one day.’
‘Don’t say that!’ cried Margot. ‘Don’t say that, Mrs Coates.’
‘Why not?’ Mrs Coates folded the dirty nappy into a tight parcel and waved the pin at Margot again.
‘Because,’ cried Margot dancing closer to the pin, ‘babies make you sad.’
Mrs Coates put the pin down, ‘sad? That’s a funny thing to say.’
‘Because they’re a nuisance because they can’t talk or do anything to help.’ Margot watched Mrs Coates holding Tommy’s kicking legs. ‘Do the pin again Mrs Coates. Do the pin.’
'Babies make you happy in ways you can’t see,’ said Mrs Coates as she pushed the pin into the side of Tommy’s nappy. ‘Anyway I thought the pin made you feel sick.’

‘Good sick. The pin makes me feel good sick.’

Mrs Coates shook her head and lifted Tommy up onto her shoulder, ‘that sister of yours is a trick,’ she said, then she started singing, *Tom, Tom the Pipers Son*, and carried him into the kitchen.

‘I’m back,’ called Catherine as she walked across the porch.

She dropped her handbag on the kitchen table and picked Tommy up.

‘Hello, little one,’ she said, ‘and what’ve you been doing?’

‘Mum. Mum. Guess what I did?’

‘In a minute Margot, I’m sorry Vi.’

‘Don’t fret yourself we’ve been having a fine old time. Haven’t we pet?’

‘I’ve been helping Mrs Coates look after Tommy and I’ve been wearing my hat and I helped put the kettle on. Where’s Lewis and Julie gone?’

‘They’re having a ride in the pedal car.’

‘In my pedal car?’

‘That’s right. I said they could have a play before tea. You have to learn to share your things Margot.’

Margot pulled a snarly face. That wasn’t a nice thing to say in front of Mrs Coates. She was good at sharing.

‘Don’t pull faces like that,’ said Catherine, ‘I’ve had a long day.’

‘I want to go out and play too.’

‘Not until the end of the week. That’s what Doctor Griffiths said and that’s that.’

‘But you said I was going back to school tomorrow.’

‘That’s a case of have to. There’s no need to go out in the cold air if you don’t have to.’

‘But it’s not cold.’

‘The night air gets a chill in it at this time of the year, pet.’

Margot made another cross face. ‘All for one,’ she snapped and then wished she could take it back, when she saw Mrs Coates look sad.
‘Stop your niggling,’ said Catherine, ‘and take Tommy into the loungeroom to play. I want to talk to Mrs Coates.’

Margot was going to say she’d already been playing with Tommy. She’d been playing with him for ages and ages while Mrs Coates had a sleep in Jim’s chair but Catherine was being cranky and she didn’t want to get into any more trouble in front of Mrs Coates.

She carried Tommy into the loungeroom and sat him in front of his blocks. ‘There you are,’ she said, putting one block on top of another, ‘you can make a tower now,’ but Tommy crawled over to the window instead and watched Julie run past, chasing Lewis in the pedal car.

‘Don’t look like that, Vi.’

‘Well, what’s he going to say? That’s all I’m saying.’

‘It’ll be alright.’

‘He won’t like it. You know that.’

‘I don’t have a choice. I wish I did but I don’t.’

Margot sat between the back of the couch and the loungeroom wall. This was the tee pee, the place where the Indians hid when they were trying to see what the cowboys were doing and now it was a perfect place to sit and listen to what she wasn’t supposed to be listening to.

‘I think it’s getting worse…or…I don’t know, maybe I’m imaging things.’

‘You make too many excuses for him. You didn’t imagine that commotion the other night or the fact that he throws his pay packet away instead of feeding his…’

‘Shhh…,’ said Catherine, ‘Big Ears in there doesn’t miss a trick.’

Margot stood up and leant over the top of the couch. That wasn’t fair. She wasn’t being a Big Ears. She knew all about the going to work business. She was there when Catherine told Mr Beckett about it and asked him for another chance.

The kettle whistled and Margot heard water pouring and cups clinking on saucers and the sound of a spoon tapping up and down on the table and then there was no noise and then Catherine said, ‘I tried the music shop first. Nothing. Or the children’s shop. None of the shops. Waitressing. I’d probably
have to go to the city for that. I don’t know how that would work. I don’t know.’

Mrs Coates said something Margot couldn’t hear and Catherine said something too but her voice was thin and scraping and a word that sounded like love was lost in the middle of some other words.

‘Don’t you have anyone, any family,’ said Mrs Coates.
‘Not any more.’
‘No brothers or sisters?’
‘Just the children.’

Catherine made a noise like coughing or choking and then she said, ‘I can’t think what’s going to happen to them if something happens to me?’

Margot put her hands over her ears. She didn’t want to hear her mother talking like that. Talking in a strange coughing voice about what was going to happen. About what was going to happen to her.

She lifted a hand off her ear and heard Catherine telling Mrs Coates about a letter and the bank and about a man who came to get the money for the rent. Mrs Coates said something that didn’t make sense and Catherine said, ‘I don’t know why. I should know but I don’t.’

Tommy banged on the windowpane and Margot’s heart banged inside her chest.

‘Get down,’ she said running across the floor to him on tiptoe, ‘get down from the window.’ She picked him up and carried him over to the couch. He grabbed hold of a cat ear and she stopped herself from hitting his hand in case he started to cry because that might make Catherine come in and growl and tell her it was her fault. ‘Clap hands, clap hands, till Daddy comes home,’ she sang in a fast whisper, ‘Daddy’s got lollies and Mummy’s got none.’

‘More. More,’ said Tommy.

‘Shhh,’ said Margot, ‘in a minute.’ She stood up and bounced him up and down on her hip the way Catherine did. ‘Horsey ride,’ she said, ‘horsey ride.’

Catherine’s voice stretched into the lounge room again. ‘He’s changed,’ she said. ‘He’s almost…he’s almost turned into a different person.’

‘Well, when he’s like that, when he’s under the influence, I dare say he is,’ said Mrs Coates.
Catherine moaned. ‘He hates the dry-cleaners. Dancing. That was the only thing he ever really loved doing but you can’t dance and have a family too.’

‘Not unless you’re Fred Astaire,’ said Mrs Coates, ‘and I don’t suppose he was quite that good.’

Catherine made a laughing noise in her throat and Margot thought it sounded a bit like the noise she made when she was being a horse. She carried Tommy to the doorway and peeped into the kitchen. She was sick of listening and looking after Tommy and being quiet too.

‘Well. If you want to know what I think.’

‘There’s no point going over it again, Vi. He’s sick and now we just have to hope he gets better.’

‘Sick?’

‘You know what I mean. He doesn’t seem to be able to help it. It’s…it’s not really him.’

‘Hmmph,’ said Mrs Coates.

‘Who’s sick?’

‘You’re supposed to be,’ said Catherine without turning to look at Margot, ‘and you can take that hat off if you want to. The mumps don’t seem to have affected your hearing at all.’

‘Will I put Tommy in his chair?’

‘You can give him to me,’ said Catherine, wiping her hand across her eyes.

Margot put Tommy on Catherine’s knee and walked around the edge of the table.

‘I made some cut-out dolls with Mrs Coates and some of them have mumps.’ Catherine nodded and Mrs Coates shook her head and said, ‘I used to love making paper dolls when I was a little girl.’

Catherine turned her tea spoon around in hand and said, ‘Time to start getting the tea on, I suppose.’

‘I’ll help you, pet.’

‘You’ve done more than enough for one day, Vi. Margot’ll help. It’ll give her something to do.’

‘I was going to play with my cut-out dolls.’

‘You can do that after you’ve helped me get the tea on.’
‘I suppose I’d better be off then, not that there’s much to go home to now Terry’s gone again.’

‘I’m sorry, Vi,’ said Catherine, ‘I didn’t realize he’d gone back.’

‘On Monday.’ Mrs Coates shook her head again. ‘I know he’s a foster child but you get very attached to them, especially Terry, I’ve had him off and on since he was a tiny baby.’

‘Are they going to let you have him again?’

Mrs Coates patted her bosom. ‘Hard to say. Now his father’s finally up and gone I don’t know how his mother will cope.’

‘Where’s his father gone?’ asked Margot.

‘Well,’ Mrs Coates turned to Catherine, ‘well…’

Margot stood at the end of the table and stared at Mrs Coates.

‘I think he…’

‘He went to sea,’ said Catherine.

‘What?’

‘The word is pardon.’

‘Pardon?’

‘He’s a sea captain so he went to sea. That’s what sea captains do.’

‘I know that.’ Margot spat the words out. ‘I know what sea captains do but is Terry’s father really a sea captain? Is he Mrs Coates?’

‘Well…’ Mrs Coates’ neck turned bright red, brighter than bright red. Her skin looked burnt. Her bosom started to move around inside her blouse as though it was burning too. ‘He’s a sort of…sea captain.’

‘What’s a sort of a sea captain?’

‘Don’t you speak to Mrs Coates like that where are your manners?’

Margot dropped her head onto her chest and fiddled with the edge of the table. ‘Bet he is not a sea captain,’ she mumbled.

‘If you’ve got something to say Margot, say it out loud so we can all hear it,’ said Catherine pushing her tea cup away and holding her breath.

Margot swallowed. Her throat felt hot. Maybe she had caught a burning throat from Mrs Coates. Maybe she had given Mrs Coates the Mumps. Maybe…

‘We’re waiting.’

‘It doesn’t matter, dear, I really must be going.’
‘Oh it matters,’ said Catherine, ‘it definitely matters. I don’t beg and scrape and run around after you lot all day long, to have my own daughter call me a liar.’

‘Now, Cath I think that’s…I think that’s a little…she only said…’

‘Well that’s it exactly. What did she say?’ Catherine straightened up in her chair and looked down at the table, ‘We’re still waiting.’

Margot looked at Mrs Coates but she knew it was hopeless. Why did she say that? Words were always bursting out of her mouth before she knew they were there. And it was no good saying sorry or begging to start again or trying to take Catherine’s hand, telling her, like Jim did, ‘I’m sorry Cath. I promise. I promise never again,’ because it did happen again. Everything always happened again. Coming home late, crashing into things, waking Lewis and Julie and shaking Margot, ‘wake-up, wake-up Tiger’, and she couldn’t tell what she was awake or asleep. She couldn’t tell what was happening when there were terrible noises like falling and breaking and terrible words like get out and sorry so they hid under her bed and promised to be good and wished, wished, wished, God had never dreamt up the middle of the night.

‘I bet he’s not a sea captain,’ said Margot in a tiny voice.

‘Louder please.’

‘I bet he’s not a sea captain.’

‘Do you? Well I’m sure you’d know better than me.’

‘I’m sorry, Mummy, I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry,’ said Catherine turning to Mrs Coates, ‘as if sorry changes anything.’

‘Well. We’ve all had a long day.’

‘Yes,’ said Catherine, her eyes blinking as she pushed her chair out from under her and stood up.

‘I know dear. I know it looks hopeless. But something will turn up.’

‘I suppose you’re right.’ Catherine walked over to the ice chest. ‘Mr Beckett came to see me yesterday. He said…he said Jim hasn’t been at work since last week. He said this was it. He said he was sorry too but he can only give him one more chance…the gave me some chops then.’ She bent down and opened the ice-chest. ‘Look at this. Out of ice again.’ Tommy grabbed hold of her fingers. ‘I know little one, ‘she said kissing the top of his hand, ‘the chops are probably better off sitting in the oven.’
‘You’ve got to laugh,’ said Mrs Coates.
‘You do,’ said Catherine.
‘You shouldn’t be too hard on her. She’s only seven.’
‘Going on seventeen, and I can’t really blame her for that.’
‘Well. They grow up fast now.’
‘Yes,’ said Catherine slowly, ‘I know all about that.’

Mrs Coates spun her teacup around on its saucer. ‘Don’t dwell on the past dear. What’s done is done.’

Catherine closed the door to the ice-chest and put the chops on the bench. ‘Don’t wipe your nose on your sleeve, Margot. Take Tommy and see if he needs a nappy change.’

‘He’s been as regular as clockwork today,’ said Mrs Coates.

Catherine smiled then and Margot looked from her mother to Mrs Coates and put her best voice on. ‘Yes, Mummy,’ she said taking Tommy from Catherine and making a funny face for him. ‘Look. Look at this Mum. I’m being mean Mr Beckett.’

Lewis and Julie slammed the porch door open and ran into the kitchen. ‘When’s tea time?’ asked Lewis.

‘When the maid gets here,’ said Catherine, ‘in the meantime you can say hello to Mrs Coates and go and wash your hands.’

‘I’d better be going, dear,’ said Mrs Coates, pulling her chair out and standing up like a giant in front of Lewis and Julie. ‘Yes, Vi. I know. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be silly and don’t come out.’ She patted Catherine on the arm and marched over to the backdoor, ‘I can find my own way.’

‘Goodbye Mrs Three Musketeers Coates,’ called Margot.

‘Bye bye pet,’ she said, but she left without giving Margot her hand, or singing out ‘all for one’.
Margot galloped up to the loungeroom window and looked at herself in the glass. She whinnied loudly, tossed her head in the air and raced away to the backdoor. Catherine was standing there, with her hands in her apron pocket, looking out at the shed.

‘Do you want to play horses,’ Margot said.

‘Not now love.’ Catherine took a peg out of her pocket and twirled it around in her hand. ‘I was just thinking…’

‘What Mum?’

‘Would you mind…could you run down the shop for me?’

Margot trotted around Catherine and looked at the peg. ‘Now? What for?’

‘Bread. We need some bread.’

Margot looked up at the sky. ‘Is it getting dark soon?’

‘Not yet. Not if you go now.’

Margot followed Catherine into the kitchen.

‘Whose gunna walk me across the lights?’ she asked pushing Tommy back onto the floor as he tried to climb up her dress.

‘You’re old enough to cross by yourself now. ‘You’ve done it before.’

‘Not in the dark, I haven’t.’ Margot snorted and wiped her nose on the back of her hand.

Catherine whacked her large, flat purse on the kitchen table, opened it and then closed her eyes.
'What Mum? What’s happened?'
She pulled two coins out of her purse and moved them around on the table.
‘There’s not…there’s nearly enough. If you could just ask Mrs Rayson…’
‘Again? Ask her again?’
‘Just this once.’
‘I can’t.’ Margot tugged at her mother’s arm. ‘I can’t, Mum.’
‘You just have to tell her I’ll pay her on Friday. Tell her I’m sorry. Mrs Rayson won’t mind.’
‘Friday?’
Catherine sighed and brushed Margot’s face with her hand, ‘I’m sorry love.’
Margot leant into her mother’s hand. ‘That’s alright,’ she said, ‘guess what?
I’ll just tell Mrs Rayson we’ll pay her on Friday. She’s very nice Mrs Rayson
and she gave me a snake once; what day is it today?’
‘Tuesday.’
‘Tuesday.’
‘Before it gets dark, love.’
‘I can run fast. I can run very fast now I’m big.’
Catherine nodded. She wasn’t wearing her Red Indian lipstick.
‘Will I take the basket?’
‘If you like.’ Catherine snapped her purse closed and put it on the bench near
the stove. ‘No point hiding my purse now, is there?’
‘Hiding it? Why are you hiding it?’
‘Goodness knows. It doesn’t seem to stop money disappearing out of it.’
Tommy crawled over to Catherine and tried to climb up her leg.
‘When will Dad be home?’
‘I don’t know that either.’ Catherine put her hand over her eyes and shook her head.
‘Are you tired Mum?’
‘A bit tired,’ said Catherine looking towards the lounge room door and then
lowering her voice, ‘you know things…you know things are difficult, love.’
‘I know Mum,’ said Margot. ‘I know that and I’m not going to tell anyone.
It’s a secret isn’t it?’
‘Yes,’ said Catherine, ‘just until…just until things get better.’
‘Mrs Coates knows doesn’t she?’
'She knows some of it.'

‘And Dad, does Dad know too?’

Catherine turned her engagement ring around and around on her finger. ‘I’m going to have to go to work, Margot. I think you know that.’

Margot looked across at Catherine’s purse. ‘That’s because of Mr Beckett.’

‘Well…it has something to do with him.’

‘Lewis and Julie are too little to know, aren’t they Mum?’

‘For the moment,’ said Catherine, ‘c’mon love, the basket’s there, near the door. Mrs Rayson will be shutting soon.’

Margot walked over to the door to the porch. ‘Are you bad if you don’t have any money Mum?’

‘Bad?’

‘Like robbers or pick pockets or people who don’t say their prayers.’

‘No love. It’s not bad. It’s just people don’t want to know things like that.’

‘Why?’

‘Because…they might get upset. Or they might feel sorry for you.’

Margot picked up the basket and slung it over her arm. ‘That’s good though isn’t it? It’s good if people feel sorry for you.’

A laugh got stuck in Catherine’s throat. ‘Not all the time,’ she said quietly, ‘sometimes it makes you ashamed.’

Margot ran out of the front gate and down the street. She rushed along looking at the train clanking along the tracks and the street lights popping on and the people hurrying home because the night was coming, the night was coming and when it came, that was all you could think about.

Her cardigan flapped around her as she ran and the basket kept hitting her hip. She saw herself flash past a shop window and she thought she looked a bit like the Little Match Girl — the poor Little Match Girl — lost and alone in the street. She felt better when she thought that and she wished there was ice and snow and people who would buy her matches. She wished there was someone who’d feel sorry because Catherine must have forgotten, that the Little Match Girl died because there was no one to feel sorry for her.
Margot stopped at the traffic lights and wiped her hand under her nose. That was sad that story. No one loved the *Little Match Girl* – not one person – and that was strange because she was brave and she was kind too.

‘Do you need help crossing the road?’ A man’s voice blew into Margot’s ear and she held her basket tight against her chest and looked up into his face.

‘It’s green,’ the man said, ‘are you going to cross?’

Margot couldn’t speak. She wasn’t allowed to speak. This might be him – the man – the stranger that took little children away. The one her teacher, all the teachers, talked about. Here. At the lights. Like a giant on the street. And if she didn’t run, run as fast as she could, she’d get taken away. Kidnapped and thrown into the sea, like Ragged Blossom when the Banksia Man took her.

She leapt off the curb and sped across the road. She heard a car screech and a shout and another shout and now the street was full of the sounds, full of the sounds of danger. The streets were dangerous. The dark was dangerous. Everybody knew that and the faster you ran the more you knew it was true.

‘Whatever’s the matter, child?’

Margot stood in the doorway of Mrs Rayson’s milkbar, panting so she couldn’t speak. She kept looking behind her and looking at Mrs Rayson too.

Mrs Rayson said something else. She looked all doughy and ripply as though she had turned into a loaf of bread herself. She moved her face closer to Margot. Margot closed her eyes. She knew what happened when you begged for food. People were cruel and laughing too.

She heard a clock ticking. It was Mrs Rayson’s face. It started to tick louder and louder and her mouth got wider and wider.

‘We’re waiting, aren’t we grade two? We’re waiting for Miss Margot to stop daydreaming.’ That was Mrs Black. Margot wished she’d never heard of Mrs Black. She wished she was still in grade one, with Miss Eddy. She wished she was still six. She wished…‘the bread money.’ The words fell out of Margot’s mouth. ‘I lost it crossing the road.’

The Heralds were piled on the floor inside the door. On the front page there was a picture of a small, smiling girl. She was riding a tricycle and waving. Margot stared at the girl on the front of the newspaper and wondered where it had come from, this big bold lie.
She looked up at Mrs Rayson and said it again, just to be sure. ‘I lost Mummy’s bread money.’

Mrs Rayson took Margot’s hand. She looked sad and worried like she was saying a prayer and Margot knew then that God knew. He knew what she had done.

The blood in her legs rushed up through her body and into her mouth. She swallowed. She swallowed again and again, to make it go down, to stop it coming out of her nose.

Mrs Rayson picked her up and sat her on top of the Heralds and a sentence that said: ‘Last Trip to the Milkbar’. She sat on the newspapers looking down at the sentence and the girl with the tricycle and her pedalling legs and her waving hand and Mrs Rayson wrapping a pipe loaf in tissue paper and putting it quietly into her basket.
Jim’s fingers drew shapes on the table top. Margot wondered if he was listening, listening to her story about Mrs Rayson and the bread.

‘I said hello Mrs Rayson. Mum’ll pay on Friday,’ said Margot dancing around the table’s edge, ‘not today Friday. Mrs Rayson is very nice, she didn’t mind. She said that will be alright dear and she didn’t even have to write it down in her book because she knows me. She knows I don’t come from a Home or anything.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with coming from a Home,’ said Jim. Margot scratched her arm. ‘Because we come from a home don’t we, Dad?’

Her father didn’t smile. Didn’t look up. ‘You know what I mean, Tiger,’ he said grimly. ‘Some people have nowhere else to go.’

‘Like the Little Match Girl,’ said Margot. Jim snorted. ‘What’s your mother doing?’

‘She’s putting Tommy and Julie to bed.’

‘She does nothing but run around after those two.’

‘Do you want to put the kettle on Dad? Make a cup of tea?’

Jim didn’t answer.

‘I think she’s reading Tales of Toyland. I know it already. Some of those toys are mean but the fairy is allowed to live there even though she’s not a proper toy.’

‘Yep.’
‘Mrs Coates is reading me *The Three Musketeers*.’

‘What sort of a book is that for a girl?’

Margot stared at her father. He looked a bit cross. ‘Jolly, the sailor doll is nice, he sings songs just like you do.’

Jim laughed then and Margot laughed too and scrambled up onto the chair next to him.

‘You’re not sad now are you Daddy?’

‘Sad?’ Jim straightened up and rubbed his hands together. ‘Sad? Haven’t got time to be sad. Tired. I’m just a bit tired. That’s all, Tiger.’

Margot nodded and started rubbing her hands together too. Jim turned and looked through the open door into the loungeroom. ‘Pop your head in. See what your mother’s doing.’

‘You want me to tell her to come?’

‘No,’ Jim said slowly, ‘I want to make sure she’s not coming.’

He turned back towards Margot and leant close to her face. He smelt sour, like vinegar. ‘I want to tell you a secret.’

‘A secret!’

‘It won’t be much of a secret if you go yelling it all over the house.’

Margot clamped her hands over her mouth, slid off the chair, and tiptoed into the loungeroom.

She stood against the wall and listened to the story of *Tales of Toyland* through the open bedroom door: ‘We must get a little house to live in. I think really we had better get married. That would be fun.’

Lewis interrupted and said the sailor couldn’t marry the fairy because she wasn’t a real doll and Catherine told him to listen to the story and started to read the same bit again.

Margot skipped back into the kitchen. ‘They’re still reading. They’re up to that bit where they want to get married.’

Jim looked at her but his eyes were somewhere else. ‘Righto,’ he said.

‘Can I sit on your knee for the secret, Daddy?’

‘Well, you see Tiger, that’s just it. For this secret I need your help to do something.’

‘Yes.’ Margot stood waiting and tried to look ready to do secrets.
‘Now,’ said Jim, ‘see this bottle,’ and magician-like he pulled a small glass bottle out of his coat.

‘Tricks,’ cried Margot, ‘I know what it is Daddy. Magic tricks. That’s the secret. Isn’t it?’

Jim looked up from the table. ‘Yep,’ he said quietly, ‘that’s part of it but it’s what’s in the bottle that’s the real secret.’

‘What Dad? What’s in it?’

‘Hold your horses. Promise you can keep a secret?’

‘Promise, Daddy. I really promise. I’ve got lots of secrets. Lots and lots.’

Jim winked at her and then looked over to the lounge room. ‘Have ya now? And what secrets would they be?’

Margot beamed across at him and shook her head, ‘Not telling. I promised Mummy I wouldn’t tell. So I’m not telling.’

Jim held the bottle cupped in his hand and fiddled with the top. ‘She’s a bit of a dark horse your mother,’ he said half under his breath. His glasses fell down to the middle of his nose and his eyes shrank, ‘but you need a good imagination for a real secret and your mother…,’ he put the bottle on the table and leant into Margot, ‘and your mother’s very…practical.’

The ‘p’ in practical sprayed all over Margot’s face and she blinked away the spit and squinted at the bottle. It was half full of brown stuff. ‘Yuk. It looks like medicine.’

Jim grabbed Margot’s hand and held it close to his chest. ‘Medicine,’ he said and a smile danced in his eyes. ‘Yep. That’s what it is.’

‘What’s secret about medicine,’ said Margot disappointed.

‘Lots,’ said Jim slowly, ‘if you think about it.’

Margot put on a thinking face but nothing came into her head. Jim let go of her hand and tapped her on her forehead. ‘Same eyes,’ he said winking at her, ‘you and me have the same eyes.’

Margot laughed and spun around herself. ‘Dad, Dad, I can do a somersault. You want me to show you?’

‘Not right now Tiger. I just want you to keep a lookout.’

‘A lookout?’

‘For your mother. We don’t want to worry her, do we? She’s got enough to do.’
‘She has, she told Mrs Coates she had bones in her fingers.’
‘Did she? Well that’s just it…I want you to keep a lookout while I take this medicine.’
‘Are you sick?’
‘Tired. Like I said. Just a bit tired. You stand in the doorway and let me know when the coast is clear…’

Ohh,’ said Margot skipping up and down on the spot, ‘it looks yukky.’
‘It’s not bad when you get used to it.’
‘Does it taste awful?’
‘Horrible,’ said Jim and made a face for horrible medicine. ‘Yep. Are you standing guard?’
‘Standing guard?’
‘Keeping a look out,’ said Jim with a frowning smile, ‘so I can take the medicine without worrying your mother.’
‘So that’s it,’ said Margot. ‘That’s the whole secret.’
‘Yep. Just guard the door and let me know if the coast is clear.’
‘That’s easy,’ said Margot hopscotching across to the doorway.
‘Quietly,’ said Jim, ‘that’s the whole point.’

Margot stood in the doorway, peered into the lounge room and looked at the tiny triangle of light on the floor. It wasn’t much of a secret – not half as good as Catherine’s but she wasn’t going to say that. She was happy Jim had given her a secret. Can you keep a secret? I don’t think you can… She was dying to sing that for him because she’d made up some actions to go with it and he’d be pleased when she showed him, really pleased he’d chosen her, Margot, to keep a secret.

She turned back into the kitchen. Jim was bent over the table, unscrewing the top off the medicine bottle.
‘Dad.’

He jumped and looked up. His eyes were wide like an animal’s, ‘She coming?’ he whispered.
‘No,’ said Margot.
‘Then why did you call out?’
‘To tell you she’s not coming.’

‘Jesus Christ, Tiger. Only call out if she is coming. If anyone’s coming.’
‘Even Julie.’

‘Specially Julie. She can’t keep a secret like you can.’

Margot hopped from one foot to the other, in a tiny dance. ‘She can’t. Or
Lewis. I’m the best secret keeper.’

‘Too right.’ Jim took the cap off the bottle and held it near his nose, ‘Was
that the door?’ he asked.

Margot leant into the darkened loungeroom. When she turned back to Jim he
was screwing the top on his medicine.

‘It’s no one, Dad. What are you doing now?’

Jim blinked his eyes and put the bottle back in the pocket of his jacket.

‘Can’t you keep watch without the twenty questions?’

He stood up, pushed his glasses onto his face and searched around the stove
for the matches. He tried to strike one against the box but nothing happened.

‘Still, Dad,’ Margot whispered, ‘you’ve got to hold it still.’

Jim put the box on the sink and stuck the match again and it sparked into life.

‘It’d be good if they made medicine for shaking hands, wouldn’t it Dad?’

Jim didn’t answer. He lit the gas and bent his head down so low he nearly
burnt his hair. Then he looked up at Margot and said, ‘gas. Made me feel a bit
crook then.’

Margot watched him search in his pocket for the medicine bottle and
wondered why everyone sick all of a sudden? Julie got the Mumps and Lewis
got chicken pox and Catherine got a fever and a temperature but that was
because she got locked out of the house. She had to spend the whole night in
the shed without a cardigan, and the doctor had to hold her up to take her
medicine and she was so good at taking it he said she could keep the measuring
spoon and the medicine too. That was the proper way to take medicine, not
drink it straight from the bottle.

‘We’ve got a spoon Dad?’

‘What?’

‘For the medicine?’

Jim screwed the top back on the bottle, dropped it into his coat pocket and
held out his arms to find his chair.

‘Any bread left, Tiger?’
‘There’s Mrs Rayson’s bread. Remember?’ Margot opened the door of the kitchen cabinet and put two pieces of bread on a plate. ‘Do you want dripping, Dad? There’s a nice new one.’

Jim pointed at her, ‘you’re a good girl. Looking after your Dad.’ He patted her on the head as she plonked the old pudding basin full of dripping onto the table.

‘Do you want me to spread it for you, Daddy?’

‘You’re the only one. You know that don’t you Tiger? The only one that cares. Maybe your brother but he’s a bit young. Only you. You’ll look after me. Stick by me. You’re loyal. Like me. Loyal and true.’

Jim’s hand was stuck flat on the side of Margot’s face as he spoke. His hand was sticky and hot and smelt like matches. When he finished talking Margot spread dripping on the pieces of bread. She wasn’t really sure what her father was saying but she knew what he meant. It was about being the best. And she, Margot was the best of all. She pushed the bread and dripping in front of him. ‘Here you are Daddy,’ she said, ‘you like me the best, don’t you? Better than Lewis.’

‘Give him time,’ said Jim, ‘give him time.’ He took a large bite out of his bread and talked with his mouth full, ‘the world’s changed Tiger. It’s changed too much. They’re going to walk on the moon soon…’

‘Are they?’

‘…on the bloody moon.’

Jim looked sad talking about the bloody moon and Margot tried to think of something else to talk about. ‘Dolls. Are we going to make more dolls soon, Dad?’

‘Dolls?’

‘Out of paper. And toys. Out of dough.’

Jim coughed and tiny chewed bits of bread and dripping sprayed across the table. ‘Out of dough…whatever happened to that doll’s house we made?’

‘It’s in the shed with my other things. I keep everything in there so no one can touch them.’

‘Good idea. Always keep yourself to yourself.’

‘You said we’re going to make dough people for the house.’

‘I did Tiger, I did.’
'Tomorrow Dad?'
'School tomorrow.'
'The next day? What about the next day?'
'The next day,' Jim slid the medicine out of his pocket again.
'And furniture. We were going to make chairs and beds and a piano for Mummy.'
'A piano for your mother.'
Jim pushed the empty bread and butter plate across the table and unscrewed the top on the bottle. 'Last one,' he said holding the bottle up in the air.
'I know,' said Margot, 'I think I know where it is.' She leapt off her chair and dragged it across the floor to the high kitchen cupboard. She opened the door and searched around the shelves.
Jim hit his hand on the table, 'furniture. What’s a house without furniture?'
'What’s a house without people?'
'Bloody quiet,' said Jim banging his elbow on the back of the kitchen chair.
'Bump the other one,' said Margot.
'What?'
'It’s bad luck to bump one elbow.'
'That explains a lot.'
'And ladders too. Mum told me.'
'I don’t know why she told you that,' said Jim rubbing his elbow, 'kids don’t get bad luck. That’s what adults get. Terrible bad luck. What are you mucking around with up there Tiger?'
'I thought the spoon might be here. The spoon for your...hey, Dad! Look! Look at this!' Margot pulled a sparkling silver bottle out from the back of the cupboard.
'Well I’ll be damned,' said Jim. Then he looked towards the door that led to Catherine with his mouth opening and closing.
Margot climbed off the chair, held the silver bottle up in the air like a trophy and handed it to Jim. He picked it up, turned it around and started to trace it with his fingertips. ‘She’s a beauty isn’t she?’ he said.
Margot nodded. Whatever it was it must be magic. It stopped her father’s hands from shaking and it opened his eyes up.
‘You wouldn’t credit it,’ he said, almost under his breath. ‘She must still polish it. Why would she polish it?’

‘Who?’ asked Margot as she watched Jim turn the bottle around and around in his hand. The silver shape looked alive. A shining, living thing from another world. Margot looked up at the open kitchen cupboard. She couldn’t believe she’d found it there, hidden amongst the paper bags and old battered cake tins and dead bits of Plasticine.

‘The sugar castor,’ said Jim. ‘The bloody sugar castor.’ He put it down on the kitchen table and wiped a hand under his glasses.

‘What’s a sugar castor?’

‘Your mother asked the same question. She’d never seen anything like it. Not that there’s many as good as this.’ Jim held it out in front of Margot. ‘See all those patterns and flowers? And this? Probably leaves. All done by hand. By real craftsmen.’

‘Can I have a hold, Daddy?’

‘Long as you’re careful.’

‘Where does the sugar go?’

‘In that bit. The top comes off here and the sugar goes in there.’

‘Why is it called a sugar castor?’

‘Probably because only really fine sugar will fit through the holes.’

‘Your father won it in a dancing competition,’ said Catherine standing in the doorway with Julie on her hip. ‘The state final for the cha-cha. Can’t get this little scalliwag to sleep.’

‘A dancing competition!’

‘Some people said he was as good as Fred Astaire. Some people said…’

‘It was a long time ago,’ said Jim pushing the sugar castor away from him, ‘before you were born.’

Margot blushed and flashed a look at Catherine.

Catherine put Julie down on the floor and looked up at the open cupboard door. ‘I haven’t even made your lunch yet, Margot. Would you like a cold sausage in your sandwich?’

‘Yes please,’ said Margot quietly.

‘I see you’ve found something to eat.’
‘Bread and dripping will do me,’ said Jim nodding at Margot. ‘I’m not fussy.’

‘You used to be,’ said Catherine taking a cold sausage out of the ice box.

No one said anything then. Margot watched Catherine slide the end of the pipe loaf out of its tissue paper.

‘I remember it took ages to unwrap it,’ said Catherine finally.

‘Unwrap what?’ said Jim crossly.

‘The sugar castor. There was so much tissue paper. It looked like the sort of thing that prefers to remain wrapped up,’ Catherine shook her head. ‘Funny the things you remember.’

‘What sort of thing would want to stay wrapped up?’ Jim asked the table.

‘I know,’ said Margot leaping around her chair. ‘I know. It’s that thing that comes before a butterfly. You know. What comes before a butterfly?’

Catherine wrapped the sandwich in the pipe loaf’s tissue paper and put it into a paper bag. ‘Cocoon. Lavae.’ She clicked her tongue and teeth together.

‘Butterflies.’

‘I like butterflies,’ called Julie from under the table.

‘I like them too but butterflies and sugar castors don’t put bread on the table.’

‘That was me wasn’t Mum? I got the bread.’

‘You never understood beauty,’ said Jim picking up the sugar castor again.

‘Beauty?’ Catherine opened the tin of baby formula. ‘You tell me where there’s any beauty around here.’

Margot fiddled with the back of her chair and looked at her father. He rubbed the side of his head with his hand and his thick black hair fell across his face. He fiddled with his glasses and then he held the sugar castor with two hands.

‘I’m too tired. Too tired to keep showing you, Cath.’

‘You’re too tired?’ Catherine filled a jug with water and put it on the stove. ‘Too tired from doing what?’

‘Can I watch?’ Julie popped her head out from under the table. ‘Can I watch the milk?’

‘Come on little one.’ Catherine bent down and lifted Julie up onto the bench next to the sink.

‘You can’t see it. Even if I showed you everyday, you just can’t see it.’
‘And you can,’ said Catherine measuring formula with a plastic spoon.
‘That’s probably because you know where to look.’
‘That’s right.’
‘In the bottom of bottles, for instance. Bound to be a lot of beauty in there.
Or in gutters. Or at Margaret Young’s house.’
‘Who’s Margaret Young?’
‘No one you know, Margot.’ Catherine hit the back of the spoon so hard the
powdery formula sprang into the water and bobbed about like a duck.
‘She’s a friend of Ted Barton’s. She stepping out with Teddy Barton.’ Jim
put the sugar castor in front of Margot. ‘There you are Tiger. It’s yours now.
Do your worst.’ He leant across the table and took Margot by the hand. ‘Just
because she’s a good dancer, your mother’s taken a set against her.’
‘I’m a good dancer,’ said Margot, ‘aren’t I? Aren’t I Dad?’
‘It’s not because she’s a good dancer,’ said Catherine counting the floating,
velvety balls of formula. ‘I had no idea she was good at anything. It’s the way
she looks.’
‘Looks,’ said Margot narrowing her eyes, ‘how does she look?’
‘It doesn’t matter. I have to count now.’
‘Evil? Does she look evil Mum?’
‘Evil? What would you know about evil?’ asked Jim.
‘Oh we learn all about evil at school. Don’t we Mum?’
‘Five. I’m trying to count now Margot.’
‘Well we do. I know all about hell and the devil and bad people being burnt
up and sausages.’
‘Sausages?’
‘It’s evil to eat sausages on Friday. And one Friday I had some in my
sandwiches. I…Mum! Mum! What day is it tomorrow?’
‘Wednesday.’
‘That’s alright. Wednesday is alright. But Friday. If you eat sausages or
meat - and sausages are meat - if you eat them you die and go to hell to get
burned up because God can see you wherever you are.’
Jim looked into Margot’s eyes. ‘I hope that’s not true, Tiger.’
‘It is. Isn’t it Mum?’
‘So they say.’ Catherine screwed the tops on two baby’s bottles and stood them on the draining board. ‘C’mon. Time for bed.’

‘It is true. I know it is because when I was looking for a bin to put the sausages in I saw God looking at me.’

‘Margot. I said bed time.’

‘He was Dad. I was running everywhere, looking for a bin where no one would see me and just as I opened the lid there he was. Looking at me. Telling me I was bad. I thought he was going to kill me and take me to hell.’

‘Margot! Stop talking such rubbish and say goodnight.’

Margot slid off her chair muttering - he did so. She stood in front of Jim and looked up into his eyes. ‘Good night, Daddy.’

‘Better get a wriggle on Tiger, or you’ll get us both in trouble.’

Margot nodded but she didn’t move. ‘What about…what about the sugar thing?’

‘Take it.’

‘Really?’

‘Yep.’

Margot snatched it up off the table and danced it around in her hand. ‘My own sugar…I think I’ll put it in our doll’s house. That’s a good idea isn’t it Dad?’

‘Terrific,’ said Jim dropping his hand onto her shoulder, ‘terrific.’

Margot closed her nose to her father’s medicine breath. He pulled her closer and squeezed her to him. The sugar castor crushed against her chest. Its rounded edges pressed into her bones. He held her tightly. He was saying something but his face was tangled in her hair so she couldn’t hear properly. She waited. She tried to hold her breath against the pain of the sugar castor but it hurt harder and harder and made tears come into her eyes.

‘Margot. One more second and you can put yourself into bed,’ said Catherine carrying Julie out to the toilet.

Jim let go of Margot and looked into her face.

‘What’s all this?’ he said in a handsome prince voice. ‘You save your tears, Tiger. You might need them one day.’ He kissed Margot’s hand and then he held it against his scratchy cheek.
Eight

Catherine stood over Margot’s bed, tucking the blankets in. ‘Do you want the blind up or down, love?’

‘Are there any stars?’

‘A few.’

‘Daddy gave me the sugar castor.’

‘I heard.’

‘Am I allowed to keep it?’

‘Your father said you could.’ Catherine bent down and kissed Margot on the head. She looked around at Lewis and Julie, sleeping top to toe in the bed next to Margot’s. ‘Out like lights, the pair of them.’

‘I’ve put it under the bed Mum. I think it might be magic.’

Catherine smoothed Margot’s fringe across her forehead. ‘Let’s hope so.’ She stood up and walked to the door. ‘Night, night love,’ she whispered.

‘Night, night Mum.’

Then Catherine pulled the door closed and was gone.

Lewis stood at the side of Margot’s bed shaking her awake.

‘Margie! Margie!’

Margot opened her eyes.

‘The wardrobe’s coming to get us. It’s coming to kill us dead.’
Margot sat up. There was noise. Inside noise. The sort of noise something makes when it’s trying to be quiet.

‘It’s the wardrobe!’

‘Shhh,’ said Margot as she slid out of bed and held herself against the dark. The door had turned big and black and it might be a wardrobe, a big monster wardrobe, the sort that would kill them dead.

‘Hurry, Margie,’ cried Lewis pulling Margot’s nighty, ‘hurry and get Mummy.’

Margot stood in front of the monster door. ‘Shhh,’ she said again and felt her breath running away from her body. She had to be brave. Brave enough to save Lewis and Julie too but what if it was already there, in their bedroom, in front of her in the dark? What if it had crashed out of her parents room, was looking for them, searching, searching…

There was a bump on the wall and a door opening and shuffling and then a light came on and their bedroom door was a door again and a small square of light was shining on the lino.

Margot crouched down on the floor and peered through the gap at the bottom of the door.

There were feet. Feet over near the window. Feet with nothing on. And then voices. Catherine and Jim talking to each other in scraps of whisper words and then something fell or crashed and some feet – Catherine’s feet – stood up on their toes.

‘What is it? What is it?’ called Lewis.

‘Shhh,’ said Margot, swiveling around to try and see better. Seeing if it really was Catherine, in the lounge room, in the middle of the night, standing on her toes.

‘It’s coming. The wardrobe.’

‘Shhh.’

‘Margie!’

‘It’s not the wardrobe. It’s Mum and Dad.’

‘Mum and Dad?’

‘Promise Cath. Promise…’

‘What was that?’

‘Shhh, I can’t hear.’
'Please Cath. Promise.'
'Margie!'
'Vet Dad.'
'He’s talking to the wardrobe…he’s…'
A sobbing noise, like someone crying under the blankets, filled the dark and stopped everything.
Margot flattened herself down on her tummy and pressed her face to the bottom of the door.
The feet were gone but the noise was still there. It was coming closer and closer, coming with Jim and Catherine, coming with their toes, their toes that were pointed towards her and coming towards their door.
She sprang up off the floor and jumped into bed.
'Margie?'
'Shhh. They’re coming.'
'Ahhhhhh.’ Lewis dived under the blankets.
'Not the wardrobe. Mum. It’s Mum and Dad.’
'It’s not.'
'It is.'
'Why?’
Margot pulled the blankets up to her chin. She didn’t know why. Why would they be talking in the middle of the night, without their slippers on, whispering and making promises.
Margot heard a door creak and the sound of a light switch going off and then there was nothing. Not a single noise except Lewis’s breath fast blowing in her ear.
'Sleepwalking,’ said Margot, ‘I think they were sleepwalking.’
'Sleepwalking?’ Lewis grabbed Margot’s arm. ‘That’s alright isn’t it?’
'Yes, sleepingwalking’s alright.’
Lewis wriggled down into the blankets next to Margot. ‘Can I sleep with you, Margie, it’s getting light soon, isn’t it?’
'Soon,’ said Margot.
'When?’
'When you go to sleep.’
'It’ll come back. When you sleep you can’t stop a wardrobe coming back.’
‘You can,’ said Margot, turning onto her side and looking up at the door, ‘if you close your eyes and keep them closed, you can stop anything.’

Nine

Margot sat on the floor, in the back of the Mr Beckett’s van, looking at the blue dress trimmed with dark green ribbon.

The dress moved from side to side, under its soft, clear plastic. It looked like it was made of dancing material. The sort of material Catherine had danced across her arm a long time ago. Margot leant into the dress and put her hand on the plastic.

‘Blue and green should never be seen,’ said Catherine and Margot turned towards the voice and saw her mother’s eyes looking at her in the rear-vision mirror.

‘Your father’s taking his time,’ she said as a car tooted for her to move. ‘If a policeman comes over or one of those parking inspectors you’d better pretend to be sick.’

‘Sick?’

‘So he won’t give me a ticket. Pretend you’ve got appendicitis or something.’

‘Or polio. Polio’s easy Mum, you only have to pretend you can’t walk.’

When Jim came back from taking the dry cleaning into one of Mr Beckett’s shops he took three goes to slide his door shut. ‘Bloody van,’ he growled.

Catherine pulled out into the traffic and said, ‘Alright? Was everything alright?’

Jim turned and looked at her. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘What it sounds like.’

‘I’m not too proud to be his delivery boy. That’ll do me.’
Catherine clicked her tongue then and sighed.

‘Why doesn’t Mr Beckett deliver his own dry cleaning?’ asked Margot.

‘Mr Beckett can’t be in twenty places at once.’

‘Can’t he,’ said Jim, ‘could of fooled me.’

‘What’s that mean?’

‘Nothing that concerns you,’ said Catherine and she stopped so fast Margot slid into the blue green dress and Jim fell against the side window.

‘How many more shops, Mum?’

‘Just one.’

‘Then are we going to get fish and chips?’

‘Bugger that,’ said Jim, ‘let’s go to the Windsor for tea.’

‘Where’s that, Dad?’

‘It’s where the rich people eat.’

‘Jim,’ said Catherine softly.

‘You,’ said Jim, ‘you always side with him even though he doesn’t give a damn about me or you. You know that, don’t you?’

‘Who?’ said Margot.

‘But you go round there. You go crawling around to him. He likes that.’

Some rain fell on the window and Catherine put the windscreen wipers on.

‘It’s not as if it’s the first time. He’s trying to do what he can.’

‘Is he now? And how the hell would you know that?’

‘Who Mum? Who?’

‘This doesn’t concern you Margot.’

‘That’s the way, lies, lies and more lies.’

‘Please,’ said Catherine as the gear stick made a loud noise and the van rushed past a tram, ‘don’t let’s argue.’

‘There’s no arguing in the car, is there Mum?’

‘Margot…’

‘You’ve bloody well brain-washed that kid.’

‘Margot,’ said Catherine in a louder voice, ‘stop interrupting.’

‘Might as well tell her,’ said Jim.

‘No,’ said Catherine.

‘Now listen Tiger…’

‘For God’s sake Jim.’
'That’s right stick up for ‘em. Christ all bloody mighty, he was waiting for me. Watching me like a hawk. Waiting for me to put one bloody foot wrong. That’s all. That’s all he needed to give me the sack. The sack good and proper. That’s what he wanted and that’s what he got.’

Margot stared at the back of her father’s head. It was wobbling around on his neck like Noddy. Catherine stopped for a red light and closed her fist over the knob on the gear stick. Mr Beckett was a nuisance. He was always going crook about something even though he was always doing his best. That’s what he told Catherine when she told him Jim was sick. ‘I’m doing my best Mrs Lovelock. You can see I’m doing my best.’ And Catherine always agreed with that so…’what’s the sack for, then?’

Jim shook his wobbling head. ‘Jesus Christ Tiger…’

The lights changed to green and Catherine said something to the steering wheel and Margot grabbed hold of the back of the seat. ‘Bottles! It’s a sack to put the bottles in, isn’t it Dad?’

‘Margot!’

‘People, Tiger. It’s for people,’ said Jim in gruff voice.

‘People?’ Margot pressed her fingers into the back of the seat as Jim twisted his head around to face her.

‘Yep. They paint a big smile on your face, with red, red lipstick, then they put you in a sack and dump you in the Yarra. They dump you in that river like a cat with kittens.’

Jim leant across to Catherine’s ear then and said, ‘that’s what happens when you get the sack.’

Margot let out a small cry and sank down onto the floor of the van with her hands over her ears.

Catherine said something to Jim but Margot didn’t want to hear it. She didn’t want to hear any of it. She wanted everything to be like it was before Mr Beckett was doing his best. Before all the secrets and the lies in the shops and noises in the night. She looked at the blue green dress and wiped her hand across her eyes. That was cruel. Cruel and wicked to put kittens in a river and now she hated Mr Beckett and she’d never, ever wave at him again.
Catherine pinned her hair on top of her head with bobby pins. She was getting ready to leave, to go to work. She had a job in the city, in a hotel, in a black dress.

When she told Jim about the job she started crying and he put his hand on her face and she cried harder and harder. When she stopped crying he let go of her and stood in front of the sink and looked out the window.

‘Righto, Tiger, three times twenty?’

‘Sixty,’ said Margot and Jim tossed her a two-cent coin and walked around the table and ended up at the sink where he started.

‘I might go and look for a Herald,’ he said then.

‘Jim.’

As Margot watched the curls on Catherine’s shoulders disappearing up onto her head she remembered that voice. It was a voice Catherine didn’t use very often. A fairy Godmother’s voice. The voice of someone who would look after you. Look after you forever and ever.

Catherine scraped some lipstick out from the bottom of her nearly empty tube with another bobby pin and ran the Red Indian covered pin across her lips. She closed her powder compact and her eyes smiled at Margot. ‘I should try and buy a new lipstick on pay day,’ she said. She smiled a big Red Indian smile then and Margot thought she heard the word again. Jim.

Jim stood in the doorway looking at them eating their sandwiches. ‘Your mother still at work,’ he asked.
‘Yes, Dad. I’m in charge,’ said Margot.

‘Are you now?’ He walked around the table and then he walked around it again. He scratched the palm of his hand and looked up at the high kitchen cupboard. ‘Not a lot to do in here then.’

He walked out into the porch. Margot heard the bathroom tap running and her father humming a tune. She smiled at that and took another bite of her Vegemite sandwich.

‘Alright,’ said Jim coming back into the kitchen with his hair all shiny and his glasses too, ‘what about some mixed lollies? Who’d like that?’

He threw a ten cent coin down on the table and clapped his hands together.

‘Me,’ said Lewis shoving the rest of his sandwich into his mouth.

‘And me,’ said Julie, ‘Me want lollies too.’


‘Clinkers,’ said Margot, twisting her plait around in her fingers, ‘yellow ones. Mum’s colour.’

Jim put his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his toes.

‘Yellow. I’m sure Mrs Rayson’ll have some yellow ones. And Cobbers. Your mother likes Cobbers too and after a long day at work…’

‘Who’s going to get them?’ asked Margot.

‘We’re not allowed out the gate, are we Margie,’ said Lewis, ‘we have to stay here until Mum gets back.’

‘That’s the rule is it Tiger?’

‘Yes. That’s what Mum said.’

She looked at Jim and he tapped his eyebrow but he didn’t say, same eyes, he said, ‘what do you think Lew? Is that a real rule or an April fool rule?’

Lewis jumped down from his chair and threw his arms in the air. ‘An April fool rule? It’s April Fool’s day.’ He snatched the coin off the table. ‘Isn’t it? Isn’t it Margie?’

Margot chewed her cardigan sleeve. It was April Fool’s day. Catherine had pinned notes on everyone’s backs at breakfast time. The notes said things like: I am a Smartie or I am a silly billy. Margot pinned a note on Lewis’s back that said: I wet the bed and he turned around and around in circles trying to get it off and when he did, he kicked Margot in the ankle and burst into tears.
‘Tommy’s asleep,’ she said, looking at Lewis’ please, please face, ‘I have to look after him too.’

‘I’ll tell you what. I’ll stay here with the baby and you three can go. Safety in numbers huh?’

Margot hopped off her chair and pulled at her wet sleeve. ‘If Julie comes she’ll have to hold my hand.’

‘Too right.’ Jim winked at Margot. ‘You’re in charge. Give the money to Margot, Lew and you do what she says too.’

Lewis gave Margot the silver coin and she turned it over and over in her hand. It reminded her of the shiny sugar castor so when Jim looked up at the kitchen cupboard again she said, ‘I’ve still got it Dad, that sugar thing. I hid it under the bed.’

Jim fiddled with his collar. ‘Did you now? I’d forgotten all about that. Righto, get a wriggle on. I’ll count and see how fast you can be. Ready? One. Two. Three…’

Lewis raced out the backdoor and Julie followed him. Margot was going to say goodbye, but Jim was already counting ten, so she closed her fingers around the silver coin and ran out after them.

At the traffic lights, she told Julie and Lewis about right and left and about roads and streets and people and all the dangerous things she could think of and they listened and held her hands so tightly her fingers started to hurt.

The busy street wasn’t busy because everything was shut on Saturday afternoon. All the blinds on the shops were pulled down and the blinds on the street were rolled up. There were hardly any cars and the red light seemed to be there just to make them wait. There was a lady though. A lady who looked a lot like Catherine walking down the footpath towards them.

On the other side of the traffic lights Margot let Lewis and Julie skip along behind her while she turned the coin over and over in her hand and thought about lollies. Ten cents was a lot. They could buy all sorts of lollies with that. Clinkers, Milk Bottles, Black Cats, Cobbers. She would buy a Cobber for Catherine. Catherine loved Cobbers. She looked over her shoulder for the lady when she thought that and even though she was gone, it felt like she was still there.
The bell on Mrs Rayson’s door was broken and they stood in the empty shop and waited for her to find them there. Lewis and Julie traced their fingers across the glass on the lolly counter and read out how many you could buy for one cent. Four Aniseed balls. Three Bananas. Two Clinkers and one cent for one Cobber. Mrs Rayson called out she wouldn’t be a minute and Margot nearly forgot to answer because she was looking at the Sherbert Bombs and wishing they lived in a milkbar so they could get their lollies for free, like Mrs Rayson.

The pipe loaves and the high tins and the sandwich loaves were sitting on a shelf behind the counter with two Boston buns. Margot turned around to the Heralds when she saw them there but there were no Heralds, it was too early yet. She hadn’t had to lie about the bread money since Catherine went to work. She hadn’t had to go to the milkbar much at all.

Mrs Rayson’s doughy face leant over the counter at them. ‘I thought you must have disappeared,’ she said, lifting up the door on her lolly counter, ‘haven’t seen you for ages.’

Margot’s face went red as she tried to think of an excuse. She wasn’t allowed to tell strangers that Catherine went to work but it was hard to tell if Mrs Rayson was a stranger or not. ‘Mum’s been sick.’

‘Sick? I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘She’s better now,’ said Lewis.
‘Yes,’ said Margot, ‘I’m going to buy her a Cobber.’

‘Well, that will make her feel better, I’m sure.’ Mrs Rayson pulled a small white lolly bag off a string and put two Cobbers into it. ‘You can give your mother one from me too. Now how much have you got to spend?’

‘Two thousand, seven hundred and forty six. Two thousand seven hundred and forty seven and forty eight. Not bad. Not bad,’ said Jim as Margot burst back into the kitchen, ‘all still with us.’

‘I won. I won,’ said Margot as Lewis and Julie ran in behind her.

Jim was wearing a tie and a jacket and he was holding a brown paper bag. Margot was going to ask what was in it but he said, ‘got any Clinkers there, Tiger?’ and made her forget to ask.

‘You have to guess the colour,’ she said holding the Clinker out to him, ‘you have to guess the colour first.’
Jim held the chocolate-coated lolly in front of his mouth. ‘Yellow,’ he said and bit into it. ‘It’s green,’ said Lewis. ‘Not as green as your tongue,’ said Jim. ‘Aniseed balls,’ said Lewis and he and Julie and Margot stuck out their green and purple tongues to frighten him.

When Catherine came home she took off her black dress and put her normal dress on. She hummed as she changed Tommy’s nappy and put him in his chair for his dinner. ‘Pick a hand. Pick a hand Mum,’ said Margot dancing around her. Catherine looked down at the chocolate covered square that sat in the palm of Margot’s hand. ‘Dad came home and bought us some lollies and I saved you a Cobber.’ ‘That was thoughtful of you.’ Catherine took the lolly out of Margot’s hand. ‘Cobbers and Cherry Ripes – they were always my favourites.’ ‘Dad had a Clinker but he guessed the wrong colour and then he went out and he said he’s coming back with a surprise.’ Catherine put the Cobber in her mouth and looked at herself in the kitchen window. ‘Another surprise,’ she said pulling the bobby pins out of her hair and shaking her big round curls onto her shoulders, ‘that’ll be nice.’

They sat around the kitchen table playing Snakes and Ladders. Margot shook the dice in its cup and threw a six. She moved her red token six squares along the board until she stopped on the head of the longest snake. ‘You have to start again, now, Margie,’ said Lewis watching Margot slide her token down the snake’s long body. ‘I don’t care. I like starting again. Your turn Mum.’ ‘It’s Julie’s turn,’ said Catherine. ‘You throw the dice, little one, and I’ll help you count.’ Julie threw a six too but she didn’t land on a head. She never seemed to land on one and Margot thought next time she’d be blue instead of red.

Jim still wasn’t home, even though it was after tea. Catherine looked up from the Snakes and Ladders, every time there was a noise. She looked up at
the kitchen window and out to the porch too but it wasn’t him. He wasn’t back yet.

Margot wished she hadn’t said anything about the surprise now. She wished she’d saved Catherine Mrs Rayson’s Cobber too but she’d eaten that one herself.

‘What day is it tomorrow, Mum?’
‘Sunday. The day of rest.’
‘Do we have to go to church?’ asked Lewis.
‘Not tomorrow,’ said Catherine, shaking the dice and throwing a five, ‘we’ll leave it to next week.’

‘We can’t go if we don’t have any money for the plate, can we Mum?’
Catherine moved her token and passed the dice to Lewis. ‘Let’s not go into that tonight, Margot. Throw the dice Lewis.’

Margot watched Lewis’s dice roll across the table and onto the floor. She wondered if she should tell Catherine that Jim had gone somewhere with his tie on and a paper bag, somewhere that would take a long time. ‘What time is it?’

‘Nearly time for bed.’
Margot wished she hadn’t asked then because that’s what Catherine always said when it was already dark.

Catherine put the dice back on the table and told Lewis to watch what he was doing and then she looked at the window again and Margot looked too. Where was Jim in the dark on a Saturday? Nobody worked in the dark.

‘He’ll be home soon, won’t he Mum?’
‘You’d think so, wouldn’t you?’
Margot frowned. That was a funny thing to say. ‘I would. I would think that.’

‘Good. It’s your turn.’
Catherine passed the dice to Margot and a smell, like flowers, came with it.

‘You smell nice Mum. You smell like perfume.’
‘Perfume!’ Catherine’s hand flew up behind her ear. ‘Can you still smell it?’

‘Yes. It smells really nice.’
‘I can smell it,’ said Julie.
‘Yuk,’ said Lewis.
‘A girl at work gave it to me.’
‘A girl at work? Is it real perfume? Can I see it?’

‘Not now.’ Catherine fiddled with her ear. ‘I left it there. So I don’t forget to put it on.’

‘Will you bring it home tomorrow?’

‘I won’t be there tomorrow.’

‘The next time then.’

‘We’ll see.’

‘Please Mum, please.’

‘Come on,’ said Catherine, ‘we’ll be here all night at this rate.’ She stood up and said she was going to get a glass of water from the tap in the bathroom. When she came back her neck was red and some of her curls were wet. ‘That’s better. I think you’re going to win, love.’

‘Me?’ Margot pulled the board towards her and shook the dice. ‘He isn’t coming is he Mum?’

Catherine looked over at the window again but Margot knew she wasn’t listening on purpose.

‘Dad. I’m talking about Dad. You’re still waiting aren’t you Mum? Waiting for the surprise.’

‘Waiting?’ Catherine twirled her fingers through Julie’s pony-tail and then she nodded slowly and bit her lips away.
Eleven

Margot lay on the floor with her feet sticking out from under her bed.

‘Hurry up,’ called Catherine as she pushed the door open, ‘you’ll be late if you don’t hurry up.’

‘It’s gone!’ cried Margot, ‘it’s gone!’

‘What?’ said Catherine.

‘My sugar castor. Someone’s stolen it.’

‘Who would want to do that?’ Catherine stepped over Margot’s legs. ‘It’s probably just caught up in the blankets. Hop out the way and I’ll have a look.’

Catherine got down on her hands and knees and searched underneath the bed. She pulled the blankets up and searched them too but she didn’t find the sugar castor.

‘That’s strange,’ she said at last. ‘Are you sure you didn’t put it somewhere else?’

‘No,’ said Margot shaking her head and pointing at the floor, ‘it lives there, under the bed.’

‘Well, when was the last time you saw it?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Last night? The night before that?’

‘I don’t know. Not last night. Before last night.’ Margot looked up at her mother and her face crumpled up with tears. ‘What, Mum, where do you think it’s gone?’

‘I don’t know but it can’t have gone far. Lewis. Lewis, come here please.’

Lewis stood in the doorway holding his school bag across his body. ‘Yes.’

‘Have you seen Margot’s sugar castor?’

‘What?’

‘The word is pardon. Have you seen Margot’s sugar castor?’

‘No. I don’t know what one is.’
‘Are you telling me the truth? You know what happens to people who tell lies in this house.’

‘I am. I am telling the truth.’

Catherine straightened her lips at Lewis and then she searched under his bed too. ‘Alright,’ she said when she stood up again, ‘I believe you this time.’

Margot wiped her nose on her sleeve.

‘Don’t do that love,’ said Catherine, ‘I’m sure it will turn up. Did you take it out to play in the shed?’

‘No,’ said Margot crossly, ‘I only had it under the bed.’

‘Then it can’t be too hard to track down. I’ll have another look while you’re at school. Come on. It’ll turn up. I promise.’

Margot dragged her school satchel out into the kitchen. ‘It’s not fair,’ she said, ‘Julie broke the window on my doll’s house and then Wendy got lost and now my sugar castor’s gone.’

‘Well maybe you should learn to look after your things a bit better,’ said Catherine.

Margot kicked her satchel and hurt her foot. That wasn’t fair either. That wasn’t a bit fair saying that.

She stomped to school, kicking her feet through the leaves on the nature strip, without waiting for Lewis. When they got to the school gate he ran up behind her and said he knew. He saw it. In the middle of the night. He saw the wardrobe sneak in and steal her sugar castor away.

Mrs Black held up a picture of Ping, swimming around on a big dark ocean, trying to find someone to save him.

Margot already knew the story so when Mrs Black said, ‘And the master hit Ping several times across the…what do you think you’re doing young lady?’ she thought, that isn’t in it. That’s not the story of Ping the Duck.

‘Yes. It’s you. It’s you I’m talking to.’

Mrs Black sounded angry. Angrier than angry.

‘I’m waiting,’ she said. ‘We’re all waiting.’

She snapped the book closed with a bang and Margot’s hands fell away from her mouth and onto her lap.
‘Don’t think I didn’t see you. I saw you my girl. Poking out your tongue at a teacher.’

Margot looked backwards and sideways around the room. Everyone else was looking too, looking at her, staring with cruel happy faces.

‘There’s no point gazing around like little Miss Innocent.’

The room was spinning. She tried to remember where she was. What she was doing. She would never poke her tongue at a teacher but…she was thinking something. Something that was far away from sitting listening to a story on the mat.

Mrs Black stood up. And now she was walking. Coming closer and closer and the wardrobe and thieves in the night and somebody trying to steal her away came closer and closer too. That’s what she was thinking. Bad things. Things that would make your tongue poking angry.

Her heart groaned and she put her hands over her face and tried to hide her wicked tongue but Mrs Black knew she was still there and she grabbed her by her plait and pulled her up off the floor.

‘Out the front, thank you Miss. Out the front where we can all see you.’

She dragged Margot through the children and the mats and didn’t let go of her until she got to the blackboard.

‘I cannot say,’ she said, sighing through her nose and opening the drawer of her desk, ‘I cannot say how shocked I am. Shocked and let down. Let down by one rude girl.’

Margot shuddered as Mrs Black pulled the sleeves of her cardigan down. She knew what happened next. Bad girls got the ruler. Bad boys got the strap. Unless you were wicked. Wicked got the cane.

Margot had never seen a cane. She wasn’t even sure what one looked like but she’d heard about it and once she heard child screams coming all the way down the iron stairs of the out-of-bounds fire-escape.

She wished she could drop down dead because Mrs Black would know then, when her dead heart fell out of her body, she’d know that she was good. Good girls didn’t get the cane or the strap or the ruler. Good girls didn’t get hit with anything.

‘And. What do you have to say for yourself? Speak up.’

Margot looked at the floor and put her hands behind her back.
‘We can sit here all afternoon if you like.’

Margot squinted into the floor of children and they squinted back at her with hundreds of joined-together eyes.

Except Audrey. Audrey had her head down too. It was squashed inside her legs and her arms.

‘I didn’t know,’ said Margot in a voice smaller than Ping’s, ‘I didn’t know I was doing it.’

‘You didn’t know you were doing it.’

Margot shook her head.

‘And who did you think was doing it?’

‘No one.’

‘No one.’

‘I think I was dreaming.’

‘Dreaming.’

Mrs Black said what Margot said and made everything sound like a lie. She was trying, trying to tell the truth but the truth was making it worse.

‘Perhaps you could give the class a demonstration.’

Margot lifted her head up a bit. What did that mean?

‘Instead of the ruler, or worse…I’ve decided you can show the class your rude and unlady-like behaviour.’ Mrs Black clasped her hands together and looked out at the mats. ‘You were in the school play last year, as I remember, so I’m sure you’re used to an audience.’

Someone giggled and Mrs Black tapped her ruler on the desk.

‘You can show the boys and girls what you were doing while they were listening to the story. When you’re ready.’

Margot dropped her hands onto the pleats on her skirt and forced herself to keep standing up. She could feel Audrey’s eyes on her now and Shona’s and Sharon’s and the boys’ eyes all looking into her, the way they had in the shelter she when she had to show them her girl bottom. When she lay on the lunch table with Audrey beside her, lifting her skirt for her, as they came one by one to look. Audrey said she’d already done it and it didn’t take long. Just one look each and then it would be over. Then they would let her go. And they wouldn’t tell. None of them would ever tell she’d been in the boys’ shelter shed. She’d
been out-of-bounds and girls caught in there got the strap. Even if you didn’t
mean it. Even if you thought it was the girls’ shelter shed, you still got…

‘A proper demonstration,’ said Mrs Black, ‘poke it out properly.’

Margot felt her fingers pull her mouth across her face and her tongue, her
wicked, wicked tongue was out again. She pushed it out of her mouth as far as
it could go and then she choked on the sick in her throat.

‘Thank you. And now I’m sure you have something to say.’

Margot’s tongue felt so thick and dry only whispered words would come out.

‘I’m sorry…Mrs Black.’

Mrs Black looked at the whispered words and put her ruler away in her
drawer. ‘I should think so,’ she said in a quiet voice too then she turned back to
the good children with her normal voice on and said, ‘you can finish the rest of
the story in the corner, Miss. Now where were we? Somewhere here I think…”

Margot stared at the wall and listened to Ping being beaten with the Master’s
cane. She was glad then. Glad she was standing in the corner because the last
time she heard the story of Ping the D…”

Margot and Lewis stood in the kitchen and stared at the mess. The cupboard
doors were open and all the drawers too. Julie and Tommy were sitting in the
middle of all the pots and knives and forks and tea towels and paper bags and
cake tins, playing.

‘Where’s Mum?’ asked Margot, trying to think what had happened.

‘The bedroom,’ said Julie. ‘Daddy growled at her.’

Margot found Catherine sitting on her bed spinning her rings around and
around on her finger.

She dropped her school bag on the floor and looked at her. She was
supposed to meet them at the front gate when they came home from school so
what was she doing sitting there on the bed doing nothing?

‘Mum?’

Catherine didn’t answer. She didn’t even look up. She put her head in her
hands and sat very still like a statue.

‘I’m sorry, love,’ she said at last, ‘but I didn’t find your sugar castor.’

‘That’s alright. Is that why…”

Catherine looked up and Margot saw she’d been crying.
‘Are you sick, Mummy? What’s happened? Will I put the kettle on?’

Catherine shook her head. ‘I know Margot. I’m sorry. I know what happened…’

Margot stepped sideways away from Catherine and ran her tongue around her teeth. She knew. Catherine knew. How did she know? She’d come straight home from school. There wasn’t time to know what happened.

‘Don’t look like that, love, please. The sugar castor’s gone and I can’t change that.’

Margot’s tongue went flat inside her mouth. ‘The sugar castor?’

‘I’m sorry.’ Catherine looked down at her hands. Two of her fingernails were swollen with black blood. She curled them under her hand and said, ‘I jammed them…in a drawer.’ She wiped her face with her other hand and looked down at the bed.

‘It might come back,’ said Margot, ‘it might.’

Catherine’s curls shook on her shoulders.

‘Not this time. This time it’s…’

‘Magic. Remember Mum? That sugar castor is magic and you never know what magic things can do.’

‘No,’ said Catherine lifting her blood fingers up to her chin, ‘you never know…not really…you only think you do.’
Margot jumped up from behind the couch and looked for the noise. It was Tommy at the windowsill, hitting his hand on the glass.

‘Tom toms,’ said Lewis, ‘Tommy’s making tom toms.’

‘Tommy get down,’ said Margot, ‘you’re not allowed to hit the window.’

‘Bang,’ said Lewis. ‘You’re dead Margie.’

‘That doesn’t count. We’re not playing now.’

Tommy hit the window again.

‘Naughty baby,’ said Margot and Tommy hit the window with both his hands.

‘You’re dead,’ said Lewis.

‘Not me,’ said Julie. ‘Not me.’

‘I’m not playing,’ said Margot and she stomped over to the windowsill, lifted Tommy up under his arms and dragged him into the middle of the lounge room.

As she sat him down he looked up into her face and she thought he looked a bit like her doll, Wendy, only she had more hair.

He grabbed hold of her fingers and she looked around for something for him to play with. His eyes were watering and he was dribbling too. He had a small cut over the top of one eye where he hit himself in the head with a pot lid.

Margot tickled him under the chin. ‘Poor little beggar,’ she said softly.

He made a gurgling sound and tried to eat her fingers.

‘No more,’ said Margot, then she changed her mind and tickled him again.

‘Last one.’

Tommy gurgled a giggle and tapped her with his hand. He looked like he was going to say things. Like he was going to tell her something.

‘Come on Margie,’ said Lewis, ‘are you going to play?’

Margot jumped up off the floor and looked down at Tommy. ‘Here you are pet,’ she said, grabbing her newspaper dolls off the mantelpiece, ‘you can play with some of my cut-out dolls.’
Tommy took the paper dolls in his hand and put them in his mouth and Margot said, ‘don’t eat them,’ and then she helped Lewis and Julie line the cowboys and Indians up in front of the couch again.

Margot was sick of playing cowboys and Indians. She wanted to play Snakes and Ladders or Old Maid or Ludo but Catherine was busy doing the ironing and then she had to get the tea and she said Margot had to mind Tommy and keep him out from under her feet.

‘Do you want to be the Indians or the Cowboys, Margie?’ asked Lewis.

‘Cowboys.’ Margot liked the brown and white horses the cowboys rode the best and Lewis loved being the Indians. ‘Julie can be an Indian too.’

‘Thank you Margie,’ said Julie.

Tommy crawled over near the couch. ‘Don’t touch,’ said Margot, ‘don’t touch Tommy.’

He waved the cut-out doll at her and she said, ‘doll. Say doll.’

‘Dada. Dada.’

Catherine walked into the lounge room, carrying some ironing. ‘Nearly finished. I’ll just put this away. Tea won’t be long.’

Tommy crawled over to her and held the cut-out dolls out for her to see.

‘That was nice of Margot to give you those.’

Margot moved some of her cowboys over behind Jim’s chair ready to attack the Indians. ‘That’s alright, I can make them by myself now.’ Margot was being good. She was being as good as she could be because even though it hadn’t happened yet, Mrs Black might still give her a note to take home for Catherine. A note that told her all about the tongue poking.

‘It’s still nice,’ said Catherine as she carried the ironing into her bedroom.

‘We’re playing cowboys and Indians. Do you want to play Mum?’

‘Not just now love.’

Lewis ran his Indians around the leg of the couch. He whooped and yelled and aimed his bow and arrow at Catherine as she walked back into the lounge room and sat on the arm of Jim’s chair. ‘They’re loud aren’t they, the Indians?’

Margot raced a couple of cowboys over near her feet. ‘That’s because they haven’t got guns.’

Catherine laughed and flicked a cowboy over backwards with her foot.
‘Mum!’ said Margot, ‘you can’t do that.’ And she stood the cowboy up again and moved it closer to Catherine’s foot but she didn’t do it again. She was looking over to the window and frowning.

‘Shoo,’ said Lewis, ‘you’re dead. I just shot you with my arrow.’

‘I wasn’t ready. I was talking to Mum.’

‘Can you call a cease-fire for a minute please Lewis? I have to go and start tea.’

When Catherine left the room Lewis and Julie started charging their Indians around and Margot shot at them.

Tommy bounced up and down and squealed as the tiny plastic horses galloped around the lounge room floor.

‘Tommy! Tommy!’ cried Margot, ‘You can hit the chair and be the tom tom drum.’

Lewis and Julie ran around the back of the couch to where the tee pee was and Margot followed them.

‘Get out,’ Lewis shouted, ‘the cowboys aren’t allowed in here.’

The window banged again and Margot yelled out, ‘Stop it Tommy!’ but he didn’t stop and the window banged again and again.

Margot popped up from behind the couch. ‘Don’t hit…’ But Tommy was right in front of her, standing up, hitting the arm of the couch. Margot spun around to the noise. ‘Dad!’ She rushed out from behind the couch. ‘It’s not Tommy – it’s Daddy!’

Jim’s head was pressed up against the window. He waved and then he banged on the glass again.

Tommy squealed and dropped from the couch and crawled as fast as he could to the window.

Jim stopped banging. ‘Get out of it,’ he said, ‘get out of it.’

Tommy squealed, ‘Dada, Dada.’ Then he hit the window with both hands.

‘Dad’s home, Dad’s home,’ yelled Margot, dancing around herself. Lewis and Julie jumped onto the couch and joined in the yelling.

Jim was trying to wave to them but Tommy was in the way. ‘You little beggar,’ he said and he stopped waving and flung his arms at Tommy.
‘Look Dad! Look!’ Margot grabbed her cut-out dolls off the floor and waved them in the air. ‘I made some new cut-out dolls. See, see?’ She leapt around behind Tommy trying to show Jim the paper dolls.

‘Go to buggery!’ yelled Jim, banging on the glass with his fist, ‘go to bloody buggery!’

Margot stared at Jim. His face was red and his mouth was angry and if he had a tomahawk, he would have looked like a real wild Indian.

She dropped the cut-out dolls and pulled Tommy by the straps of his overalls but he held onto the window sill and she couldn’t move him.

Catherine ran into the room. She looked around as though she didn’t know where she was and then she stood very still and called out, ‘Jim!’ so fiercely, Margot felt the word tear through her body before it went through the window.

Lewis and Julie dived off the couch and raced around to the tee pee. Catherine made a noise in her throat and ran out the door. And then she was running in again following Jim, pulling the back of his jacket, saying, ‘don’t, don’t.’

Jim was growling like an angry dog, saying words Margot didn’t understand and he pushed Catherine into the fireplace and then his hand flew through the air and hit Tommy in the head.

He missed when he tried to hit him again and Margot was in between Catherine and Tommy, frozen, until Jim punched the window pane and hundreds of pieces of glass crashed into the room.

Margot threw herself over the top of her baby brother and screamed, ‘he didn’t mean it! He didn’t! He didn’t!’

Lewis and Julie were screaming too and Catherine was on the floor. On her hands and knees. Looking like she’d forgotten how to walk.

Tommy struggled underneath Margot’s body and cried, ‘Dada. Dada,’ softly now and Margot held him tight against her chest and felt a sharp pain cutting into her knee.

As she held her breath against the pain, she saw the broken window and Jim holding onto the windowsill. He was half falling down and half standing up and their heads were very close together. The same eyes. That’s what everyone said they had. But Jim’s eyes were not the same. They were flat and wild, like the eyes of the wicked Banksia Men. And as the pain in her knee got sorer and
Tommy’s cries got softer, Margot thought she saw a bit of Banksia Man, creeping and cruelling inside her father’s eyes.
Mrs Wallace the headmistress stood in the doorway of Margot’s classroom talking to Mrs Black. Their heads were very close together and Mrs Black was nodding and frowning. When Mrs Wallace left, Mrs Black told Margot to pack up her things. She told her that her mother was there, in the corridor, and that she was going home, now, in the middle of the day.

Margot’s heart started to beat all over her body then. Her mother had never come to get her from school, before school finished. Something had happened. There must be a surprise, a surprise party even. But you only had a surprise party if it was somebody’s birthday and Margot couldn’t think of a birthday today. Maybe it was the opposite of a surprise. Maybe Catherine had heard about her tongue poking out and she was going to send Margot to a school for bad girls.

‘Take your satchel over to your desk Margot and pack up all your things,’ said Mrs Black. ‘All your pencils and books. There’s a good girl.’

When Margot had put all her things in her bag Mrs Black walked over and opened the door for her. ‘There’s a good girl,’ she said again and Margot looked up into her face and thought that Mrs Black might be a nice lady after all.

‘I have to talk to the two of you,’ said Catherine to Margot and Lewis as she marched down the school corridor, like she was Mrs Coates.

‘What Mum? What’s happened?’

‘We’ll wait till we’re out of the school yard. It’s alright. It’s nothing terrible.’

They walked across the quadrangle and past the shelter sheds. Nothing terrible. That was good because the packing up and the marching around and Lewis coming too made Margot think that maybe it was, maybe it was something really terrible.

‘In lots of ways,’ said Catherine reaching out and touching the end of the monkey bars as they went past the playground, ‘you could say it’s something a bit exciting.’
‘Ooh, ‘said Margot, ‘let’s run then,’ and she ran around Catherine and Lewis and fell over on her sore leg, just before she got to the school gate.

Catherine said she would tell them the news while they had afternoon tea. They walked down High Street and bought a Boston bun at Mrs Rayson’s.

Mrs Rayson said, ‘no school this afternoon?’ and she gave Margot and Lewis a snake. Then she looked down at Margot’s leg and said, ‘in the wars again.’

When they got home Catherine put the kettle on and cut three pieces of Boston bun. The kitchen seemed bright and sunny. Catherine looked bright and sunny too.

‘Now,’ she said sitting down at the table, ‘here we are, afternoon tea.’

Margot and Lewis bit into their, sticky pieces of bun.

‘Where’s Julie?’ asked Lewis.

‘She’s still at kinder and Tommy’s with Mrs Coates.’ The kettle started to scream and Catherine jumped up to make the tea. ‘That’s where they go every Friday while I’m at work.’

Margot licked her fingers and looked at Tommy’s empty chair. If today was Friday why wasn’t her mother at work? Why wasn’t she wearing her black dress? Why did she take them away from school to have afternoon tea? ‘But not today, Mum. You didn’t have to go today?’

‘No. Not today.’ Catherine sat down again and picked some icing off the Boston bun. ‘That’s what I want to talk to you about. Tomorrow…tomorrow,’ she laughed then and said, ‘I might as well just say it. Tomorrow we’re moving to a new house.’

The kitchen was full of noise then. Lots of exciting noise. A new house was exciting. It was very exciting. Especially a house with a garden and lots of rooms and a pond.

Margot picked up her last piece of bun and licked off the icing. She wasn’t expecting that. That was the last thing she expected Catherine to tell them. She tried to think of something else to ask about moving but she couldn’t remember moving before and it was hard to think of questions.

She looked at Catherine to help her but Catherine was fiddling with her wedding ring. She was always doing that, turning the little circle of gold around and around on her finger.
‘We’re all going to start again,’ she said as she pulled her teacup close to the edge of the table and breathed into it, ‘except for your father. He’s not coming with us.’

The piece of bun inside Margot’s mouth turned into a thick hard lump. ‘Not coming? Why isn’t he? Is Tommy coming?’

‘Now I don’t want any carrying on. Of course Tommy’s coming. That’s one of the reasons…’ Catherine’s voice ran out and Margot noticed she wasn’t wearing her engagement ring. She always wore her engagement ring except when Margot had the stitches in her leg. That night she took the ring off her finger and said Margot could wear it instead.

‘I’m sorry, love. I didn’t mean to jump down your throat but please listen to what I’m saying. Your father’s gone to Ballarat for Ted Barton’s wedding and we’re going…while he’s away.’

‘Where?’ asked Margot. ‘Where’s he gone?’

‘A long way away, love.’ Catherine twirled her wedding ring again. ‘He went last night. Last night when you were asleep.’

Margot touched the scar on her knee. It had healed into a sort of star shape but it still hurt when she touched it and sometimes she rubbed it really hard because the stinging made her feel good.

She had to have seven stiches and while the doctor sewed her up Catherine kept saying how brave she was. She said Tommy could be dead if it wasn’t for Margot. The doctor said he was lucky, a very lucky baby and such a good boy too.

Catherine told the doctor he was always good. She said the window was an accident. And Margot said that’s why it wasn’t fair to hit Tommy and Catherine said Margot didn’t know what she was saying.

The doctor shone a light into Tommy’s eyes and felt his head. Tommy didn’t make a sound, not once. He was very brave for a baby.

Catherine wasn’t brave. She burst into tears every time the needle put a stitch in Margot’s leg but she let Margot wear her sparkling engagement ring and that made the bleeding pain feel better.

Margot wore the ring the whole time they were at the hospital. She felt bad about that now. She should have let Catherine have a turn but nothing had happened to her. Margot was the one with a gash in her leg. That was
Catherine’s word. Gash. That was the last word she screamed at Jim as she rushed out the door with Lewis and Julie and Margot and blood and Tommy in the pusher sleeping with his eyes open.

‘It’s a secret,’ said Margot. ‘Isn’t it Mum?’

‘Yes…I don’t want you to say anything to Julie. Tommy’s still a baby so he won’t know anyway.’

‘Is it very far?’ asked Lewis.

‘Not too far. We’re going to go in a taxi.’

‘Ooh,’ said Margot, ‘I’ve never been in a taxi.’

Margot sat hunched over the steering wheel, staring across at the railway line. She used to be a train driver in her pedal car and sometimes a racing car driver too. But not now. Now her pedal car made a loud siren noise and rushed people to the hospital.

The ambulance is here. The ambulance is here. Speeding up the path. What happened? A window fell on a baby. That’s alright. The doctor will fix him up. Have you got an engagement ring? Good. Put that on his finger while I get the sewing out. We’ll have to sew him up. Just like a doll. Don’t worry. You can sew up people too. If they come apart. Hold still. It might hurt a bit. You have to be brave. When it’s finished I might take you for another ride in my ambulance. You can’t walk home with sewing in your leg. Ha ha ha. That’d be funny. Let’s go.

Margot stood up, and turned her pedal car around. She looked down at her nurse’s uniform. What would all the sick people do now she had to leave her ambulance behind?

She drove her pedal car slowly along the side of the house and tried not to think about that. She tried not to think this was the last ride. The last one for a long time. Until things got better. Until they came back. She looked up past the clothesline and down to the back fence. She wished Terry would pop his head up or shout or poke out his tongue. He went away. And now they were going away too. She sighed and turned her pedal car around again. ‘Let’s go,’ she said. But nothing happened. She thought she might drive back to the gate but her knee was sore and a bit stiff too, so she sighed again and drove her pedal car into the shed.
‘It’s alright. Mum says we’ll be back to get you soon. I’m not allowed to take my other toys either, only Wendy, now I’ve found her again.’

Margot closed the door to the shed. The sky was bright outside and the sinking sun stung her eyes. She looked up into the fluffy clouds and saw a girl up there, a girl with sun in her hair, racing past.
Fourteen

When Margot heard the car horn tooting, she raced across to the front window, pulled the cord on the stiff, brown blind and watched it escape to the top. She stared out at the window and there it was, outside her house – a taxi.

‘Mum! Mum! It’s here!’

Then she saw Catherine. She was already standing beside the taxi and the tall taxi driver was standing beside Catherine, staring into her face as though he was waiting for her to tell him something important.

Catherine helped the taxi driver put the cardboard boxes into the boot. There weren’t many. They weren’t going for long – just until Jim got better, until he got another job.

There was only one suitcase. It was very old and looked important and the taxi driver put it on the floor in the back seat. Then he put Lewis in the front seat and let him toot the horn. Lewis laughed at that and the taxi driver laughed too.

‘That’s not fair,’ Margot mumbled looking across at the railway line. A train was crawling past and she thought about Jim crawling around on the lounge room floor, carrying her on his back while she called out, ‘giddy-up, giddy-up Dad.’

‘Alright, Margot, you can stop staring into space and hold Tommy whilst Mrs Coates and I check the house,’ said Catherine.

What do you mean check the house? Margot was going to say, but she took her plastic-smelling brother instead and balanced him on her hip.

The taxi driver told Lewis it was time to finish playing with the horn and get in the back with Julie. Julie was standing in between the two front seats looking straight ahead, as though she knew where they were going.

‘Hurry up Lewis,’ said Margot.

The taxi driver smiled at her. ‘You’re a good girl, helping your Mum with this lot.’
Margot shrugged her shoulder and sighed, ‘they’re a handful,’ she said and the taxi driver laughed again.

Mrs Coates came back and snatched Tommy from Margot and waved her into the back of the car.

‘Where’s Tommy going to sit?’ asked Margot throwing an I’m-in-charge look at the taxi driver but he was listening to Mrs Coates and he didn’t look back.

‘In the front with your mother, pet,’ said Mrs Coates, her eyes blinking in time to her voice, ‘she’ll be back a minute.’ Then she said something to the taxi driver that ended with ‘…and the kiddies too, you’ve never seen kiddies so thin.’

The new house had a verandah and a big pointing roof and lots of shutters on the windows. There was a driveway made of stones and flowers along the grass and a letterbox shaped like a house as well.

Catherine pushed open the gate and the taxi driver helped her take the boxes along the driveway to the front door.

When he’d gone they stood looking out at the street, as if he was going to come back.

‘It’s nice. Isn’t it Mum?’

Catherine put her hand on Margot’s shoulder. ‘Very nice and the garden too.’ She patted Margot’s shoulder a couple of times and then she dropped her hand.

‘Do you want to go in now Mum or stay outside?’

‘Whose house is this?’ asked Lewis.

‘It’s ours, stupid.’

‘Please.’ Catherine gave Tommy to Margot and bent down and picked up the suitcase. It was quiet then. Quiet like the middle of the night.

‘Look Mum,’ said Margot pointing at a tiny clump of bright blue flowers, ‘they’re those forget-me flowers, you love.’

‘Yes,’ said Catherine, ‘time to go in,’ and she turned away from the flowers and walked towards the grey front door.

‘Everything will be different now, won’t it Mum?’ said Margot but Catherine didn’t answer. She was inside her handbag, searching for the key.
Margot sat on her new bed and sniffed. The room smelt funny. The whole house smelt funny, different to how their other house smelt. She knelt up and looked out the window, her new window. It looked out over dark bushes and leaves and a tall grey fence and looking at this new world she thought about the rooms in the house. A lounge room, a bathroom, two more bedrooms, a room with a box. She wasn’t expecting a box. Not one big enough to put a person in. There was a dog on the side of it, listening to a record player. She wondered if they were inside it, the dog and the record player, but the box looked too quiet for that. It looked just like the room she found it in, big and empty.

Catherine came in carrying sheets and blankets and said, ‘down you get, love, while I make up the beds.’

Margot watched her mother. She watched the straightening out, the tucking in, the pulling and folding and smoothing and when all that was finished Catherine threw her the pillow to bash into shape.

‘You’re quiet,’ said Catherine, when Margot caught the pillow. ‘Why don’t you put your things away in the drawers? Make things look a bit homely.’

When Catherine left the room, Margot knelt on the floor and searched through her things. Her clothes, Wendy, her blue plastic sandals, her seven badge and her new book—*Snugglepot and Cuddlepie*.

Catherine bought her the book at Coles. It was a present for saving Tommy and so was the straw basket with the yellow flowers on the front. Two presents. She wasn’t expecting that. She’d walked home with the basket dangling from her wrist, feeling like a grownup lady. She pretended she was carrying a real handbag then and wearing high-heels too. And when Catherine asked why she was walking on tiptoe, Margot told her: ‘so I can be like you.’

Margot put her hand on the book and ran a finger around the pictures of the Gumnuts and the Bush Babies. Mr Lizard was on the cover too and Ragged Blossom and Mrs Butterfish. There were no pictures of the Banksia Men. They were inside. Hiding. Waiting to snatch you away and kill you until you were dead.
Mrs Black read them that book, and sometimes, when the Banksia Men were making the whole grade scream or put their eyes into their hands, she turned the book away so they couldn’t see the terrible, killing pictures.

Margot slid *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* across the floor with her foot. She counted four drawers on the dressing table and looked at herself in the speckly, oval mirror. Her eyes were frowning and her face was frowning too. She thought about trying to smile or trying to pull some other sort of face but she wasn’t allowed to look in mirrors. It wasn’t natural. That’s what Catherine said. It wasn’t natural to stand around looking at yourself. But Catherine looked at herself. She looked and looked when she was putting her lipstick on. When she was waiting and waiting for Daddy to come home.

Margot opened the bottom drawer. There was a piece of newspaper folded up inside it, folded exactly to fit inside the drawer. There was a word, bigger than all the other words, written in the corner. She lifted the book up off the floor, put it down on top of the word *Herald*, and closed the drawer.

Her eyes started to sting and she pulled her doll Wendy out of her tangle of clothes and shook her, to make her open eyes close shut. ‘Don’t look,’ she said. ‘The Banksia Men are gone now. All gone away.’ She held her doll in her lap and ran her fingers across Wendy’s hard, pink lips. She was gone away too. They were all gone away now. All except… It was only for a little while. That’s what Catherine said. Until things got better. But how long would that be? How long… Her star scar started to itch and she rubbed it and then scratched it until tiny, bright bubbles poked through her skin and she thought about blood, instead.
Sixteen

The Weetbix had turned into mush. Margot stirred them around and around turning herself into mush too.

Catherine said it was normal to be nervous on your first day at a new school and Lewis laughed chewed Vegemite toast crumbs all over the kitchen table and said he wasn’t nervous because Mummy was coming to school too.

Margot rolled her eyes up into her head when she heard that. As if that made a difference – that was only one day. What about the days after that?

In her mother’s bedroom, Margot stood in front of the wardrobe mirror and hugged her pinafore against her chest.

‘It’s alright,’ she whispered, ‘you’re not going to be a baby forever.’

She looked down at her toes and shook her head. That wasn’t what she meant to say. That was a different talk altogether. That was what her mother said when she asked her why Tommy slept in a room with Julie now, not in Catherine’s room anymore.

Margot pulled the pinafore over her head and looked at herself in the mirror.

‘You’re the new girl. Everyone will want to be your friend.’

That was what she meant to say. That was what you said before you went to a new school and had all the others stare at you.

The front door to the new school was so heavy Catherine had to ask Margot and Lewis to help her push it open. Inside, they walked down the long, silent corridor and searched for Margot’s new teacher.

Catherine whispered all the names on the doors as they went past. ‘Mrs Barbara Hunter. Miss Adele Cook. Mr John Keston. Miss Joyce… Stiller. That’s it. We’ve found her.’ She ran her hand through Lewis’ hair then spat on the end of her ring finger and rubbed the corner of his mouth. ‘Remember what I told you. Don’t speak until you’re spoken to and then remember to speak up.’
‘In you come. Come in,’ said the lady in a very straight skirt. ‘We’re all expecting you. You’re Mrs Lovelock and the new girl.’

A floor full of cross-legged children watched them creep into the class room.

‘I’m Miss Stiller. Of course you already know that.’

Catherine nodded and looked up at the drawings on the blackboard and Margot did too. ‘This is Margot and her brother Lewis. Lewis is going to be…’

‘In Mr Peacock’s prep. Yes.’

The children nodded and Catherine nodded again too and Miss Stiller looked like she was going to nod but instead she turned to Margot and said, ‘For those who didn’t hear that, could you please tell grade two your name, again.’

Catherine eyebrows waved at Margot and then she pulled another face to try and pretend she wasn’t doing that. Margot looked at the space on the floor between her new teacher and the class on the mats. ‘Margot,’ she said in a small voice, ‘my name is…’

‘Margot. That’s an odd one.’

Catherine fiddled with the strap on her handbag.

‘Of course we’ll to do our best to remember it, now Miss…’ Miss Stiller, turned away from Margot and spoke to the class, ‘in grade two, we don’t stand with our hands knotted up like that do we? No, no we don’t. In my grade two we stand with our hands…who would like to show me?’

Miss Stiller moved her chin from side to side waiting for it to find someone to show her.

‘Leandra,’ she said, ‘could you please show our new girl, and anyone else who has forgotten, the proper way, we stand, at Small Hills Primary.’

Leandra had big blinking eyes like a cat and pale silky plaits on her shoulders. When she walked through the children on the mats, she seemed to get taller and taller. When she stopped walking, she was almost the same size as Miss Stiller.

Miss Stiller picked up a piece of new white chalk, held onto it with two hands, and smiled at Leandra to begin.

Margot watched as the girl’s arms lifted slowly up over her head and then drifted to her sides, like a ballerina.

‘Thank you Leandra,’ said Miss Stiller in a voice like dancing arms.
While Leandra twirled back to her mat, Margot pressed her arms onto the sides of her itching pinafore. She could feel Catherine and Lewis standing beside her, their arms like hers and Miss Stiller’s – everyone standing the same way.

She tried not to think about the itching. She tried to stand still. She wanted to look down at her star scar and see if it was itchy too.

‘The rules.’ That’s what Miss Stiller said next and Margot’s fingers squeezed the side of her pinafore.

The rules were: Margot could sit next to Leandra but Gillian would be in charge of her at playtime. There were other rules too but Margot didn’t hear them. She was looking at Gillian. Gillian sat in the front row with her hand in the air. Her arm was straight and stiff and her wrist and hand were bent backwards as though she was giving something to the ceiling. She wondered if Gillian would be the one. The one she’d be best friends with. She knew it wouldn’t be Leandra. Leandra was the kind of girl who could choose anyone.

‘February. It’s in February. Margot, Miss Stiller asked you a question.’

Margot squinted at Catherine.

‘It doesn’t matter this time,’ said Miss Stiller holding the top of her cardigan together with two fingers, ‘but even if you’re not listening it’s not polite to pull faces.’

Margot was going to say she was listening but when she looked at Catherine’s white face and her teacher’s white fingers and Lewis standing stiller than he ever had for What’s The Time Mr Woolf, she couldn’t get her mouth to work. Her head felt heavy and swollen up and she hoped it hadn’t turned orange, like Wendy’s had, when she was feeling sick from too much sun. She wanted to stop standing. To sit down. On a mat. Like the others. Even sitting with your hands on your head would be better than standing out the front like a statue forever and ever. And then her tongue was trying to get out of her mouth. It could taste something. Something wet and thick and pouring. Leandra put her hand up then and while it was still in the air, she told Miss Stiller that Margot’s nose was bleeding all over her dress.
Margot stood in her underwear and waited for Catherine to finish ironing her skirt. ‘How long now Mum?’ she asked. ‘How long now?’

‘How long is a piece of string,’ said Catherine.

Margot danced around the ironing board, she loved ‘how long is a piece of string’. ‘Mum…how long have we been here?’

Catherine lifted up the iron and it made a hot, hissing noise. ‘Not long. About a two weeks or so.’

‘It feels like a long time. Doesn’t it?’

‘Hmmm.’ Catherine pressed the iron down hard on the pleats. ‘I suppose so.’

Margot looked at the steam coming off her skirt. She wanted to ask other questions too but she wasn’t sure what they were and Catherine got cross if you asked and asked. Not knowing things was for your own good. Margot knew that. Everyone knew that.

‘Get a wriggle on or you’ll be late. Maybe you’ve taken a dawdling pill this morning?’

‘Mummm.’

‘Or a giggling Gertie pill.’

Margot pulled at a sock that had slipped down into her shoe and giggled for her mother. She liked being a giggling Gertie because Catherine was a giggling Gertie too once. Once when she was little.

Margot sat on the floor to fix her sock. The sock made her think about Leandra, sitting on her mat, holding her long, long arm in the air. There was no giggling then. Not at school. At school you were allowed to smile or look serious. You used the same face as the teacher.

It seemed a long time away since the first day, when she told Catherine she couldn’t remember where the door was or where the gate was or how to find the way home and Catherine said she was confused too but after a while it was easy to remember where you were and it was where you’d been that you forgot.

Margot wriggled across to the wardrobe mirror and pressed her face up against the glass. She could see Catherine in the mirror, rubbing her hand over the top of her eyes. It was strange to see herself and her mother in the mirror at the same time. Rubbing her eyes. The same eyes. That’s what popped into her head then and Jim – tapping the side of his head with his fingers. Tap. Tap.
Tap. ‘Same eyes, Tiger. You and me.’ She felt happy thinking that. Warm and happy. Inside and out. It was the same feeling you would have if you’d been rescued from the ice and snow and put in front of a bright, burning fire with your hands snuggled into a fluffy, red muff.

‘This house business,’ she said happily, ‘it’s all Dad’s fault, isn’t it Mum?’

Catherine stopped rubbing her eyes and unplugged the iron. ‘Fault,’ she said with a tiny click of her tongue, ‘I’m afraid it’s a lot more complicated than that love.’ She folded the iron cord up and looked out the window. ‘I’ll tell you. One day I’ll tell you the whole sorry story.’

Margot swivelled around to face Catherine. A sorry story? What was a sorry story? ‘Why can’t you tell me now?’

‘You’re going to school now.’ Catherine put the iron on the mantelpiece.
‘When I get home? When I get home you can tell me.’
‘We’ll see.’ Catherine walked towards the door.
‘Does anyone else know?’
‘Anyone else?’
‘Stig. Does Stig know?’

‘No. And his name is Steven,’ said Catherine without turning around, without changing her voice but Margot knew she was pretending because while she was talking her shoulders went hard.
The first time Margot saw Steven his name was Stig. He was in the kitchen playing *clap hands, clap hands* with Julie. The kitchen was full of noise – singing and clapping and Julie giggling.

‘Hello,’ he said, when he saw Margot and Lewis standing in the doorway, ‘you must be Margot and Lewis.’

‘This is…a friend,’ said Catherine, bouncing Tommy on her knee. ‘His name is Stig.’

‘Stick!’ Lewis yelled the word out and jumped around on the kitchen floor as though the lino was boiling hot. ‘Stick!’

‘Steven,’ said the man. ‘It’s better. Easier.’

‘Steven!’ Lewis kept jumping and yelled that name out too.

Margot looked at her mother. That wasn’t right. How could a man’s name be Steven? Men were always called mister someone.

‘Goodness me,’ said Catherine, ‘did you two leave your manners at the park? Just say hello please.’

‘Hello Mr Steven,’ said Margot shyly.

‘Hello Mr Stick,’ laughed Lewis.

‘Any more of that and you can go back outside and come in again.’

‘Caty,’ said Steven. ‘I hadn’t thought of Mr Stick – that’s funny.’

Catherine rubbed the side of her arm and pulled a funny face.

‘Caty,’ he said again and Catherine’s face got funnier.

Margot chewed on the end of her plait and looked at the man. Who was he this man who was calling her mother Caty? And what was he doing sitting in the kitchen playing games with Julie?

The man took some cigarettes out of his pocket and Catherine stood up and gave him the matches from the stove. Margot watched the smoke sail past Julie’s face and disappear out the back door.

‘Now you’ve said hello, you can take a biscuit and go out and play.’
Margot was going to say she didn’t want to go out and play. They’d already been playing, in the park down the street for ages and ages but then she saw the plate of Tic Toc biscuits and changed her mind.

Lewis grabbed a yellow one and asked if he could have two. The man said he could have three but he changed his mind back to two when he looked at Catherine’s face.

‘I had two. Yellow ones,’ said Julie.

‘We won’t eat our tea, will we Mum, if we have too many?’ Margot was certain about that but Catherine and the man laughed. They laughed together and looked at each other together too.

‘Did you have a nice time at the park?’ asked Catherine putting Tommy down into his chair with a biscuit too.

‘I went on the whirligig,’ said Lewis, ‘and on the swing.’

‘The park is beautiful in Autumn,’ said the man.

Margot looked to see what her mother thought about that but instead of saying anything she rubbed her hand down the side of her arm as though she was patting herself.

‘Me play too,’ said Julie.

‘I suppose so. But don’t you go anywhere near that pond. Margot will look after you.’ Catherine leant towards the man and said, ‘it was terrible. She fell in the day after we arrived and…’

‘She was the troll,’ said Lewis squeezing his biscuit covered teeth together to make a troll face. ‘I wasn’t scared. I went over the bridge three times.’

‘Three times. That was brave,’ said the man.

Margot pushed her Tic Toc into her mouth. That wasn’t brave. Not brave like dragging Julie choking and spitting out of the muddy water. She looked at her sister sitting on the man’s knee, at her yellow pony-tail bouncing around her head and her nose crinkling up at Lewis’s troll mouth and wished she hadn’t saved her. She wished she’d left her there, at the bottom of the sea, to be stoned and boned by those bad, bad Banksia Men.

‘Did you like Stig…Steven?’ asked Catherine as she tucked Margot into bed.
‘Yes.’ Margot looked into Catherine’s face to see if that was the right answer. ‘Where did he come from?’

‘Come from? Catherine straightened up and called out to Lewis to hurry up cleaning his teeth. ‘I met him…’ She walked over to the dressing table and ran her hand across the top of it. ‘At work.’

‘In the city? In the hotel?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what did he say?’

‘When?’

‘When you saw him?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t really remember.’

‘And now he’s your friend?’

‘Yes.’ Catherine was talking to the dressing table and frowning.

‘It’s nice to have friends, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. It is nice.’

‘I had some. Didn’t I? At my old school?’

‘Hmmm. You’ve made new friends now though.’

‘Sort of. Only Gillian but I don’t tell her anything. Nothing about us. That’s a secret isn’t it?’

Catherine walked back to Margot and danced her fingers through Margot’s fringe. ‘He means well. And he’s kind.’

‘Who?’

‘It doesn’t mean I don’t love your father Margot. I did. I do. More than I should have, I suppose.’

‘More?’ Margot felt her mother’s hand brush past her chin.

‘Anyway.’ She held her hands together, against her mouth. ‘There’s something I have to tell you. Something I think you’re old enough to hear.’

Margot wriggled up on her pillow. ‘Is it the sorry story?’

Catherine swallowed her lips. She looked like she was going to change her mind. ‘Cross my heart and hope to die.’

Catherine’s lips came back. ‘This house, it’s Stig’s, I mean Steven’s.’

‘Why is he called sometimes Stig and sometimes Steven?’

‘Stig is the name he had before he came here.’

‘From the hotel?’
Catherine frowned again. ‘The point is…’ she sighed and started again. ‘The point is, he’s been very good to me. To us. Letting us live here.’

Margot nodded. That wasn’t much of a secret. It was funny how secrets didn’t feel very secret when you knew what the secret was. ‘When you were little, Mum, where did you live?’

‘A long way from here.’ Catherine coughed a laugh.

‘What’s funny, Mum?’

‘Nothing,’ said Catherine. ‘I don’t know. It’s either funny or it’s sad.’

That was a strange thing to say. Funny and sad were nothing like each other. They were… Margot tried to remember the word. There was a special word for that. When two things were nothing like each other. Opposite. That was it. Something that wasn’t like the other thing was called the opposite. ‘I didn’t know you could choose, Mum.’

‘I’m just being silly,’ said Catherine kissing Margot on the head. ‘Time for sleep. School tomorrow.’

Margot watched Catherine walk out of the bedroom. She didn’t turn around and say ‘night, night’ and that was funny. School tomorrow. Margot wished Catherine hadn’t said that. That wasn’t what she wanted to think about. She tried to think about Stig instead and his house. This house. She didn’t know you could have a house this big if you were one person. She thought about Jim then and their real house. He was one person. All by himself. Wondering…wondering… Margot put her arms around Wendy and Wendy said it was alright because her Daddy had gone to Ted Barton’s wedding and really it was the house who was all by itself. That was alright. That was a good thing to think. But then…what about…if this was Stig’s house, where was he going to live?
Eighteen

Before Catherine left for work she gave Margot a necklace-making set. It was a present for being brave. Margot loved being brave. She loved jumping from tall prison towers onto the backs of wild, galloping horses. She loved swimming after drowning ducks, rescuing lost babies from secret trapdoors and blowing torn and fallen dandelions up into the air.

Margot Lovelock knew how to be brave, but alone this morning, waiting for the clock to tell her it was time to walk to school, she felt sad-hearted and far, far away from bravery.

Tiger brave. That was what she was supposed to be. That was what she promised Catherine she would be when she waved goodbye and said she couldn’t wait to start the necklace. But now there was something frightening about sitting by yourself in the kitchen cold, waiting for the time to leave, wondering if everyone knew that her heart was much, much, tinier than a tiger’s.

She had walked to school by herself once before. She went the way she always did: past the milkbar, past the ballerina fence and along the footpath next to the boys’ school.

When she stopped to watch the pushing and punching, Miss Stiller drove up in her blue beetle car, and told her to pick up her feet. She said dawdlers always got into trouble and that was what they deserved.

Margot ran into her school as fast as she could. Two cents jumped out of her pocket as she went. She chased after it. Catherine had given it to her for walking to school by herself. She was supposed to tie it inside her handkerchief, to keep it safe, but she liked to be able to feel it, to turn it over and over and imagine what she would buy.

Black Cats, aniseed squares and liquorice straps were her favourites now. Black lollies lasted the longest and they were the cheapest too. For one cent you got four or six lollies but Clinkers or Cobbers cost one cent for only two.

Lewis’ favourite was Black Cat chewing gum but chewing gum was dangerous. If you chewed gum you looked like nobody owned you. Catherine
could tell if someone had chewing gum in their mouth from miles and miles away.

Margot stamped on the two cent coin and stopped it from running away. As she bobbed down to pick it up she saw a dirty, stood-on, piece of chewing gum stuck to the ground next to her coin.

It wasn’t Black Cat. It was old and hard and had probably been pink. Lewis wouldn’t care about that. He didn’t care what sort of chewy it was. If he found some on the ground, or stuck to the wall or a seat in the shelter shed, he pulled it up or scraped it off with a stick and shoved it into his mouth.

The clock dinged eight. Margot looked down at the box of beads. Lewis wasn’t allowed to go to school. He had scarlet fever.

A nurse had to come every day and give him a needle and when she left the whole house smelt the same as a hospital.

Now he was getting better he went with Julie and Tommy to stay with the lady who had a big rocking horse and minded children.

The lady told Catherine she should give them Hypole, which was supposed to stop you getting sick but it smelt like fish and every time Margot saw the giant, grey, spoonful coming towards her mouth she felt as sick as someone who was already dead.

The unopened bead box started to make her eyes hurt. She wished she was at the rocking horse house or waiting with Lewis, like she used to.

She wished they were running down the street to the park, jumping on the swing or the whirligig, screaming up into the air, pretending they were allowed to do whatever they wanted.

Margot opened the necklace making set and stared at the rows of tiny coloured beads. The clock ticked loudly. It always made more noise when there was no one else to listen to it. It went tick, tick, tick instead of tick tock and that made the time from eight o’clock to half past eight take hours and hours.

When he came on Saturdays Steven wound up the clock. He turned the key around and around while Margot watched. The clock and the key were very old. Steven liked old things. He told Margot he was born with the Vikings and everything the Vikings had was old.
Margot watched him put the key away into a cup in the cupboard next to the clock. She wondered why anyone would like old things better than new things. She remembered him talking about old trees when they went for a picnic in the park. He knew what all their names were. He showed her an acorn tree and an enormous tree with green berries all over it and when you squeezed them in your fingers the smell of pepper came out.

Margot lifted a green piece of plastic thread out of the necklace box and spread it along the kitchen table and wondered what colour beads Catherine would like.

She sorted through some red and orange ones but blue was Catherine’s favourite colour now.

There were lots of different blues. She lined them up on the table. Light blues, dark blues, purpley blues and some bluey green ones.

She picked up a light blue bead and pushed it along the green thread and stopped and looked at it. Blue and green should never be seen so how could she put blue beads on a green necklace?

She searched in the box for a different coloured thread. The long green ribbon dress danced before her eyes and she started to feel all by herself again.

She blinked down at the tiny blue bead and thought about the ice. She could see herself standing next to Jim turning the baby metal hand that opened the door where the ice blocks were sold.

She saw them standing together, waiting, wordlessly, until the heavy watery clump crashed down the chute and fell into their open hessian sack.

She picked up the light blue bead and turned it over and over in her hand. Her throat felt hot. She looked at the clock again.

The big hand was just past the twelve and the little hand was still on the eight.

She tried to thread the bead onto the string but her fingers weren’t working properly.

She started to feel like she did last week when she was sitting at the kitchen table after everyone had gone, when she felt like she had been left behind forever and ever.
She cried so much she felt sick and when half past eight came she didn’t go to school. She had a temperature. She was hot and sticky and that was what a temperature was.

She was still sitting at the kitchen table when Catherine came home from work. She was trying to finish her drawing but you couldn’t do a drawing if you were sick.

Margot promised she wouldn’t get sick today. Today she would make a necklace and then she would go to school.

A noise made her jump and she turned towards the back door. Perhaps her mother had changed her mind, had come back for her, was going to run in and tell her it was April Fools day.

‘It’s going to be a beautiful day.’ That’s what Catherine said before she left. She reached out and pinched Margot’s nose off her face and held it up for everyone to see.

‘Got your nose,’ she said and everyone laughed.

Margot stood up and listened but the noise had gone away. ‘Come back. Come back.’

That was what she said when she was sure no one could hear. It was what she thought when Catherine told her she was going to work in a drycleaners. It was what she wanted so that everything could be like it was before everything changed.

The beads on the table didn’t look anything like they did when she first saw them in the window at Coles.

There, they looked beautiful and princess-like. Margot imagined making necklaces and bracelets and maybe even an engagement ring but away from Coles the beads just looked like beads.

She picked up the empty string and thought about her mother’s diamond earrings. She hadn’t seen anything like them in Coles, or in any windows on the way to Coles.

At the clothesline, at the very back of the garden, when no one was watching, she promised she would get those earrings back.

When the clothesline pole was hidden behind wet and heavy washing, she stole inside and told it all her secrets and afterwards the pole would hug her and tell her she was brave.
She looked at the clock again. The big hand had moved. Time to make a necklace was running out.

There was so much to do now she was a big girl, now she had to help with everything, time was always running out.

Cleaning up the kitchen, bringing in the washing, getting the tea ready, putting the ironing away and Tommy too. He had to be walked and put into the bath and played with. Margot shuddered. She thought about the *Little Red Hen* and how no one helped her to make the bread. They always had excuses, those other animals, just like Lewis, who took all night to bring in the kindling or screw up the newspaper ready to burn in the fireplace.

She put three red beads onto the thread and held it against her chest. Red Indian Red. The beads were a bit like that colour.

Mrs Wilson from the dairy next door wore red lipstick too. She told Catherine she felt guilty about that, now her husband was dead.

Mr Wilson died in the war. He died on the very last day and Mrs Wilson wasn’t happy about that.

She said, ‘a war was a war but you’d think you’d keep your head down on the last day.’

Margot kept thinking about the word guilty. Guilty was what happened when you killed someone. Like Ronald Ryan. He was guilty, guilty for killing a policeman.

Everyone at her old school talked about that. That was why he was tied up with a rope around his neck and hanged.

Margot put the necklace down on the table and put her hands around her neck. God said you shouldn’t kill people but maybe hanging was different. Maybe you only died a bit if you got hanged.

Margot once asked Catherine if she’d ever been dead and Catherine smacked her on the back of her hand with the Hypole spoon and said, ‘I’ve had enough of your cheek for one day.’ She left her standing in the middle of the big, white lilies, nursing her hand and crying Hypole-tasting tears.

Margot wiped her hand across her nose and wondered why she was so bad. Why she couldn’t she do what she was told. It wasn’t hard to make a necklace. If she was brave, like a tiger, if she stopped daydreaming, if she would stop feeling sorry for herself, making a necklace would be easy.
She threaded some orange beads next to the red ones and then some green ones and yellow ones. The top of her dress was wet and her hands were sticky. Her nose kept running all over her face and when she tried to swallow she choked instead.

Catherine said she would get used to it. She would get used to her new house and her new school and all the new things but she didn’t seem to be able to. She didn’t seem to be able to do anything.

The clock made a noise. A half past eight noise and Margot flung her arm across the table and knocked the bead box crashing to the floor.
On Sunday morning the man, whose real name wasn’t Steven, was sitting next to Catherine in bed. ‘Well,’ said Catherine, shaking her hair out of her eyes, ‘there are no secrets in this house are there?’

Steven laughed and pushed his hair away too. ‘Good morning Miss Margot,’ he said.

Margot looked at him. He sounded like a school teacher. And what did her mother mean, ‘there were no secrets’? There were lots of secrets and Margot was the one who knew all of them.

‘Oh well,’ said Catherine, ‘it may as well be now as any time. Go and get Lewis so I can tell you both.’

When Margot rushed back into the room with Lewis, her mother was out of bed, leaning on the fire-place, wearing her new dressing gown.

Lewis stayed close to the doorway, away from the wardrobe, while Margot crept near the end of the bed.

She felt like she did the day she was waiting for her seventh birthday to start – a bit frightened but excited too.

Steven was half sitting, half lying, close to the middle of the bed. He took up a lot of room. Maybe that was why Catherine got up.

‘Remember how I told you that this was Steven’s house?’ said Catherine, sitting on the chair and looking into the fireplace as though it was alight.

‘Yes,’ said Margot, ‘I remember that.’ She turned to look at Lewis. He was frowning at the wardrobe.

‘Well from now on we’re all going to live here together.’

Margot looked from her mother to Steven. ‘Who is?’

‘We are. Us and Steven.’ Catherine fiddled with the collar on her dressing gown. ‘That’s when he’s here. Sometimes he’ll have to go away to work.’

‘Not too often,’ said Steven and he winked at Catherine.

Margot scratched her arm. Why was her mother talking in the voice she used for visitors? Because Steven was a visitor. That’s why. They hadn’t had visitors for a long time. Jim used to come home with visitors but Catherine
didn’t like that. She especially didn’t like it after she found the empty beer bottles hidden in the sacks in the shed.

Margot looked at Steven. She wondered if he knew the rules – no beer in the house and no people with beer. She wanted to ask him. She wanted to be sure. The more rules – the less arguments. Catherine always said that and Jim always said ‘bugger the rules’. He said, ‘if they’d followed the rules they wouldn’t have Margot’.

‘Are you going to be our new Daddy?’ said Lewis.
‘If you like,’ said Steven.
‘What about Julie and Tommy?’ asked Margot.
‘Them too,’ said Catherine.

Steven was wearing blue pyjamas. Blue was Catherine’s favourite colour. Margot couldn’t remember her father’s pyjamas. She couldn’t remember him sitting up in bed to talk either.

‘Will we have to call you Daddy too?’ asked Lewis.
‘Not just yet,’ said Catherine. ‘But in time you might like to. It might be easier.’

Margot looked at Steven. So that’s the reason. The real reason they came to this house – to get a new Daddy. She should have thought of that.

God said you had to have a Mummy and a Daddy. That was God’s rule. Unless they died. That was different. If they died you didn’t get a new one. That’s what happened to Catherine’s parents. She was an orphan. Her mother died on her sixteenth birthday. She told Margot she came home from school for lunch and instead of a cake there was a note on the kitchen table telling her, her mother was gone. Gone forever.

She said it was lucky she was sixteen because that meant she didn’t have to get put in a Home. And Jim said there was nothing wrong with coming from a Home and Catherine said her best friend Marilyn Jennings came from a Home and some of the stories she told would make your hair curl.

‘Our real Daddy might be dead,’ said Margot.
‘Margot!’ Catherine stood up so fast she nearly knocked her chair over.
‘Because Mum went back to get our toys and the house was closed down, wasn’t it?’

‘That’s enough,’ said Catherine.
‘And what’s happened to Margot’s pedal car?’ said Lewis.
‘Go and get dressed,’ said Catherine. ‘Now’.
‘Now, Caty,’ said Steven. ‘It will take some time. It’s normal.’
What will, thought Margot, to get her pedal car back?
Catherine looked across at Steven. Her face was red but she looked hot rather than angry.
‘Even if he’s not dead, he doesn’t know where we are,’ said Margot, ‘and that means…’
The look on Catherine’s face stopped her voice. What was she saying? She had promised and crossed her heart that she would never tell anyone anything. If she did she and Lewis and Julie would be taken away. That’s what happened to children without fathers. Catherine told her that. Tommy would be alright. He was a baby. You were allowed to keep the baby but the rest of them would have to go. It was against the law to have four children and one mother. The law wasn’t made for mothers or children. No one cared what they thought.
When Marilyn Jennings told Catherine what happened in the Home, she said she was so scared she decided to grow up there and then. She wouldn’t be a child any more because once you got locked up inside one of those places you couldn’t get out.
‘Look, love,’ said Catherine, looking at Steven with her eyes half open, ‘we’ve already been through this a hundred times. If your father wants to find you he will.’
‘I know,’ said Margot quietly. She looked at the floor and then she looked up at Steven. She wasn’t expecting a new Daddy but she knew they had to have one. She skipped around a bit trying to think. ‘I’m going to draw you a drawing,’ she said, moving close to the bed, ‘and Lewis is too.’
Steven looked surprised. ‘What of?’
Margot shot a look at her mother. She had the same face on as Steven. ‘Clouds,’ she said because she couldn’t think of anything else.
‘Anyone can draw clouds,’ said Lewis, ‘I’m going to draw a whole galaxy.’
‘Outer space,’ said Catherine, ‘that’s what it is now.’ She sat down on the end of the bed and smiled the same smile she was smiling in the photo she used to keep on her dressing table. There was writing across the bottom of that photo. Writing that said: ‘To Jim, love always and always, Catherine.’
Margot thrust her legs up into the air and down again.

‘Hey Lew. What goes black white, black white, black white?’

‘A penguin falling down the stairs.’

‘Wrong. It’s a newspaper.’

‘A newspaper can’t fall down stairs, Margie, it’s a penguin.’

‘In my joke it’s a newspaper.’

‘You can’t make up jokes,’ said Lewis tilting his head up towards the sky.

‘Daddy did,’ said Margot, pushing her legs harder and faster, trying to swing higher than Lewis.

‘Daddies are allowed to. He’s coming to see us soon and he’s going to take me down the pub.’

‘He is not,’ said Margot.

‘He is so. He told Mum. At our old house.’

Margot laughed into the empty space that swung between them. ‘That’s not what he said.’

Lewis didn’t answer back.

‘That’s not what he said,’ said Margot again in a halfhearted voice. They’d been on the swings so long, she was starting to feel sick.

‘Why not?’ said Lewis.

‘Why not?’ Margot thrust her legs up and bent her head so far backwards her plaits swept through the dirt. ‘That doesn’t make sense.’

‘It makes sense in koala world.’

‘We’re not in koala world. We’re in the park. Wanta race? First one to Mars.’

‘I’m not playing,’ said Lewis, ‘you always win.’

‘That’s because I’m bigger and you don’t try.’ Margot tossed her head in the air, threw her legs up to the sky, and then fell head-first straight towards the earth.

‘I want to be an eagle when I grow up,’ she yelled breathless from trying to fly.
Lewis smiled sadly.

‘Watch this, Lew. No hands.’ She flung her hands away from the chain and flew through the air with only her bottom and armpits holding on.

‘Stop it! Stop it Margie you’re making me feel sick.’

‘Wah, wah, cry-baby.’ Margot grabbed the chain and leapt from the flying swing. She landed in a running jump and kept running until she was clear of the swing’s swinging. Then she stopped at the base of a giant oak tree and continued her search for acorns.

Lewis dragged along behind her.

‘Do we have to look for acorns again? Why can’t we go on the sea-saw?’

‘Because it gives you splinters,’ said Margot who had made a pouch out of the bottom of her cardigan for the acorns. She was thinking about lifting up the end of her skirt to make a bigger pouch when she saw a man standing by the side of the whirly-gig.

‘It does not have splinters,’ said Lewis.

‘Shhh,’ said Margot and Lewis followed her eyes and saw the man too.

The man – was it a man, he looked like he was wearing a school uniform even though it was Saturday – was smiling and moving around on the spot. He put his hands in his pockets and said, ‘Remember me?’

Margot squinted past the skipping autumn leaves, past the smelly toilet block to the still and silent whirly-gig.

She thanked God she hadn’t lifted her skirt to make a pouch but even as she did so, she knew that God wasn’t there. He wasn’t shining down on her like he did on the children in books about God at Sunday school.

She wished she still went to Sunday school. At Sunday school you could feel his glow coming from the sky. You could see halos and angels. Instead the sky in the park was blue and hard and it was pressing down on her and stopping her from moving.

‘The other day. Remember?’

‘Don’t answer.’ Margot spat the words to Lewis without moving her lips.

The man turned and waved his hand. ‘This one’s my favourite,’ he said, pushing the big wire circle into action. He turned away from them and watched the whirly-gig spinning.
Margot wasn’t fooled. She knew adults could see through the backs of their heads.

‘Wanna ride?’ As he said that the man spun the whirly-gig faster and faster and then jumped on and gave himself a ride. Lewis threw his acorns to the ground and ran towards the whirling man.

‘Come back!’ cried Margot in her best Catherine voice.

The man dug a trench in the ground with his foot and stopped spinning. He gave Lewis his hand and helped him onto the wheel. Margot ran after him and stopped a short distance from the man.

‘Get down. Mum said we have go home now.’

‘Lewis wants a ride though. Don’t you Lew?’

Lewis sat with his legs dangling over the edge of the circle. He looked at the ground and waited.

‘Get down!’

‘Just one Margie. One little one,’ he said quietly.

He looked so hopeful sitting on the big wheel, waiting for a turn, that Margot suddenly wanted to kill him. How could she have such a stupid brother? She had a good mind to leave him there, because she knew that when adults said that, they really meant they had a bad mind to do something. ‘I’ve got a good mind to give you a clip over the ear.’ Jim used to say that all the time.

‘Hey. Don’t be such a spoilt sport Mar-gie.’

The man said her name slowly in two halves then he turned and sent the wheel spinning.

‘I’m Margie’s friend,’ he said to Lewis. ‘Can I be your friend too?’

‘He is not,’ said Margot, ‘he’s a stranger.’

The man laughed.

‘Margot always tells jokes,’ said Lewis. ‘She loves jokes.’

‘Yeah. You know something Lew? I love jokes too.’ He laughed loudly, as though there was a joke.

‘And I love jokes three,’ said Lewis.

The man laughed even louder at that and his big, finger-nailed hands grabbed hold of the wheel and pushed it again and again and Lewis screamed and kicked his legs through the air.
Even though she had seen him before, he was still a stranger. The first time she
saw him he’d jumped out from behind a tree on the nature strip and landed in
front of her.

‘Made ya jump,’ he said laughing, ‘do you know where Whitehill Street is?’

Margot shook her head. The man moved around the footpath. He moved
around so much it was hard to tell which way he was going.

‘Whitehill Street.’ He scratched the side of his head. The end of his sleeve
was wet and his tie was loose and crumply. A school uniform. He was wearing
a school uniform and that must mean the man was really a boy.

‘I don’t know,’ said Margot quietly. ‘I’m new.’

‘Yeah. You’re brand new,’ said the Manboy blowing a big, Black Cat
bubble out of his lips. The bubble exploded across his face and his tongue shot
out of his mouth like a fat hook and dragged the broken black bits back inside
his mouth.

Margot stared. He was a good bubble blower.

‘Everyone knows Whitehill Street. ‘Cept you. Do ya know what your street
is?’

‘Page Street.’

The Manboy took a step closer to Margot and looked into her eyes.

‘That’s funny. I used to live in Page Street.’

Margot fiddled with the strap on her school satchel.

‘Funny strange. Not funny ha ha.’ The Manboy looked quickly around.

‘How old do you reckon I am?’

Margot frowned. The school uniform looked like the one worn by the boys
at the school next to hers. Only boys were allowed to go to that school and they
all wore the same clothes and looked the same and shouted in the same loud
way.

The Manboy’s tongue flicked around his bubble gum and Margot thought
about the tongues on the snakes that live in hell.

‘Come on,’ he said, ‘have a guess.’

‘Um…fourteen.’

‘Pretty clever, aren’t ya.’
'I’m in grade two already.’
‘Yeah. You’re eight then.’
‘I should be eight but really I’m seven because…’ Margot clamped her hand over her mouth and stopped her tongue.

He was trying to trick her. Man or boy, he was a stranger and it was a law of the police you weren’t allowed to talk to strangers.

Yesterday she told Catherine, ‘We had a policeman at school today, Mum, he came to tell us about a girl who got taken by a man in a Volkswagon.’

‘I’m glad to hear that,’ said Catherine, her head half up the chimney while she swept out the fireplace, ‘I hope you listened to what he had to say.’

‘He said to run away and don’t talk to anyone except if it’s someone’s mother. Mum, you’ve got some black stuff on your nose.’

‘Soot.’ Catherine knelt in front of Margot and brushed her nose with the back of her hand.

‘The policeman wrote all the rules down on the blackboard. He said little girls get taken away every-day and that green Volkswagons were the worse ones and if anyone sees one near the school they have to tell a teacher.’

‘Green,’ said Catherine wrapping the ash inside lots of sheets of newspaper and rolling it up so that it looked like pass-the-parcel, ‘I thought they said the one in the paper was purple.’

Margot added purple Volkswagons to her list. The other things on the list were: anyone offering you a lift anywhere (even if it was somebody’s father) it was safer to walk than to get into a car. Any man, on his own, anywhere, but especially if he was in a park or a public toilet. Public toilets were dirty and had germs and places with dirt and germs were good for hiding in. And the people who were hiding there were the ‘Men Who Want To Take You Away’. That was the heading on the blackboard when the policeman came to tell them how not to get kidnapped.

He told the boys, ‘now, of course, this doesn’t really concern you boys, but nevertheless I want you all to stay alert. Keep your eyes peeled and help protect your little sisters and big sisters too, of course. And let’s hope that they have enough sense to help protect themselves.’
The girls and boys sat at their tables with their hands clasped together in front of them. Miss Stiller stood next to the policeman and her face moved in time to everything he said. The policeman had a lot of rules of how to not get taken away. He read them out in a very loud voice.

‘Rule One. Never talk to a strange man. Rule Two. If a strange man starts talking to you, cross to the other side of the street. And if he crosses too – that’s rule three – if he crosses too, run like the devil. Run to the nearest house or shop or if you’re lucky there might be a mother walking down the street, run up and say, in a big loud voice, ‘A MAN IS TRYING TO TAKE ME AWAY’. They’ll know what to do. Now, these men will normally try to offer you sweets or money. Rule Four. Never accept anything from a strange man and never answer any questions. And finally – Rule Five – this is very, very important. Never. And I mean NEVER. Get in a stranger’s car. Right then. Is everyone clear?’

Miss Stiller nodded and her class nodded with her.

‘Good. I think that just about covers it. Except to say that if you do get taken, you almost never, ever, come back. Right then. Now I’m going to show you a picture of a Volkswagon.’

Margot wondered if he was the same policeman who came to talk at her old school. That policeman didn’t say anything about Volkswagons. That talk was about riding bikes and going to the beach.

The picture of the Volkswagon started to look like a picture of her pedal car. When Miss Stiller turned away from the policeman and started underlining the rules on the blackboard, the car smiled at her and she knew it had pushed open the door of the shed and driven all the way to find her at her new school. When the bell went she was going to race over to it, jump in and drive off. They were going to pass all the strange men and the evil cars and the wicked bags of lollies. They were going to drive for miles and miles until they got to the beach, until they saw the children splashing and singing, ‘a man is coming to take me away.’

‘I’m not allowed,’ said Margot, moving backwards, ‘I’m not allowed to talk to strangers.’

‘I’m not a stranger,’ he laughed. ‘My school is right next to yours.’
Margot looked across the street to the boys’ school. There was no one there. Everyone had gone home. Everyone except her. She had dawdled. She was playing on the lines on the footpath when the boy jumped out at her. She was playing and thinking about what she would buy with the two cents hidden in her pocket because thinking about that, stopped her thinking about being at home – alone.

She looked up at the Manboy. Half his mouth was smiling and the other half said, ‘What’s the time Mr Wolf?’

Margot frowned. ‘Pardon?’

‘Nothing. Gotta go. Hey, what’s your name?’

Margot looked at the ground. The Manboy waited a couple of seconds and then blew a quick black bubble in and out of his mouth.

‘I get it. Little Miss No Name.’ He bent down close to her head.

‘Well Miss No Name you’d better be getting home. Mamma will be getting worried.’

Margot could smell sticky bubble gum on his breath. She hugged her school satchel close to her chest. She could hear her heart beating louder than the Manboy’s voice. She didn’t know why tears were galloping up her throat.

‘I’m going to the shop.’

‘I didn’t hear that No Name.’

‘The milkbar. I’m going there first.’

‘Off you go then.’

The Manboy put his hands in his pockets and nodded in the direction of the milkbar and Margot ran. She ignored the look to the left, look to the right voice that screamed inside her head. She raced across the road, past two tangled gum trees and along the lumpy footpath. She turned the corner and flew into the wind but she could still feel his eyes coming towards her head.

She ran down the hill and around a corner. She kept running, pressing her satchel to her chest to stop it from striking her. She ran around two more corners, turned into her street and ran towards the park. She rushed through the gate and looked over her shoulder. Rule one. Never talk to a strange man. When is a man? Isn’t fourteen a boy? She ran past the swings and the see-saw, past the whirligig and the public toilet. She kept running until she got to the peppercorn tree.
Run like the devil. Run like the devil. The boys were supposed to look after the girls. That was the rule. The peppercorn’s foliage swept the ground. Margot pulled down a fledgling branch and climbed up into the tree’s strong arms. Shaking and panting for breath she clung tightly to a branch and hid deep inside the secret, peppery world. One or two baby peppercorns got trapped between her fingers. She closed her eyes and breathed in the spicy smell. As she started to calm she looked down at the ground below and knew, knew it was true: If you do get taken, you almost never, ever, come back.

When Catherine came home there was a lot to do. Lewis was very sick. He was so sick Catherine had to get him from the lady with the rocking horse and take him to the doctors. He had to go straight to bed with his medicine and sleep. Stig bought Julie and Tommy home and said he was going to make rissoles for tea and that made Margot so hungry she forgot about the boy, and the park and the smell of the peppercorn tree.

Margot shelled the peas while Steven cooked the onions for the rissoles in the frying pan. She told him about her first day walking to school by herself. How she had seen Leandra walking ahead of her and how she had crept along behind her pretending to be a spy. Steven stopped stirring the onions then. He said it was bad to spy on people. He said it was like telling lies.

‘Lies have no end,’ he said, ‘they start small but they get bigger and bigger.’

Margot held up a shell full of fat, shiny peas for him to look at. Everyone knows that, she thought. That’s what happened to Pinocchio.

Steven made the rissoles smooth by patting them from one hand to another.

Margot leant across the kitchen table watching the squashing and smoothing. She rubbed at her star scar and thought about her father’s hands making bread into dough.

She felt a small hole in her tights and looked down at her leg. Catherine would be cross about that. Tights were dear and her one red pair and one blue pair were supposed to last all through winter.

Julie came in and said she wanted to watch. Steven wiped his hands on the tea towel and lifted her up onto a chair.

‘There you are my little blossom,’ he said.

Margot looked at her sister. Blossom? Why was he calling her that?
‘Do you like *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie*?’ she asked.

‘Is that question for me or your sister?’

Margot snorted. ‘Julie can’t read. She’s only four’.

‘Four. She’s a very clever girl for four.’ He tickled Julie under the chin and she giggled and held her chin out for another turn.

‘I saw a Banksia Man today,’ said Margot.

‘And what’s that?’ asked Steven.

‘It’s what’s in *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie*. They’re terrible, mean baddies who kidnap the gumnuts and kill them.’

Steven laughed, ‘you make them sound real.’

‘They are real. They live in the gum trees. Me and Lewis saw one.’

‘And I saw one too,’ said Julie.

‘You’ll give the little one nightmares making up things like that.’

‘I’m not making it up. They have pictures of them at school. Miss Stiller drew one on the blackboard so we can’t talk when she goes out of the room.’

‘And that’s where you saw one today.’

Steven finished lining up the rissoles up on the breadboard and looked at Margot. She had to be nice. No answering back and no pulling faces. Catherine said that.

Margot started to say she didn’t answer back but her mother said she was doing it again and she was old enough to know, that without him they would starve in the streets.

Margot liked imagining starving in the streets. Freezing and begging and dying like the *Little Match Girl*.

‘No. Today I saw a real Banksia Man.’

‘So the one on the blackboard is not real?’ Steven turned on the tap and washed his hands.

‘It is real but this one was realer. It was outside.’

‘Outside,’ said Steven, ‘now I understand.’ He opened up the knives and forks drawer and asked Julie if she would like to help him set the table.

Margot watched him handing her sister forks and spoons and the salt and pepper. She could hear the potatoes trying to jump out of the saucepan full of boiling water. She fiddled with the hole in her tights.
Slide and slide down someone’s cellar door. Slide and slide till our pants got tore.

She looked down at the lino. It was grey with pink and white zig zags running across it. It was the same as their other lino, except for the pink on the zig zags.

She’d practised her dancing on that lino. Going over and over the steps, yelling out to Catherine, ‘Look Mum, look. This is how you dance sliding.’

Catherine told Margot the first time she saw Jim he was dancing. He was doing the fox trot. He was the best fox trotter she had ever seen. Everyone said he should go in competitions but he always said, ‘The dance at the Railway’s good enough for me.’

Catherine played the piano in a band at the Railway Dance Hall on Friday and Saturday nights. They had given her the job, even though she was a girl, because she could play the boogie woogie very fast.

One night Jim asked Catherine for a dance and she wished and wished she could say yes but she had to play the piano and you can’t do the fox trot without a piano. But just before midnight, Jim jumped onto the stage and held a two pound note in the air.

The money was for someone who would play the last song so he could dance the last dance with Catherine.

Six people ran up to the stage. Jim said he didn’t have time for auditions and everyone laughed.

Catherine said everyone always laughed when Jimmy Lovelock was around. She said when the music started the crowd made a circle around them and they danced and danced like they really were in a competition.

Jim walked her home after that and when her cardigan fell off he picked it up and put it around her shoulders.

Catherine told Margot she fell in love with him, there and then, while he was doing up her top button.

Margot stood in the doorway looking at Lewis lying in bed.

Steven had helped Catherine move his bed into the loungeroom so he could keep warm near the fire. He was staring at the ceiling with his head resting on two pillows. The collar on his pyjama top was buttoned up to the top button.
His pyjamas were blue and fluffy with cowboys and Indians running around them. They were new. He must be sick if he had to get new pyjamas.

Margot tried to think of a joke to make him better but before she could think of one, he said, ‘I had to have a needle, Margie, in my bottom.’

Margot walked over to his bed. His eyes moved to look at her. ‘Want me to get your koala?’ she asked.

Lewis moved his head a tiny bit.

‘Would you like me to tell you a story?’

He moved his head again.

‘Steven’s made rissoles for tea. You love rissoles.’

Lewis didn’t move. He just lay there, staring straight ahead with his eyes almost closed.

Margot looked at the fireplace. Red and yellow flames poked in and out of the burning Briquettes. The briquettes were black and thick like giant lumps of chewing gum.

Lewis’ body made a noise and Margot turned back to him. His face was serious and frowning and he looked like he was sleeping.

Black Cat chewing gum – she would save up her money and buy one for Lewis. That would make him better. She could hide it outside, down in the old water tank, until he was allowed to chew again.

Margot put the end of her plait in her mouth and chewed on it. Her hands still smelt like the peppercorn tree. She wanted to tell Catherine about the Manboy but she was scared to.

If she told her she had spoken to a stranger, told the stranger where she lived, ran across the road and gone to the park, when she’d promised to go straight home, her mother would be angry. So angry, she might get the ruler or even the strap.

Margot looked down at the bright, sparking flames, chasing the dirty briquettes around and around the fireplace. Run like the devil. She remembered that bit. That was the only bit she got right.

She looked back at Lewis. He seemed to be getting smaller and smaller. She wished he wasn’t sick. She wished they were sitting on the floor, in front of the fire, playing Snakes and Ladders or Ludo.
Ludo was Lewis’ favourite. He always went green. He didn’t care if green was bad luck. He said he loved green things. Grass was green and so were trees. A word cried out of him and Margot hoped he would wake up but it was only his face moving around. The rest of him kept on sleeping.

‘I’m going to buy you a Black Cat chewy, Lew,’ she said softly. ‘When you get better.’

Catherine stood in the doorway with Tommy on her hip.

‘There you are,’ she said. ‘Better let him sleep now.’

Margot looked down at the bed and noticed the fluffy pink blanket. ‘This looks like your quilt.’

‘It was,’ said Catherine.

‘Off your bed. Did you take the blankets off your bed?’

‘Not all of them,’ said Catherine smilingly. ‘C’mon, time for tea.’

‘Mum…’ Margot fiddled with her plait. She was about to put it in her mouth when she remembered that chewing hair made adults – not just her mother but teachers and Mrs Coates and even people in the street that she had never met – get cross. ‘Mum…’

‘I’m waiting,’ said Catherine.

Margot wasn’t sure what she was going to say. Tea was ready. When tea was ready Catherine usually said, ‘get a wriggle on’ or ‘what is it now’ or ‘you can tell me later’ but here she was standing still and waiting.

‘I walked home from school by myself today.’

‘I know that, love. You used to walk to school and back by yourself before we moved. You found the way alright didn’t you? You’re here now.’ Catherine smiled at her.

Margot smiled too. ‘It was easy, Mum, even though it’s longer than the old school.’

‘Just a bit further. What did you buy with your two cents? Liquorice squares?’

Margot looked past the fluffy blanket to the floor. ‘I saved it. I saved it to buy something for Lewis.’

‘You’re a very thoughtful girl, Margot.’

Margot fiddled with the hole in her tights. ‘I got a hole in my tights. Playing chasey.’
‘Never mind. I’ll see if I can sew it up.’

‘It’s in the same spot as my scar,’ said Margot brightly.

‘Never mind,’ said Catherine again, ‘tights can be mended.’ She walked across to the bed and put her hand on Lewis’ head. ‘He’s still very hot.’

‘Will he get better?’

‘Of course he will. We’re all here to help him get better.’

‘We are, aren’t we Mum?’

Catherine nodded and looked like she was going to put her hand on Margot’s head too but instead she folded both her arms around Tommy and kissed him with her nose.

Margot skipped down the hill towards the big red telephone box. Mr Peacock, was walking up the hill towards her and he stopped to ask how Lewis was.

She told him he was nearly better now and instead of staying at home in bed he stayed with Julie and Tommy at the house of the lady who minded children.

Mr Peacock was happy Lewis was nearly better. He said scarlet fever was very serious and Lewis must be very brave.

‘He is,’ said Margot, ‘he had to have a lot of needles.’

‘Ahh,’ said Mr Peacock, screwing up his eyebrows, ‘needles. That’s nasty.’

Margot agreed. ‘Worse than Hypole.’

‘He’s going to have a lot of catching up to do when he gets back.’ He patted his tie. ‘Tell me,’ he said, as though he was asking his tie a question, ‘how is your mother?’

‘Good thank you, Mr Peacock. She hasn’t even been sick since we left our other house because she works at the drycleaners now.’

‘Hmm, that’s the one in High Street, I suppose.’

‘Yes and she has to work there a lot. She has to leave at breakfast time and she doesn’t get home to teatime.’

‘Well, I’m sure you’re a big help to her.’

Margot beamed. ‘I do all my jobs and some of Lewis’s too now.’

‘Good girl. I’m sure your mother and father appreciate that.’

Margot looked at the telephone box. What was she going to say? She couldn’t tell a lie to a teacher but her father didn’t know anything about how good she was being.
'Do you like the telephone booth Mr Peacock?'

‘The telephone booth?’ Mr Peacock turned to look at it as though he wasn’t really sure.

‘Mum lets me press button B and listen to the money falling in.’

‘Well, that is a nice sound.’

‘Mum comes to the telephone booth a lot. She likes it because no one knows who you’re talking to in there.’

‘Ahh, so she has secrets then,’ said Mr Peacock as he put two fingers into a secret pocket hidden in his vest.

Margot’s face went Red Indian red. Why did she say that? The visits to the telephone box were a secret. Margot was the telephone box lookout. She knew what a lookout did, they were supposed to keep secrets. They weren’t supposed to blab.

Just in case. That’s what her mother said. Keep a lookout just in case anyone was snooping around and when Catherine started crying in the telephone box people did stop and stare and Margot had to keep a big lookout then.

Making secret telephone calls to Mrs Coates made Catherine cry but Mrs Coates needed to be cheered up because she was all by herself since Terry had to go and live with his mother. Terry’s mother was a very bad lunatic. Sometimes she had to go into a special hospital where everyone was mad but then they let her out and they said Terry had to go back and live with her.

Margot looked past her mother to the fence made out of ballet dancers and listened.

She’d heard part of this story before, when she was kneeling on the concrete floor of the porch, teaching Wendy how to be a good girl, she had listened to every word about the bad, lunatic mother and Terry’s father, the poor man who couldn’t live with one.

‘No man should have to live with a lunatic,’ said Mrs Coates and she told Catherine that Terry’s father had gone away and the lunatic shouldn’t be allowed to have Terry because children shouldn’t have to live with lunatics either, but lunatic or no lunatic she was still very pretty, and everyone knows that rules were made to be broken.

‘You’re allowed to have secrets with mothers and daughters, Mr Peacock,’ said Margot.
‘Are you now? I suppose I’ll have to take your word for that.’ Mr Peacock looked at the telephone box again and then he looked at the ballerina fence and shook his head. ‘Well, you’d better be getting off home. Tell Lewis to keep his chin up.’

Margot watched Mr Peacock walking slowly up the hill.

She wished that he was her teacher instead of Miss Stiller. Mr Peacock didn’t growl and he didn’t look at you when he was talking and that meant it was easier not to make a mistake.

Margot put her fingers on one of the concrete tutus. The tutus were painted pink and white. They looked like real ones but when you touched them they were rough. Margot always stopped to touch the ballet dancers, to look at their strong arms and the way they held up the top of the fence. The telephone box and the ballet fence and the milk bar were her favourite parts of walking home from school. The BEWARE OF THE DOG sign was the worst bit.

This sign was nailed to a tall wooden gate, which stood in the middle of a tall tin-looking fence. The house was on the corner and the angry dog who lived there ran along the fence, barking and crashing its chain against the metal. Margot always tiptoed past, holding her breath because the fence looked like it could fall over any minute or the dog might chew a hole in the tin and if it did that it would rush out and bite her to death.

‘Ark!’ The Manboy yelled in Margot’s face as she crept around the corner. ‘Ark! Ark!’ The dog started yelling too and Margot fell against the fence in fright and her two cent piece jumped out of her pocket and tried to roll away.

‘Ark! That’s what Noah said when he heard the rain falling.’ The Manboy laughed and his foot flew out in front of him and trapped the tiny frilly lizard. As he bobbed down to pick up the coin, Margot saw the top of his bright orange hair and she cried out and started to run before she even knew she was going to.

She raced away. She ran faster than the street, faster than the trees and houses - faster than she had ever run before. She ran with the wind. She ran like the devil. She kept on running until she burst through the door to the milk bar and stood in the dark shop with her heart beating in her ears.

‘Where’s the fire?’ said the milkbar lady as she ran her hands down the front of her musk pink apron and waited for Margot to say something. Margot
hugged her satchel against her chest and looked down at the floor. The tiny door-bell trilled again and the Manboy crashed into the shop, panting.

‘You dropped this,’ he said and held the small coin out in front of Margot. Margot backed away and bumped into the Twistie stand.

‘That’s very kind of you dear,’ said the milkbar lady. She looked at Margot and clicked her tongue, ‘look at you. Red as a beetroot.’

The Manboy tossed the coin in the air and caught it. ‘She always runs too fast.’

‘My girlie was a tear-away,’ said the milkbar lady, ‘never seen a girl in such a hurry. Never seen a girl get in so much trouble either.’ She laughed, ‘you been keeping your big brother a secret?’

Margot tried to think. She could hear Catherine’s words bouncing around in her head – no dawdling no dilly-dallying.

‘We’ll have a cent’s worth of raspberries and a cent’s worth of aniseed balls,’ said the Manboy.

The milkbar lady pulled a small white paper bag from a stack tied together with string and put four raspberries and four aniseed balls inside it.

‘And one more for good measure,’ she said adding an extra ball, ‘I know she likes the black ones.’

She swapped the bag for the coin and patted the Manboy on the hand, ‘you’re a good lad,’ she said, ‘looking after the little lass’.

The words, ‘A MAN IS TRYING TO TAKE ME AWAY,’ formed in Margot’s head but they wouldn’t come out of her mouth. She made a gurgling noise and moved towards the door.

‘Cheerio dear,’ said the milkbar lady, then she walked out from behind the counter and said, ‘she’s a funny little thing.’

The Manboy nodded, shoved a raspberry into his mouth and pushed Margot out onto the footpath.

‘Page Street next,’ he said moving slowly around her, ‘we have to make sure you get home alright.’ He held the lolly bag open in front of her, ‘want one?’

Margot shook her head.

‘We have to think of something to cheer you up, No Name. What about a swing?’

‘I have to go straight home. Mum said.’
'Yeah. You’re no fun.’ He shoved three aniseed balls into his mouth and chewed them all at once. ‘Come on then. Let’s go.’

‘Mum says I’m only allowed to walk home by myself.’

‘Mum says. Mum says. Yeah. Well guess what? If you don’t tell her, I won’t.’

He stopped moving and peered into her face. ‘Can ya keep a secret?’

The ‘s’ in secret got squashed in with the aniseed balls and dark brown spit, sprayed onto his chin.

Margot looked away.

‘Hey, you look at me when I’m talking to you,’ he said loudly, ‘don’t want to be a rude girl do you?’

Margot shook her head. Of course she didn’t. Catherine always said, ‘I don’t care where you are or who you’re with Margot, good manners cost nothing’. She looked up into the Manboy’s growling face.

‘You heard the milkbar lady, I’m looking after you.’

As they turned into Page street and neared the park Margot started to walk faster. A van, like Mr Beckett’s, drove past them and she quickened after it. What if it was Mr Beckett? What if she asked him to take her back to their old house? Back to when Catherine would be home and Lewis wasn’t sick and Daddy called her Tiger and told her she was loyal.

Margot had to ask Catherine what loyal was and her mother said it was when you loved someone and stayed with them whatever they did.

Jim said Catherine wasn’t loyal and that was true. She didn’t stay. She left in a taxi and Margot left with her and that meant that she wasn’t loyal anymore either.

Margot felt sick when she thought about that. How could she be so bad when she always tried to be good? Maybe her blood was bad. Mrs Coates said the lunatic had bad blood.

The Manboy grabbed the strap on her satchel. ‘Slow down,’ he said, ‘it’s not the Olympics.’

When he let go of her, Margot didn’t slow down. She started to run. She wanted to throw her satchel away and run with her arms opened out to the wind. She knew that if she ran that way often enough, one day (and she was very sure of this) she would really fly away.
She wrenched open her gate, ran onto the verandah and stopped at the never-used front door. The Manboy arrived behind her, panting at the gate.

‘My Mum’s here,’ Margot yelled across the lawn. ‘She’s coming out in a minute.’

The Manboy opened the gate and walked slowly down the path.

‘Wanna hear the joke about the empty house? There’s nuthin’ in it.’

He threw his head back and laughed. Margot could see his black tongue and his big green teeth.

‘We’ve got a dog,’ she said, looking quickly across to Mrs Wilson’s house, ‘A watch dog.’

‘Woof. Woof,’ said the Manboy, ‘can it tell the time?’

He grinned and walked towards the verandah.

Margot banged on the front door. ‘Mum! Mum!’

‘I bet she’s feeding the dog.’

‘We really have got a dog. Cross my heart…’

‘Don’t worry No Name. I believe you. Millions wouldn’t but I’m not millions.’

He laughed and squashed a forget-me flower with his foot as he crossed the grass.

‘There’s no need to get all het up. I don’t wanta hurt you or nuthin. I just wanna quick look inside.’

‘You’re not allowed.’

‘But I spoke to your Mum this morning and she said it was alright for me to wait inside until she got home.’

A shutter banged against a window pane.

‘What was that?’ said the Manboy peering at the verandah.

Margot turned towards the window. She saw the box with the dog and the record player, making shadows on the glass.

‘Dad,’ she said, and added with the courage of despair, ‘my Dad’s home too.’

The Manboy shattered an aniseed ball with his back teeth.

‘Why would he be home now?’

‘He got the sack.’ Margot kicked the verandah post and hurt her foot. She was glad about that. It was better to think about a sore foot than why she had told this Manboy, this stranger, her father’s secret secret.
The Manboy lowered his head and peered at the window. ‘Yeah. Why doesn’t he open the door then?’

‘He’s deaf.’

The Manboy spat on the ground. ‘Think you’re smart, don’t ya?’ He turned and made his way back towards the gate.

Margot leapt off the verandah, jumped over the forget-me-nots and tore down the driveway. She fumbled around her neck for the piece of string that held the key to the back-door, turned the key in the lock and toppled into the kitchen.

Inside everything was dark and cold and blurry. The clock’s tick, tick, tick, ran around the room so fast she couldn’t tell if it was nearly 4 o’clock or 5 o’clock.

She thought about hiding under the kitchen table, like Catherine did at their other house, when the man came to get the money for the rent, but this table was in front of the window and it was hopeless for hiding under.

She looked around the room for another hiding place and saw the potatoes sitting on the sink, ready for her to peel for tea. The potatoes made her feel sad. Sadder than the Little Match Girl and that was stupid because the Little Match Girl didn’t have anything to eat at all.

The fridge made a loud noise and Margot jumped and looked at it through narrowed eyes. She hated that fridge. It was worse than the wardrobe. Always coming on and making noises when you’d forgotten it was there. Without taking her eyes off it, she edged past it, pushed open the door to the passage and crept out.

She squinted down the long passage-way to the never-used front door. It looked bigger and heavier than it did from outside. It looked like the kind of door that could turn into a drawbridge.

That’s just what she needed now – a drawbridge and a moat and a sword. All for one.

She could feel her heart beating. She looked down at her chest. Her school satchel was still strapped across her body. She took it off, put it on the floor and picked her way slowly along the wall until she came to the room with the box.

A line of sunbeams twinkled on the floor and made the empty room feel bright. The dog was still there with his head on the side, listening to the old fashioned record player.
‘Hey, No Name!’ The Manboy was still there too. He was hitting the letterbox and waving envelopes in the air.

‘Hey! There’s a letter here for someone called Stick Persson.’
He waved his arms above his head, like an angry puppet, and shouted,
‘Watch this. I’ll show ya what a stick person looks like.’
Margot fell from the window and flattened herself against the back of the television box.

The box smelt like something she thought she remembered.
She put her head close to the dog’s kind face and breathed in the cardboard and the warm, musty smell.
‘Please, please God,’ she whispered, ‘please make him go away. I’ll say the Lord’s prayer every night on my knees I promise.’

Everything went quiet. Quiet quiet; like the middle of the night.
Margot peeped around the side of the box and saw the Manboy moving along the fence. He stopped at the forget-me flowers and dragged some of them into his hand and held them out towards the window.
‘Hey! Look what I found! Forget-me-nots. Get it?’
Margot put her hands over her ears and slid down the box to the floor and tried to dream herself far, far away.

‘Our father who art in heaven.’ She wished she could remember being a baby.

‘Hallowed be thy name.’ It must be so nice to be a baby.

‘Thy kingdom come.’ Not Tommy, of course, but some other baby.

‘Thy will be done.’ The room started to go dark (the Lord’s prayer always sent her to sleep).

‘On earth.’ The dark meant that Mummy will come home and every thing will be alright again.

‘As it is in heaven.’

She squeezed the words Mummy and heaven into her heart and decided to do as Ragged Blossom had done when she too was hunted by wicked Banksia Men: she lay as limp and as still as she could, and pretended she was dead.

‘Margot? Margot love, are you sick?’
Margot opened her eyes and grabbed hold of her mother’s dress. ‘Mum! Mum!’
‘What on earth’s the matter? What’s happened?’
Margot clung on to Catherine and tried to think. What had happened? Where was she? ‘The Banksia Men.’
‘What?’
‘They tried to take me away.’
‘For goodness sake,’ said Catherine, ‘you nearly scared me half to death.’
‘They did Mum. They followed me home from school.’
Catherine took a deep breath. ‘You shouldn’t play with this box,’ she said, hitting the dog on the head as she spoke, ‘it’s full of ash.’
‘Ash?’
‘From the bedroom. It’s where I empty the fire-place.’
‘The fire-place?’
‘Will you please stop repeating everything I say and tell me what you’re doing curled up in here, on the floor, in complete darkness?’
Margot let go of her mother’s dress and looked at the window but the glass had turned black and there was nothing now. ‘Nothing,’ she whispered.
‘Nothing? It doesn’t look like nothing. What it looks like is the potatoes sitting exactly where I left them, the table not set and the house in complete darkness.’ Catherine looked down at Margot, shook her head and then she smiled a little bit and said, ‘well…you seem alright. That’s the main thing I suppose.’
‘I am Mum. I’m sorry. Guess what? I saw Mr Peacock on the way home.’
‘Mr Peacock?’
‘Near the telephone booth and he said to say hello.’
‘That’s nice.’
‘I told him I was trying to do more helping while Lewis is sick.’
Catherine picked up the end of one of Margot’s plaits. ‘I suppose that explains the letters and the flowers.’
‘Flowers?’
Catherine smiled, ‘don’t start that repeating business again. It was nice of you to bring the letters in, and the forget-me-nots, but I don’t know why you left them on the back door step. It’s a miracle I didn’t trample them to death.’
'Mum…'
'I know…they’re my favourite…'
'Mum…'
'I can see you putting them down to get your key out and forgetting all about them.’ Catherine pressed her forget-me-not coloured eyes close to Margot’s head, ‘I’m right aren’t I?’
Margot nodded.
‘I thought I might be,’ said Catherine taking Margot’s hand, ‘because that’s what mothers are for.’

‘Lewis!’ cried Margot. ‘If you don’t come right now I’m going home without you. I mean it.’
The Manboy grabbed the spinning whirly-gig and bought it to a whining halt.
‘Why did the girl take a hammer to school? Give up? Because it was breaking-up day.’ He hooted with laughter. ‘Get it?’
Lewis slid off the whirly-gig and ran over and stood next to Margot.
Margot took hold of his hand, turned heel and marched towards the gate with the boy’s laughter ballooning along behind them.
‘Ow! Let go! You’re hurting.’
Margot knew that.
‘C’mon,’ she hissed, tightening her grip and yanking her brother down the street, ‘we have to get home.’
She looked at Lewis’ upset face and added gently, ‘we have to be brave, Lew.’
His face turned into a smile then and fear squeezed Margot’s blood – Lewis never smiled he always squinted.
Margot could feel the Manboy clomping along behind them. She looked at the long, stretched-out footpath and wished she was already ahead of herself. It would be good to be in tomorrow or the next day or somewhere else far away.
Her chest began to hurt as a big piece of it’s-all-your-fault settled there.
Catherine told them they couldn’t to go to the park, until after lunch, when she came home from work. But after lunch was ages and ages away so Margot
asked Steven if they could go. She knew he’d say yes because he loved having peace and quiet and his favourite peace and quiet time was Saturday morning, before he went to work at the hotel.

Margot looked up at the sky. Maybe her mother was already home. Maybe Steven hadn’t left for work yet. Maybe she only had to get home and everything would be alright.

At the gate to the park the Manboy caught up to them. ‘Hey, Lew! Wanna play, ‘I Spy’?’ he asked moving from foot to foot blocking the park’s entrance.

Lewis looked up at Margot and his squint came back and she felt a bit braver.
‘I spy with my little eye something beginning with M.’

Lewis squeezed Margot’s hand and whispered, ‘don’t tell him.’

‘What?’

‘What it is.’

‘Something beginning with M,’ said the Manboy again. ‘Give up?’ He didn’t wait for an answer. He turned around and walked out of the gate and into the street.

Margot froze in the gateway. What was he doing now? You didn’t start to play I Spy and then leave. It must be a trick. ‘Get ready to cross the road,’ she said to Lewis, ‘and don’t look around. Look straight ahead.’

Lewis nodded. ‘Now?’

‘When I say. And don’t run. It’s the same as dogs, if you run they know you’re scared.’

A small gust of wind hurried them along as they crossed the nature-strip and the road.

‘Is he still there Margie?’ asked Lewis holding his neck stiff and straight.

Margot didn’t answer. She hurried on, dragging Lewis along with her. She knew without looking that he was still there, on the other side of the street, easily keeping up with them and even if he wasn’t there, he knew where they lived and that was all her fault.

‘Let’s play horses,’ said Margot, starting to run.

‘Now?’ asked Lewis.

‘Come on. Go!’ Margot yelled the words up into the air, leapt off the footpath and careered along the nature strip. She threw her head up to the sky
and filled her lungs with horse breath. Lewis copied her, kicking the air with his flying hands and attacking the nature-strip with a criss-crossing gallop.

When they reached their house, Margot imagined herself leaping over the front gate, like a real horse would. She whinnied and kicked open the gate open and they galloped away, down the driveway, towards the kitchen.

They were nearly there, nearly inside, nearly, nearly safe but then the kitchen light was off and the backdoor was locked and when Margot felt around her neck for the key, it wasn’t there because it was Saturday and when it was Saturday, she had to get the key out from under the rock near the pond.

When she came back with it Lewis was gone.

As the sun sprang out of the sky and into her eyes the Manboy came walking down the driveway, holding Lewis by the hand.

‘Lewis’s horse is called Lucky. Lucky, Lucky. So what’s yours called Margie?’

Margot squinted into the sun’s rays. Circles like bright cellophane danced before her eyes making it hard to think.

‘Maybe your horse doesn’t have a name.’

Lewis pulled his hand away from the Manboy and shook his head. ‘Margot’s horse has got the best, best name.’

‘Yeah,’ the Manboy jiggled his hands inside his pockets, ‘what’s that?’

‘Galaxy,’ said Lewis proudly.

The Manboy scratched his thigh from inside his leg pocket, ‘not bad.’

‘Galaxy is the best. He’s the biggest and the fastest. And he saves other animals, doesn’t he Margie?’

Margot looked at Lewis’ serious face and then she looked across to the smirking Manboy.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘but he’s not here now. He stayed behind.’

‘Behind where?’

‘At our other house.’

‘Ahh!’ Lewis drew in a long breath and clamped his hands to his head.

‘We’re not allowed to tell anyone that.’

‘You got another house?’

‘It’s a long way away,’ said Margot.

‘Further than the sky,’ said Lewis.
‘I’ve got Star now, that’s my new horse,’ said Margot squeezing the key tightly in her palm.

‘And I’ve got a new horse too. My horse…’

‘You two think I’m stupid or something? I bet you’ve never even seen a real horse.’

‘Star is a real horse,’ said Margot steadily and Lewis looked up at the Manboy and nodded wordlessly.

The Manboy spat on the ground, ‘Whose gunna open the door?’

‘Margot’s the only one who’s allowed to have a key,’ said Lewis.

‘And me. I asked your Mum.’

‘Steven will be home soon,’ said Margot looking around, trying to hide the lie on her face.

‘Who’s Steven?’

‘Our new Daddy,’ said Lewis.

‘Our other Daddy,’ corrected Margot.

‘That’s dumb,’ said the Manboy then he put his hand into his blazer pocket, fiddled with something and said, ‘yeah, well I believe ya…millions wouldn’t…hey…What goes ha ha ha bonk? Give up? A man laughing his head off.’

Margot looked down at the key gripped inside her hand and knew it was finished.

There was no more waiting time. No one had come to save them and now she had to open the door and let him inside.

The Manboy was moving his face around and around, filling the inside of his mouth with spit and watching her. He was watching her very closely. Margot stood at the kitchen door and prayed the key wouldn’t work but with one turn the door clicked open as if by magic.

The Manboy swallowed his spit and walked quickly inside.

‘Not so smart now are yous?’

He looked around and his tongue came slowly out of his smile and licked a white pimple that sat on the side of his lip.

Margot fiddled with the button on her cardigan and stared out the kitchen window. The leaves on the trees were waving to each other and a few snow drops danced under the old pear tree. ‘They’re late,’ said Catherine, when she
first saw them there. ‘Everything is topsy turvy this year.’ Margot had laughed at that. Topsy turvy was one of her best, favourite words.

‘Margie.’ Lewis tugged at Margot’s dress. ‘Make him stop now Margie.’

Margot turned back into the kitchen and watched the Manboy opening cupboards. He opened one after another and he left them open too.


‘Why’s he doing that?’ asked Lewis.

‘Shhh,’ said Margot because she was thinking the same thing. She was also thinking what would Catherine say when she found out that a strange man – a boy – had been looking in all the kitchen cupboards.

She should have done exactly what the policeman said. She should never, never have spoken to this Manboy, or told him where she lived and now there was no one to help her or Lewis.

Maybe God or Jesus would understand. But they didn’t have him anymore. Jesus didn’t go to Small Hills Primary. They had the queen instead.

‘Jesus!’ The Manboy held a hand over his eye and belted the cupboard with his other hand. ‘That cupboard nearly killed me.’

A wish popped into Margot’s head when she heard that. A wicked wish. A wish that ‘the cupboard had killed him’.

Margot chewed on the end of her plait and looked over her shoulder. There was no point asking God or Jesus now. You couldn’t make a wish like that and then say a prayer.

The Manboy kicked the cupboard under the sink because he couldn’t get the door to open properly.

‘Get down and have a look in that one,’ he said to Lewis.

‘There’s nothing in there,’ said Margot frowning, wondering what he thought was in there.

‘Yeah. Looks like a pretty good hiding place to me.’

Margot looked at the cupboard. Her mother’s flat, brown handbag sprang into her mind. She was sure Catherine didn’t hide her purse under the sink like she did at their other house, but what if it was there, hiding from the robbers and now she had opened the door and let a robber come in and he was searching for something to rob.
‘I know where something is,’ said Lewis looking up to the highest cupboard and nodding.

The Manboy followed Lewis’ gaze up to the top cupboard. ‘Yeah. What?’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Lewis, clamping his hands to his head, ‘it’s not ours.’

‘Yeah? Guess what? I couldn’t care less about that. You tell me what it is or I’ll make you climb up there and get it.’

The Manboy pushed past Lewis and dragged a chair across to the cupboard.

‘Knock knock.’ He jumped up onto the chair. ‘Knock knock,’ he said again. Lewis hid behind Margot held onto her dress, ‘make him stop.’

‘Who’s there?’ said Margot in a loud voice.

The Manboy looked down at her. ‘You tell me,’ he said, ‘you’re the one who likes jokes.’

The only knock, knock joke that Margot knew was Jim’s ‘I thought you said you’d remember me’ one and she wasn’t going to tell him that. ‘Father,’ she said instead.

‘Father who?’

‘Father Christmas.’

The Manboy stared at her for a long time and then he started to laugh. ‘Ha ha ha. That’s pretty funny, Father Christmas.’

The clock dinged twice and the Manboy turned towards the sound. ‘What’s the time Mr Woolf?’

‘One o’clock,’ said Margot and Lewis shook his head.

‘What’s wrong with you Lucky Lew. Cat got your tongue?’

‘I want Mummy,’ cried Lewis, running around himself in circles. ‘Why doesn’t Mummy come?’

‘Because she’s gone away for good and put me in charge.’

Lewis’ breath started to race and his face went red and hot.

‘She did not,’ cried Margot.

‘She did so,’ said the Manboy moving from one foot to another on top of the chair, ‘she told me in secret. I’ve got secrets too.’ He climbed from the chair onto the kitchen bench, straightened up and pulled open the cupboard door.

Margot half expected to see the sugar castor gleaming away in there but there was nothing, nothing except a dark, empty shelf. ‘See! See!’ That was what she wanted to shout so everyone could see the Manboy wasn’t in charge but as
she was thinking that he ran his hand along the very top of the cupboard and sent a large bag of potato chips crashing into the sink.

‘Colvan!’ he cried, ‘they’re my favourite.’

He stepped heavily onto the chair, scooped up the packet, tore it open with his teeth and smashed handfuls of chips inside his mouth.

Lewis tugged at Margot again, ‘they’re Steven’s chips. We’ll get in trouble now.’

‘It’s alright,’ said Margot watching the Manboy climb down off the chair, ‘Steven likes sharing.’

‘Steven.’ Lewis spat the word across the kitchen. ‘Steven,’ he said again. The Manboy held the bag of potato chips out at Margot.

‘Want one,’ he said. His mouth was hanging open and bits of half-eaten chips were sticking out of his teeth the way bits of carrot stick out in vomit.

Margot shook her head.

‘Lew’ll have one, won’t you Lew?’

Lewis looked at the open bag of potato chips and then he looked at Margot. ‘I’ll just have a little one,’ he said quietly.

Margot watched him put his hand into the bag and take out a tiny chip. The Manboy was standing very close to him, his teeth were all over his face and he said Lewis was his friend. He told him to hold out his hand and he tipped more chips into his upturned palm.

Margot had forgotten about the potato chips. Steven’s friend, Peter, bought them the night he stayed for tea. They were throwing the packet up in the air, across the kitchen, playing keepings off Lewis until Catherine walked in and went crook.

Steven said they were only playing and tried to hold her hand and when she let him he played keepings off her until the chips landed on top of the cupboard and Catherine said they could stay up there and Margot could clear away the sweets bowls and everyone else could start acting their age.

The Manboy gave Lewis another chip.

‘So how many of yous live here?’ he asked.

Lewis thought about this for a second and said, ‘there’s me and Margie and Mum and Ju…’

‘Six,’ said Margot.
The Manboy whistled. ‘Six. Counting the dog?’

‘Dog!’ Lewis hit his hands on his head. ‘Dog! I hate dogs.’

‘Hey! What did the dog say when he sat on the newspaper? Rough! Rough! Get it?’ The Manboy started laughing and Lewis laughed with him.

‘We have to go and see Mrs Wilson now,’ said Margot.

‘Do we?’ asked Lewis surprised.

‘Yes.’

‘Rough! Rough!’ The Manboy held his hands up like paws and pretended to be a dog and Lewis jumped around him asking for the dog joke again.

‘That’s enough jokes for today,’ said Margot in her Catherine voice, as she walked to the back door.

‘Bye bye then Margie. Lewis is gunna give me a look at the rest of the place and then he’ll come later.’

Margot stood in front of the closed back door. She stood as still as a statue and wished she was a sunbeam or a fairy or part of a dandelion. If she was one of those things she could slide away under the door or through the key hole and never have to see this Manboy again.

‘You goin’ or what?’

Margot tried to think of something to say or do but nothing came into her head. She just wanted the Manboy to leave. To leave them alone. Forever and ever. She turned back into the kitchen and saw Lewis rubbing at the chip crumbs that were stuck on his chin and on the front of his jumper. She looked at the floor and the lino squares stretching away and away, away past the table and Lewis and the Manboy, stretching all the way to the rest of the house.

*Slide and slide, down somone’s...* that song was always in her head. It was stuck there, spinning around and around, especially when she was trying to think of something else. She wondered how long it would be until she could think properly. Until she would know what to do, like grownups did.

Catherine told her that sometimes grownups didn’t know what to do. She told Margot that in the phone booth, when the telephone wouldn’t work and there was no one there on the other end and she looked frightened when she said that and so Margot felt frightened too. ‘I don’t know what to do, love.’ That was what she said. The *slide and slide* song popped into her head then too and she stopped it by smelling the phone booth. It smelled like very thin paper and
the paint made of checks smelled like dust. Catherine put the telephone back and looked past Margot to the rain outside. Margot told her not to worry. She told her lightning can’t get inside a telephone box and Catherine picked up one of Margot’s plaits and said, ‘It’s taking a long time, much longer than I imagined.’ Margot started to smile then. She liked the word imagined.

‘What’s funny,’ asked the Manboy, smashing the blown-up empty chip packet on the side of his leg.

‘Nothing,’ said Margot and she marched across the kitchen to the door that led to the rest of the house.

The Manboy stood in front of the blackened fireplace blowing on his hands.

‘This place is freezing,’ he said.

An outside shutter banged against the window and his head jumped towards the sound.

‘They always do that,’ said Margot.

‘Sometimes they’re louder than the wardrobe,’ said Lewis, standing in the doorway, picking a loose piece of paint off the wall.

The bedroom was messy. It was always messy on Saturdays because Catherine went to work first and Steven went back to bed with the paper and toast and a cup of tea. He sometimes stayed in bed until it was his time to go to work and as long as no one interrupted him, he didn’t care how long you took to do the dishes or sweep the floor or bring the washing in.

Margot looked at the empty bed and wished he was still in it. It seemed like ages ago since she had finished making bubbles with the dish washing liquid and hair dos on the dish mop and telling him she was finished now and could they go to the park to play.

‘Some one should fix that,’ said the Manboy kicking at a page of the Herald that lay near his foot, ‘the window might break’.

‘Do you want to go back to the loungeroom?’ asked Margot.

‘You’re not allowed to touch the television in there,’ said Lewis. ‘We did once and a space man came out of it and tried to take us to outer space, didn’t he Margie?’

Margot nodded.
The Manboy picked up the fire poker and stirred the ash in the grate. Tiny, silvery, specks flew up into the room. Lewis watched some of them land on the top of the wardrobe.

‘It’s not that wardrobe that scares you in the night,’ he said, ‘it’s that other one, in Julie’s room.’

‘You two talk a lot of rot,’ said the Manboy, dropping the poker on the hearth.

Margot felt like poking out her tongue when he said that but then Lewis said, ‘I hate you,’ and the Manboy turned around from the fireplace and looked at them and then his teeth got bigger like the wicked wolf in *Red Riding Hood*.

‘What?’

‘I hate you.’ Lewis told him again the same way as he told him the first time.

The Manboy’s tongue searched for the pimple on his lip and he looked at Margot and said, ‘why did the potato cry?’

‘Because he wanted to go home,’ said Margot quietly.

‘Home. Home. You think you’re smart, don’t ya, here in your great big house?’

‘It’s not our house,’ said Margot.

‘And that’s why youse live here.’

‘It’s Steven’s house and we’re only allowed to stay if he says we can.’

‘So if you do somethin’ bad he can get rid of youse.’

‘Yes,’ said Margot looking across to Steven’s side of the bed, ‘he can throw us into the street.’

The Manboy nodded and put his hands in his pockets, ‘you’d better watch out then.’

‘We are watching out,’ said Lewis, coming suddenly to life, ‘we’re all the time watching out.’

‘Sounds like like a good idea,’ said the Manboy, ‘let’s finish the game then.’

‘What game?’

‘I Spy.’

Lewis pulled at Margot’s arm until their heads were level and he whispered something in her ear. Her eyes flicked across to the Manboy as she listened.

‘What?’ he asked as he scratched at the side of his arm.
Lewis shook his head, and Margot half nodded then turned towards the window and saw a tiny bird playing hopscotch on a tree branch.

‘I’m going to ask you again,’ said the Manboy, sounding just like Miss Stiller, ‘what?’

‘It’s a secret,’ said Lewis.

‘Yeah,’ said the Manboy, ‘well guess what? I’ve got a secret too.’

His tongue poked around his teeth.

‘It’s right here inside my pocket.’

He pushed his hands deep inside his pockets and made the sides of his pants stick out. He looked like he was going to say – ‘stick ‘em up’ – only he didn’t say that, he said, ‘it’s straight and white with a red head.’ Then he started moving quickly, from one foot to another and his handless arms made large triangles on the side of his body, ‘Give up? Give up?’

‘The Little Red Hen,’ said Margot suddenly sure.

‘What?’

‘The Little Red Hen, you know that story…’

‘About the sky falling in,’ said Lewis.

‘That’s a different hen, that’s…’

‘Shut up,’ the Manboy snapped. He stopped moving his feet and his arms. His face went all angry and he said, ‘Are you two stupid, or what?’

Margot swallowed hard and looked at the Manboy, ‘no,’ she said in a tiny voice. ‘I thought…’

‘Well I’ll tell you something for nothing. You two are stupid at thinking. You two are the dumbest kids ever. If I had any money I’d buy youse a brain.’

‘Ahhhhhhhhhh,’ Lewis screamed and covered his ears with his hands.

‘What?’ said the Manboy, ‘what’s he doing?’

‘Ahhhh,’ cried Lewis again, ‘don’t, don’t.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘Brain,’ said Margot, mouthing the word more than speaking it. If anyone says the word brain, he screams.’

‘Screams?’ The Manboy moved closer to Margot and put his hands back into his pockets. ‘That’s funny. That’s funny, funny. So what word makes you scream, Margie-no-name?’

Margot rubbed the top of her eye and tried to think.
'Dunno? I know mine,’ said the Manboy. ‘My scream word starts with F.’
Margot kept rubbing her eye but she couldn’t think of a single word that started with the letter F.
‘Give up?’
‘No,’ said Margot.
‘I give up,’ said Lewis.
‘It’s something in my pocket.’
Margot stared at the Manboy’s hands as they charged around inside his pants’ pocket.
‘You’ll never guess.’
‘It’s easy,’ said Margot looking straight into the Manboy’s face, certain that she guessed it. ‘Fingers.’
‘Wrong!’ The Manboy spat a laugh in their faces.
‘This is what makes me scream,’ he said, excitedly.
He turned his back to them and as he moved he pulled something out of his pocket.
Margot could hear a scraping, scratching noise, then the Manboy turned slowly back to face them and said, ‘fire.’
The match burned brightly in the Manboy’s hand.
Margot and Lewis stared at it in silence.
‘I spy with my little eye something beginning with M. Told you. Told you. Matches!’
The Manboy’s words blew the match out. He threw it on the floor and lit another one and his face lit up with it. His eyes were shining and his red hair got redder. He looked just like the lady on the front of the match box.
As each match blackened and died he lit another one and another one.
Margot looked at the dead matches piling up on the floor of her mother’s bedroom.
She started to feel hot. She started to feel like everything was burning – the floor, the bed, the Manboy, the wardrobe.
Everything swirling and flaming and burning and then she knew, when she saw the fire of another match, she knew why he had found her.
He was the devil and he had come to take her to hell.
She grabbed Lewis and ran to the door.
‘Stop it!’ she shouted. ‘Leave us alone.’

She started flaying at the air with her free arm and her shouts turned into screams.

‘Stop it! Stop it!’

‘Go home mean boy, go home,’ said Lewis pulling a mean face.

‘Shhh,’ said the Manboy softly as though he was talking to the matches.

‘You’re a stealer,’ yelled Margot.

‘Shoosh,’ said the Manboy, ‘I didn’t steal nothing. You gave me those chips and anyway I’ll just say you ate them.’

‘You go to jail for stealing and telling lies.’

‘You’re nuts.’

‘I know all about jail,’ cried Margot.

‘She does, she does,’ said Lewis.

‘Shut up both of youse. You two don’t know nothing.’

‘I do so. I saw a dead bird in the copper.’

‘It was stabbed through the heart,’ said Lewis.

‘You’re nuts,’ said the Manboy again. ‘They’re gunna put you two in an institution. And I’m gunna tell ‘em where you live.’

He closed the matchbox and put it back inside his pocket. He pushed past them in the doorway and stood in the passage.

‘Don’t tell anyone I was here, or I’ll come back and set youse on fire.’

He fumbled down the passage and disappeared through the door to the kitchen.

Margot and Lewis stood staring at the empty space where the Manboy had been and even though it was very, very quiet everything seemed loud.

‘Pick the matches up,’ said Margot falling to her knees and scraping them into a pile on the floor. ‘Something might catch on fire.’

They stood in the doorway of their mother’s bedroom, hands full of dead matches, staring down the passage.

‘Do you think he’s really gone?’ asked Lewis.

‘I saw him run past the window,’ said Margot.

She looked at Lewis’s believing face and felt sad. She felt sad and tired.

I’m sick and tired of this Margot. Catherine often said that and for the first time, Margot felt it too – the very same thing – sick and tired.
She was sick and tired of having to think about everything - what to do with the matches, what to tell her mother, what to do next.

Everything was really topsy turvy now and it wasn’t funny anymore. It was horrible – horrible like the middle of the night.

She took a deep breath and stepped into the passage. She knew she had to go first. The eldest always went first.

Lewis followed her and they walked along in single file, without saying a word.

She tried to listen for noises the way animals do – not just with her ears but with her skin too.

She thought she could smell something, something like fire, and then she remembered her hands were full of burnt matches – that the fire smell was her.

She thought the old water tank would be a good place to hide them or maybe they could throw them into the pond but Lewis didn’t want to go outside. He didn’t want to go into the kitchen either. He said he was sick. He said he was going to be sick.

Margot pleaded with him. Not now. Not right this minute in the middle of the passage.

‘I’ve got a surprise for you,’ she said brightly.

‘What sort of surprise?’

Margot couldn’t think of a surprise right at that moment but the thought of a surprise was nearly as good as a real one.

‘It won’t be a surprise if I tell you.’

Catherine always said that and Margot wondered now if that was why.

‘When will you tell me?’

‘When Mum gets home.’

Lewis nodded and looked down at his hands. ‘Where are you going to put the matches?’

‘In the fireplace,’ said Margot and saying the words out loud made that seem like the best place to put them.

The door to the loungeroom was wide open. They stopped at the edge of the room and peered in.

‘No wardrobes,’ said Margot and Lewis smiled at her.
She walked over to the fireplace. The hearth was full of ash. She opened her hands and let the matches fall.

Lewis did the same and they sank one after another into the soft, silent, ashes.

‘Hello! Where is everyone?’ Catherine’s voice rang through the house.

‘Mum!’ Margot and Lewis fell over each other racing to meet her. They tore into the kitchen and came to a halt at the sight of the chair standing beneath the opened top cupboard.

‘And what have you two scalliwags been up too?’

Margot and Lewis looked at each other.

‘Cat got your tongue?’

Margot looked up the cupboard and then she looked at Lewis.

‘Well you must have been doing something you mustn’t. That’s the only reason the two of you would be so quiet. Who’s been up in the cupboard?’

Catherine wheeled Tommy’s pusher over near the door.

‘A boy came in and stole the potato chips,’ said Lewis.

Catherine sat down at the table and started searching for something in her handbag.

‘What boy?’

‘He didn’t tell us his name, did he Margie?’

Margot was scratching the side of her arm and pulling a face.

Julie jumped around the table holding her dress tight between her legs with her hand.

‘Julie, if you want to go to the toilet, go,’ said Catherine. ‘You’ll burst your bladder one of these days.’

‘He’s from school,’ said Margot.

Catherine looked up from her bag frowning, ‘and you don’t know his name?’

Margot tried to think what to say next. She looked down at her hands. They were covered in black stuff from the matches. She put them behind her back.

‘Not our school. The school next-door.’

‘The high school? What was a boy from the high school doing here?’

Margot looked at Lewis. He looked like he was going to say something but when he saw the look on Margot’s face he looked down at the floor instead.
'He was asking for money.'
'Money?'
'For some poor people,' said Margot, ‘and because we didn’t have any we gave him Steven’s potato chips instead.’

Catherine smiled. ‘Well there’s no need to look so guilty about it. He can do without. He probably forgot they were up there anyway.’

She put her handbag on the table and searched inside it with two hands.
‘Ah…here it is. I was beginning to think I’d imagined it,’ and she pulled a Cherry Ripe out of her bag as though she was a magician.

On the narrow bridge across the pond, Margot broke the treat in half, measured the two pieces against each other, bit a small piece off the biggest one and handed it to Lewis.

She took a big, smiling, bite of her half and galloped away.

She sprang into the afternoon, neighing and tossing her head up to the clouds that raced around the blue, spring sky.

She ran past the glossy leaves of the arum lilies, past the nodding snow-drops and the fluffy pom-pom flowers and through the soft, sad, hydrangeas.

She ran and ran until the clouds got thinner and thinner and the Cherry Ripe got smaller and smaller and she was as far away as you could go, at the very end of the garden.

The three giant eucalypts shook their leaves and growled at her.

She reared up at them and neighed wildly. She wasn’t afraid of those Banksia Men. She wasn’t afraid of anything just then.

As her last bite of Cherry Ripe slid down her throat she looked up past the giant trees to the sky.

The sun was trapped inside a cloud and its edges looked like fire. *Liar, liar, pants on fire.*

She had been bad but now she would be good. Now she would be the best, best girl in the whole universe and then her Daddy would come back.

She ran down to the Hills Hoist and tiptoed over to the grey metal pole that held the clothesline up.

She grabbed the pole with both hands and whispered, ‘when will my pedal car be coming?’
‘You’ve asked me that a thousand times, Margot,’ said the pole. ‘When your father sends it.’

‘But he doesn’t know where we are. He doesn’t know all of the things that are happening.’

‘I can’t help that,’ said the pole. ‘If he wants to find you, he will.’

‘I want him to find me,’ said Margot. ‘Why won’t he find me? Tomorrow Dad? Tomorrow?’

Margot grabbed the pole and covered it in kisses.

‘Come back. Come back,’ she cried, and she kept on crying out, until the pole’s rough metal, plucked tiny blood-drops from her chocolate kissing lips and made her stop.
Catherine picked Julie’s ponytail up off the kitchen floor and tried to make it come back to life. When it wouldn’t she snatched Tommy out of Margot’s arms and told her to stand with Lewis and Julie in front of the kitchen window.

‘On the last day. On my very last day.’

She kept saying that over and over. Her face had gone white and her eyes had gone dark and she looked a bit like a ghost mother.

Margot looked up at the ticking. It was nearly five o’clock and that meant there would be five dings in a minute, right in the middle of everything.

‘The truth,’ said Catherine, her voice starting to get louder, ‘this time I want the truth.’

Margot sighed. She was sick of the truth.

‘That shouldn’t be too much to ask. Margot, will you look at me when I’m talking to you.’

Margot wasn’t looking properly on purpose. She shouldn’t have to line up. It wasn’t her fault Lewis cut Julie’s ponytail off with the scissors.

Lewis was looking down at the lino. His face had gone all red – even the backs of his ears and the skin on his head. Julie was next to him, standing with one leg bent up in front of the other and her whole hand squashed inside her mouth. If her arms and legs had been made of stripes she would have looked like a rag doll. The clock started to ding and Julie pulled her hand out of her mouth and said, ‘I know, I know. Five o’clock.’

Catherine wasn’t interested in the clock. She was only interested in lies. She looked at Lewis and said, ‘only cowards tell lies and there’s nothing worse than a lying coward’.

Margot tried to think of something worse than a lying coward but she couldn’t think of anything, especially as Lewis’s hair was all cut up too and it was hard to think how that had happened by itself, but then her mother had a new idea.

‘Rats!’ Catherine yelled the word across the kitchen.

‘That’s what it looks like. Like you’ve been eaten by rats.’
The word rats made Margot feel sick. She always felt sick about rats ever since Audrey Fish’s brother told her they could burrow into your brain and live there without you even knowing.

Catherine stopped shouting and started opening the drawers in the kitchen cupboards as though she knew that’s where the rats were hiding.

‘I didn’t do it,’ said Lewis in a tiny voice.

‘You know what happens, Lewis, when you tell lies. You know what happens to liars.’

‘They were playing hairdressers,’ said Margot, ‘that’s what Julie said.’

‘And koalas. Lewie was going to turn me into a koala.’ Julie nodded and when her ponytail didn’t fall in front of her face she put her hand on her head to see where it had gone.

‘You know you’re not allowed to play with scissors,’ snapped Catherine, ignoring all the reasons for the scissors. ‘All of you. All of you are old enough to know that.’

What about Tommy, thought Margot, he’s not old enough to know anything. She looked at him sitting in his little wooden rocking horse, moving back and forwards, back and forwards.

She wondered how old you had to be to get your first belting. Then she remembered Tommy had already had one – a big one – and he was very little then. Not Julie though. She couldn’t remember Julie ever getting into trouble. Julie was a goody goody but now her ponytail was gone maybe she would change.

‘It’s the lies,’ said Catherine. ‘I won’t stomach lies.’

Margot knew that. That was why she only told white lies. White lies were alright. They were the sorts of lies you told to make someone feel good or not worried. Margot was afraid of the other lies, the bad lies. They got you the strap and after that, they sank into the bottom of your stomach and stayed there.

‘I’m going to ask you once more, Lewis. Did you or did you not cut Julie’s hair with the scissors?’ On the words scissors Catherine pulled the strap out of one of the drawers she’d already looked in.

‘No, Mum.’

The strap wriggled around in Catherine’s hand, like a snake looking for someone to kill. She took a deep breath.
‘I didn’t know I was doing it. I didn’t really.’

‘That’s enough,’ Catherine said. ‘Hold out your hand.’

Margot looked at her brother. He was staring at the floor and holding his arms tight by his sides. Catherine told him again and Margot could feel her heart start to race. He should just do it. He should just get it over with. It was easier if you owned up. If you said sorry. If you promised you would never, ever do it again.

Catherine wasn’t going to ask a third time. That was what she said. She grabbed Lewis’ arm away from the side of his body and bought the strap down hard on the palm of his hand. He squealed so loudly he sounded like a fire siren.

Julie cried out too and hit her hands on her head and Margot narrowed her eyes at her mother.

‘Don’t think I’ve finished with you young lady,’ said Catherine as she dropped the strap on the table and rubbed the inside of her hand. ‘And what exactly, were you doing while all this was going on?’

Margot lowered her head to her chest. The dusty streaks of flour on the front of her dress told her what she was doing.

She thought about trying to rub them off and then she thought about Lewis and lies and the shock of seeing the flour flying over everything and she decided it was better to keep standing there, like she was, as still as a statue.

Lewis sank down onto the floor and his siren noise sank with him.

‘I’m waiting,’ said Catherine.

Margot knew that. She could feel the waiting. It was big and heavy and filled the whole kitchen.

She wished she was in some other kitchen. Mrs Wilson’s kitchen, on that day they had scones for afternoon tea with her lamb sitting on a blanket in front of the wood stove.

‘I’m disappointed in you Margot. Very disappointed.’

Margot knew that too but her mother didn’t know how hard it was to clean up the flour. It kept going everywhere and there was mess and noise and Lewis saying he didn’t spill it and Julie saying he did and Tommy crawling through the middle of the cleaned up bit.

She had threatened to tell on them. She was going to tell everyone – Catherine, Mr Peacock, Mrs Wilson, the milkbar lady.
She threatened to lock them in a tower too and never let them out but then they promised to be good for the rest of their lives and do whatever Margot said.

‘Have it your own way.’

Margot lifted her eyes to her mother’s voice. She hated that have-it-your-own-way voice. It made her feel scared. Scared that Catherine wouldn’t change back because what if the wind changed and your voice stayed the same like a face did? What would happen then? She’d never to able to say it. To tell her mother she wanted to tell her everything. Always.

Even now she wanted to be next to her, touching her dress and telling her how Tommy kept grizzling and Julie kept arguing and Lewis wouldn’t stop searching in all of the cupboards and if she hadn’t taken so long to hide the flour box in the old water tank, there wouldn’t have been time to cut the ponytail off.

Catherine opened a drawer. Then she opened another one and another one. ‘Who’s lost now Mummy?’

Catherine ignored Julie’s question. Or maybe she didn’t hear it. Julie had a little voice and now, without her ponytail bobbing around, it seemed even smaller.

It was the ruler. That’s what she was looking for. You weren’t supposed to hit girls with the strap, not unless they’d been wicked but it wasn’t wicked if you promised not to do it again.

Lewis couldn’t promise. You can’t take back a cut-off ponytail. It wasn’t like a bad word or a rude face and the holes in his hair might stay there forever too and people might think he was a rat.

Julie put her hand up and said the ruler was naughty. It was very naughty to keep hiding but the same time she said that, it was found.

Catherine tapped the ruler on top of the table a couple times and then she put it down. Her face went stiff and she looked like some of those people from outer space. The ones who come down to earth and pretend to be normal.

Margot hid her hands behind her back and looked up at the clock. She knew she had to get hit. That was what happened when you didn’t do as you were told or when you were selfish and ungrateful or going behind people’s backs.

That’s what Catherine was saying, in her mean mother voice with her lips straight like a ruler.
Margot screwed up her face but the words still found her. They flew around the kitchen and hit her on the head. They told her to own up, to stop being selfish, to be some other, better girl. A girl who told the truth.

Margot’s hands pulled at the skin on her face. Liar, liar. Buried inside her. That’s where they were, those words, those lies. The cut-out dolls knew that. That’s why they called her names and cut her up in the night. She could see their red lips and their scissor legs coming closer and closer. Coming to hurt her, and Lewis and Julie too.

She felt hot. Hot like the oven door or the iron. She closed her eyes and her pointer fingers pulled the corners of her mouth into a great big hole across her face and then her tongue was out and pointing too and it was finished.

Catherine cried out backwards into her throat. She grabbed Margot by the arm and hit her hard on the back of her legs with the ruler. She hit her again and again and she kept hitting until the words went away and the tears went away, until the clock’s tic, tic, tic was the only thing you could hear.
‘Margot! Margot wake up!’

Margot opened her eyes. Her mother was standing over her bed shaking her. She was in her nighty, yelling in a whispery voice.

‘Get up,’ she said. Then she was shaking Lewis and waking him up too.

‘What? What’s happened?’ Margot blinked into the dark room. The moon was shining in the window and her mother, flying about, looked like an angel, an angel with something special to say. Maybe she had come straight from God.

‘Quickly. Come with me. I want you to go into Julie and Tommy’s room. I’ll tell you when we get there.’

Margot and Lewis hopped out of their beds and followed their mother down the passage. The passage was in darkness too.

‘Why don’t you turn the lights on?’ Margot whispered.

‘Where’s the wardrobe?’ Lewis asked, reaching for his mother’s hand.

Julie and Tommy were asleep in their dark bedroom. Nothing ever woke Julie up. Catherine always said that. And she was right because when she left Margot and Lewis standing in the door way, to run over and pull the window open and close the outside shutters, the loud bang didn’t stir either of them.

‘Why can’t we put the lights on?’ wailed Lewis.

‘Shhh,’ said Catherine, ‘you have to be quiet, just for a little bit.’ She was back at the door, fiddling with the door handle.

Margot strained through the darkness. What was her mother doing? It was too hard to see. Maybe the sky had fallen in.

‘Listen to me,’ said Catherine. ‘When I go I want you to press this button here. It locks the door. See?’

‘Where are you going?’ asked Margot alarmed.

‘I won’t be long. I promise. Just wait in here until I come back.’

‘In the dark?’

‘The lights are broken. Just for a minute. Just while I fix the lights.’

‘How did…’

‘Mum! Mum! The wardrobe’s in here. That big…’
‘Shhh. The wardrobe’s asleep. We don’t want to wake it up now do we?’

Lewis shook his head.

‘I’ll only be a minute. Here…’ Catherine pulled the blankets out from the bottom of Julie’s bed. ‘You snuggle in here for a minute. Margie will look after you. Won’t you love?’

‘Yes Mummy,’ said Margot, feeling suddenly brave, even though it was dark.

This was it. Another chance. Another chance to show her mother how good she could be at looking after everyone. It was time to start again.

Time to forget all about the pony-tail and the rats. Her heart was ticking louder than the kitchen clock and she loved her mother, loved her with all her heart for giving her a second chance.

Catherine took her hand and placed in on a bump underneath the door handle.

‘Press this button once I’m gone and don’t, whatever you do, open the door for anyone – unless it’s me.’

Margot nodded and her mother rushed out and closed the bedroom door behind her.

The room went so dark, that for a second or two, Margot was sure she would never see daylight again.

‘Turn the light on! Turn the light on!’

Lewis was out of Julie’s bed and grabbing hold of Margot. His hands were sticky and he smelt like warm blankets.

Tommy called out in his sleep and Lewis clung to Margot so tightly she couldn’t move.

‘It’s just Tommy,’ she said, ‘babies dream by calling out.’

‘It’s not him,’ cried Lewis, ‘it’s the…coming to get me.’

‘Let go,’ said Margot, ‘I have to press the button.’

‘Nooo,’ cried Lewis and Margot could feel his fingers scraping the bones in her chest.

She strained through the darkness to see if she could see anything but with the shutters closed the bedroom was nothing but big dark shapes. She freed a hand and felt around the door handle for the button.
Lewis was screaming, ‘turn on the light, turn on the light,’ and now, because she couldn’t find the button, she was starting to think she would have to turn it on.

The button must have moved. Everything moves in the dark. Everyone knows that.

She heard Tommy kick the side of his cot and call out again and if he kept doing that Julie would wake up next and her second chance would be gone.

Lewis let go of her and started hitting the wall. ‘Where’s the light gone? Where’s the light?’ he screamed.

‘Stop it, Lewis,’ she hissed, ‘it’s here. It’s here.’ She grabbed at the dark with both hands and when she found the light cord she pulled it down as hard as she could. It made a loud click but the light didn’t come on.

She pulled the cord on and off and on and off but nothing happened. ‘It’s broken,’ she said in a small voice, remembering why they were there, remembering her mother was fixing it and thinking that if she kept holding onto that cord, as tight as she could, for just a minute longer it would be fixed.

Light flashed through the door’s keyhole and the cord jumped away from her hand.

Lewis put his arms over his head and made a noise the same as Mrs Wilson’s lamb made when it wanted to be let out.

The door started to get bigger and bigger and voices started coming. There were voices and noises and ragged bits of light pushing through the edges of the door.

Margot put her arm on Lewis’ back and spat into his ear in a fast whisper, ‘under the bed, Lew. Get under the bed.’

Lewis ran to Julie’s bed and crawled under it with Margot following.

They lay flat on their stomachs, close to the wall and their noses filled up with the smells of rust from the springs and dry wee from the underside of the mattress.

Margot thought about lifting Tommy out of his cot, of saving him, but then a bright beam of light was in the room and legs near the edge of the bed and a voice and then Catherine’s voice too.
‘We’re safe. We’re all safe now.’ Catherine kept saying that over and over but her voice didn’t sound safe and when Margot poked her head out into the room, her mother started to cry like Tommy.
Margot chewed her bread and butter and looked at the policeman. He didn’t look anything like a real policeman. Real policeman didn’t dress up like they were going to work or to church, real policeman had uniforms and badges. He had a pencil though. A very, very sharp pencil. A pencil that looked sharper than Miss Stiller’s and Margot smiled as she watched him writing.

The policeman had come with two other proper policemen, in uniforms, who were still walking around outside, shining their bright torches into the bushes and the trees and the pond. Margot had never seen so many torches. They had all arrived together in the passage and light beams rushed around everywhere and she thought about the girl in the television, the one who got taken away in a flying saucer by Martians.

Lewis was shining Mrs Wilson’s torch on the table top. It was Mrs Wilson who shone her torch through the bedroom door and made her drop the light cord.

Mrs Wilson told the policeman she was putting her lamb outside for the night, when she saw something running down the road, waving its arms. She said she had no idea it was Catherine. She thought it must be a lunatic. And Catherine said she felt like a lunatic running onto the road in her nighty and Mrs Wilson laughed and said she thought she might have another cup of tea even though it was nearly half past ten.

Catherine wasn’t drinking her tea. Her cup was sitting there getting cold and her lips were moving, even though she wasn’t saying anything and her hands were shaking too, because that’s what happens when a burglar falls on you.

‘He fell against my fingers.’ Catherine said that very quietly and the policeman wrote it down and asked lots of questions looking at the table.

Catherine told him the shutters on her bedroom window were banging, banging louder than usual, and when she got out of bed to close them there he was.
She didn’t know if he was half in or half out. She tried to close the window and then the burglar fell against her fingers and bent them so far back she thought they were all broken.

The policeman asked Catherine to hold out her shaking hands for him to see. He made her hold onto the milk bottle to see if any bones were broken. Margot watched her mother trying to squeeze the milk.

‘She’s a saint. There’s no argument about it,’ said Mrs Wilson, taking the bottle when the test was finished and pouring some milk into her third cup of tea.

Catherine said her fingers felt a bit better now and if the man in the car hadn’t stopped and Mrs Wilson hadn’t come out with her lamb and her torch she didn’t know what would have happened.

‘Some young lout,’ said Mrs Wilson, ‘prowling around, looking for money or a watch. Something to sell to buy cigarettes or take his girlfriend to the pictures.’

The policeman scratched the side of his head with his pencil and looked down at his notebook. They waited for him to say something about the lout and his girlfriend.

‘Hmmm. Well, let’s just say, you thought quickly, very quickly, you’ve a lot to be grateful for. Most women in your situation…most would have…’

‘Dropped down dead on the spot.’ Mrs Wilson finished the policemen’s sentence for him.

‘Thank you, Mrs Wilson. Let’s just say, that running out into the street to get help was…well, some might call it brave.’

Margot looked across at her mother. She didn’t look very brave, sitting there in her dressing gown, holding onto her teacup with her shaky fingers. How could you be brave in a dressing gown?

‘I’ll say it was brave,’ said Mrs Wilson, shaking the teapot to see if there was any tea left, ‘what if the burglar had been driving the car?’

‘Burglars don’t normally drive cars, Mrs Wilson. If they could afford cars they wouldn’t have to burgle.’

Margot smiled at the policeman. Of course that was right. ‘If the burglars had cars they would be kidnappers wouldn’t they?’ she said.
‘Let’s hope not,’ said the policeman laughing then he changed back to his policeman voice and said, ‘and the man of the house. Where was he, while all this was going on?’

Catherine said he was away. He was away working. Trying to make more money for them so she could stay home and be a proper mother.

The policeman nodded and said it was getting harder and harder to make a bob and look after your family too.

He said everywhere you looked there were hooligans and louts and it was ten o’clock closing you could thank for that.

Margot wanted to know what ten o’clock closing was but Mrs Wilson said, ‘Or Henry Bolte, you can thank him too,’ and everything went quiet.

‘So.’ The policeman scratched his chin with the end of his pencil and said, ‘when will Mr Persson be coming home?’

Catherine fiddled with the collar on her dressing gown. He was coming back, she said, for a visit next week and then she told the policeman it was her last day at the drycleaners and she made an Irish stew for tea.

Margot looked behind her to the stove. She wondered if there was any left. It might taste nice now, now that everyone in the kitchen was talking again and if there was more, she could ask for some more bread and butter too, to dip into the warm gravy and make patterns on the bottom of her plate.

‘Irish stew,’ said the policeman, ‘it’s certainly still cold enough for stews.’

‘Cold…,’ Lewis threw the word up to the ceiling where he was making light circles with Mrs Wilson’s torch. ‘Mine was cold and it nearly made me sick.’

The policeman turned to look at Lewis.

‘What happened to his head?’ he asked frowning.

The outside policeman shone their torches in the kitchen window and made everyone jump, and the inside policeman left his question and went to see what they wanted.

‘Are you going to tell him, Mum?’ asked Margot after he’d closed the door behind him.

Catherine folded her arms into her dressing gown and shook her head. ‘What I have got?’ she said, ‘what have I got that anyone would want to steal?’
Margot fiddled with her empty bread and butter plate. That wasn’t what she meant. She meant the rats and the scissors. What was her mother going to say about those?

‘Savages and lunatics the lot of them,’ said Mrs Wilson. ‘They won’t get away with it for long.’

Mrs Wilson always said nice things.

Margot tried to think of something nice to say too but Lewis shone the torch in her face and said, ‘Where’s the policeman gone?’ and Catherine put her hands together, like she was saying her prayers, and laughed.

She kept laughing, louder and louder and the more she laughed the more her eyes got very, very sad. Maybe her fingers were hurting. Those long, white fingers with their tiny pink nails. Those fingers she was working to the bone. That’s what Mrs Coates really meant. Not bones in her fingers. She knew that now. She wondered why Jim didn’t tell her how to say it properly…

‘Cathy, Cathy,’ said Mrs Wilson, leaning across to Catherine and putting her hand on her arm, ‘you mustn’t let it play on your mind. It’s finished now and that’s the truth.’

Margot was sure her mother would stop her sad laughing when she heard that. After everything that happened it had come back to her, back into their kitchen, Catherine’s favourite - the truth.

The policeman came back too and said he could finish up and get going. He said the grounds were clear, his men had fixed the wires in the fuse box and he had everything he needed.

He told Catherine she probably gave the poor burglar such a fright, he was probably half way to Sydney by now.

Catherine sighed and shut her eyes and said, ‘Sometimes, sometimes I wish that’s where I was too.’

‘Let’s hope not,’ said the policeman putting his pencil and his notebook away in his pocket and waiting while everyone stood up.

‘Goodbye young miss,’ he said to Margot, ‘you look after your mother for me, won’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said Margot smiling, ‘I will look after her because when I grow up I’m going to be a policeman too.’
The policeman laughed. ‘You have to be very strong to be a policeman,’ he said. He tapped his finger on the side of his nose. ‘And you have to be able to keep yourself to yourself. Not something the ladies are very good at.’

Mrs Wilson snorted, ‘that depends on the ladies,’ she said and one of her eyebrows bounced up on top of her head and left the other one behind.

Margot watched the policeman watching Mrs Wilson’s face. She didn’t understand what they were talking about but she knew something else. Something very important and policeman-like.

‘Do you know Ronald Ryan?’ she asked.

The policeman looked down at her surprised. ‘And what would a little girl like you know about Mr Ryan?’

‘He got hanged. That’s what everyone at school said.’

‘Please Margot,’ said Catherine, ‘the policeman has to get home. I’m sure he has a family too or other work to do.’

‘All of those,’ said the policeman cheerfully.

‘Well, I’m impressed,’ said Mrs Wilson. ‘I’m sure I didn’t know a thing about hangings when I was her age. In my day it was only the war.’

‘It’s a very different place today, Mrs Wilson. The world’s a very different place.’

The policeman nodded to himself and moved towards the backdoor.

‘Then again, a warm cocoa and a good night’s sleep and they’ll forget all about it. Children are still lucky that way – they won’t remember a thing later on.’

And while Mrs Wilson was starting to argue about that, he left.
Margot called across the dark bedroom in a quiet voice. ‘Lewis.’ She knew he was already asleep. She could hear him making dreaming noises with his breath. She called to him again, just to be sure, then she slid out of bed and tiptoed out the door.

She couldn’t stay asleep. She kept on thinking - what would happen if the burglar hadn’t gone to Sydney. If he was hiding instead, like she did, down the dark side of the house or inside the washing on the clothesline.

She hurried down the passage towards the light that shone from her mother’s room, edged around the open door and peeped in.

Catherine was sitting in the chair near the fireplace looking at a photo in a frame. She was rocking backwards and forwards, the way you did when you were nursing a baby. When she saw Margot she put a hand on her heart. Margot thought she was going to swear something. Was going to say ‘cross my heart and hope to die’ but instead she shook her head and said, ‘Yes, love, in you come.’

Margot thought that was funny – shaking your head for no when you were really saying yes.

Catherine reached up and put the photo frame back on the mantelpiece.

Margot didn’t have to look at it. She knew what it was a photo of. Catherine had taken it at the tea party. The one they had outside. Just like Alice in Wonderland her mother said, except no one was going to get their head chopped off.

Margot laughed, although she hadn’t laughed when Catherine read that part of the story. She’d screamed for Catherine to stop reading. She wanted to know why a queen would cut off someone’s head? Why there were evil people in the world and why you didn’t know which ones they were?

Margot rubbed the back of her leg with her foot. There was bright sunshine in that photo and when Catherine threw the yellow tablecloth over the top of the big round log she split the kindling on, it turned into a sun too.
Together they carried out all the cups and saucers and the teapot and a nut loaf spread with butter. As they laid them out on the sun table, Catherine told Margot that when she was little, she loved tea parties.

‘I used to invite the birds,’ she said. ‘Birds love tea parties too. I bet you didn’t know that.’ She giggled and tapped Margot on the nose and Margot started singing *Sing a Song of Sixpence* and asked her to tap her nose again.

‘It’s lucky you’ve got a photo, isn’t it Mum?’ Catherine smiled, ‘It doesn’t seem important now,’ she said looking away into the blackened fireplace.

‘We should have a fire, shouldn’t we Mum? It’s cold.’

‘Freezing. In November.’

‘It was warm when we had the tea party. When you took the photo. Remember Mum? Remember the purple flower you put in my cardigan?’

Catherine put her hand on her mouth. ‘It was lilac.’ She said the words through her fingers, ‘it was the first corsage he ever gave me.’

Margot frowned. ‘Who?’

‘It’s what you call it when someone gives you a flower to pin on your dress, a corsage.’

‘Who Mum? Who gave you that? Steven?’

‘Steven doesn’t dance. He doesn’t like dancing.’

‘Doesn’t he?’ Margot wanted to dance around the bedroom when she heard that, ‘why doesn’t he?’

‘Oh Margot, love,’ Catherine covered her head with hands, ‘what are we going to do?’

Margot waited for her mother to say something else but she didn’t. She kept her head in her hands as though she was counting in a game of hide and seek.

Margot looked up at the photo of Julie at the sun table. At her long, blonde ponytail, tied up with a long, silky ribbon. She saw her mother brushing and brushing. Lifting her sister’s hair higher and higher onto the top of her tiny head until it swished around from side to side like a real horse’s tail.

‘It’ll be alright Mum,’ said Margot moving closer to her mother’s chair, searching for her watery blue eyes, ‘it’ll all be better soon.’

‘I know it will love. I know it will.’

‘You’re the best Mummy in the world,’ said Margot softly, ‘the very best.’
A tear fell through Catherine’s fingers and she stood up and leant against the mantelpiece.

‘Your father came and saw me today.’

Margot looked at her mother’s back. ‘My father. Daddy? Was it Daddy, Mum?’

‘At work. On my last day there, he came to see me.’

Margot couldn’t move. She couldn’t speak. She could feel her heart beating inside her ears. Her Daddy was back. She knew he’d come back. He had searched and searched and now he had found her.

‘He wants to see you. And Lewis too.’

‘He wants to? Is he better now Mum?’

‘Better?’ Catherine didn’t seem to understand the question.

Margot tried to think of something else to say but she didn’t know what. She didn’t know what you should say if your Daddy was gone and then he came back.

Come back. Come back. How many times had she said that to the pole on the clothesline? And the pole was listening. It was listening all along.

‘He bought me some flowers. Some flowers for my birthday and some Black Magic chocolates.’

Catherine turned to look at Margot.

‘My birthday was months ago.’

A little laugh jumped out of her sad lips.

Margot laughed a little bit too. She wanted to ask, ‘Can we? Can we see him?’ but she was afraid. She was afraid she might say something wrong. That Catherine might get angry or upset and her Daddy who had found her, had finally, finally found her, might go away again and be lost in the world forever.

‘You don’t have to see him,’ said Catherine slowly, ‘not if you don’t want to.’

Margot felt like she was in the dark again, pulling on the light cord, trying to make it come alive. ‘I do Mum,’ she said at last, ‘I want to see him. I do.’

Catherine’s fingertips touched the side of Margot’s face. ‘I thought so,’ she whispered, ‘so we’ll see.’
Like a baby animal finding its nest, Margot wanted to climb up on her mother and burrow down deep inside her. Her mother. Her beautiful mother had found her Daddy. Had brought him back to her.

She wanted to sing. She wanted to sing out as loud as she could and thank God and baby Jesus and the stars.

Here, in the room where a Banksia Man threw matches at her feet, were her wishes and prayers, forgiving fingers on her cheek, and now they’d all be together again and every everything would come true.
Jim and the telephone box were standing together in the same silent way. Margot thought her father looked smaller than she remembered, with his head bent down to the footpath and his hands inside his pockets.

‘I don’t think he knows we’re here,’ she whispered to Catherine. She didn’t know why she was whispering in the middle of the afternoon in the middle of the street she walked down every day to school.

‘He’ll see us in a minute,’ said Catherine and while her words were still in the air he did look up and see them and his hands fell out of his pockets and his feet moved around and for a moment he seemed to be dancing.

‘He looks the same now Mum, doesn’t he?’ Catherine blinked and put a hand on her throat. ‘I love you both,’ she said quickly, ‘you know that.’

Margot frowned. That was a strange thing to say.

‘I don’t want to go,’ said Lewis, pulling his hand free from Margot’s, ‘I want to stay with you Mum.’

‘You’re here now Lewis,’ said Catherine.

‘Daddy will get sad if he doesn’t come, won’t he Mum?’

‘Yes.’ Catherine put both her hands up to her throat as though she was trying to help the words come out, ‘yes, he will.’

‘I’m not going next time then,’ said Lewis kicking at the footpath with his toe.

Catherine took at deep breath and pulled Margot’s cardigan up onto her shoulders. ‘Remember what I said, love. I’ll come back and pick you up in two hours.’ She kissed them both on the tops of their head. ‘Off you go, before I change my mind.’

Margot took Lewis’s hand and they walked slowly towards Jim and the telephone box. He seemed a million miles away even though he was right there in front of them. It felt funny walking down the street towards her father with her mother
standing behind her. She should turn around and give her a wave or blow her a kiss. Her mother loved proper goodbyes. Jim put his hand up and Margot thought he was going to wave but instead it stayed up in the air like a hand who’d forgotten what it was doing.

‘Thought you’d never get here,’ said Jim pulling his upside face when they stopped on the footpath in front of him.

Lewis squealed and jumped around on the spot, ‘Dad, Dad, I thought you’d never get here,’ he said.

‘And what about you Tiger? What did you think?’
Margot scratched the top of her hand, ‘Me? I didn’t think anything.’

‘That’s not like you,’ said Jim. He bent down and looked into Margot’s face. His hair was sparkling and he smelt like poppies. ‘Still got those same eyes though.’

Margot looked up into her father’s smiling green eyes and for a tiny instant she thought she remembered being a baby. A tiny pink baby with big green eyes. A baby sitting on her Daddy’s knee and playing with the prickles on his chin. She remembered lips on her fingers and kisses on her toes. And songs about horses wherever she goes. ‘Daddy, guess what? I’ve got a new horse.’

‘That’s my girl. What d’ya call it?’

‘Star.’

‘Star. Good name that.’

‘And I’ve got one too, haven’t I, Margie?’

‘We both got one because now we can run around faster.’

‘Terrific. Let’s get ‘em out then we can gallop off and hunt you two up a treat.’

‘Dad, Dad, what sort of lollies do koalas eat?’

‘Dunno, Lew.’

‘Chewing gum. Chewing gum, Dad.’

‘Chewing gum. That’s still on the black list I suppose.’

Margot laughed into her hands. ‘Specially Black Cat.’

‘Black Cat!’ Lewis spat the words up into the air. ‘Father Christmas wouldn’t even bring me one of those.’

‘Righto. On your marks or it’ll be Christmas by the time we get there.’

‘Where are we going Dad?’
‘We’re off for a ride.’
‘A ride,’ said Margot, ‘what on? A merry-go-round?’
‘If we can find one,’ said Jim, ‘we’ll all jump on and ride away.’
Margot squealed, ‘will we? Will we really Daddy?’
‘First things first,’ said Jim, ‘off we go.’

Jim squeezed Margot’s hand. ‘Won’t be long now,’ he said. Margot nodded but the queue for tickets was long and it seemed to be taking ages. Lewis pulled at the bottom of Jim’s coat, ‘When are we going to get a treat?’

‘In a minute,’ said Jim, ‘when I’ve got the tickets.’

Margot looked around the station. There were posters on the walls, of trains driving through palm trees and pineapples and one with a kangaroo jumping along beside it. There were men with their coats and hats on and ladies in dresses made out of lots of colours with shoes and handbags to match. Margot hadn’t been in a train station before. She hadn’t been on a train. She was a bit disappointed when Jim told her the surprise was a train ride not the merry-go-round and a bit worried too. She tried to remember what she had promised. Don’t go in any cars (that was the same as the rule for the police) don’t say anything about Steven (Jim would get angry and if he got angry he got sick) and don’t eat too many lollies (because lollies and treats made you forget what your promises were). Lewis had rolled his eyes at Margot at the mention of lollies and treats but he had crossed his heart and hoped to die – just like she did.

It was difficult to decide whether a train was part of the promises. Jim said they were going on a ride into Melbourne, into the middle of the city and then they would come back again. He said it would be fun. He said that next time they might even catch a train all the way to see the animals at the zoo.

‘Right you are.’ Margot heard the ticket man say that and Jim said something and put the tickets in his pocket.

‘Now? Are we going to get the treat now, Dad?’ Lewis tugged at his father’s coat again.

‘You don’t give up easily, do you?’ Jim he looked around the station and led the way to a small kiosk near the entrance. He mumbled something to the lady who was squashed into the middle of newspapers and lolly stands and cigarette packets and boxes and boxes of red-head matches piled high one on top of the
other. The lady handed Jim something with her hand closed and Jim slid the something inside the pocket of his coat.

‘Let me see. Let me see,’ yelled Lewis scrambling around his father’s pocket.

‘On the platform,’ said Jim, ‘we don’t want to miss the train.’

A hot wind whipped up and down the platform. A few people stood about. Margot watched a railway man in a uniform marching around with a flag. She told Jim he looked like someone out of *Tales of Toyland* and her father clapped his hands together and looked up and down the platform. He walked across to a big notice board and when he came back he said, ‘seven minutes. The train will be here in seven minutes.

‘Seven’s a lucky number,’ said Margot.

‘Is it?’ said Jim smilingly, ‘well you might be right there. Okay. Pick a hand.’

He stood in front of Margot and Lewis with his hands behind his back.

Margot giggled. ‘I thought you were going to say pick a number.’

‘Me too,’ said Lewis, ‘I thought that too.’

‘Well it’s good to see you two are on the same wave length. Righto, who’s going first?’

‘Lewis can. He’s the littlest.’

Lewis beamed at Margot and his eyes screwed up into his head. ‘That one.’

He pointed at his father’s left hand and Jim whipped it out from behind his back and held a Pollywaffle high in the air.

‘What do you say?’ said Jim.

‘Thank you, thank you, Daddy,’ squealed Lewis, his hand reaching up to take his prize. ‘Am I allowed to eat all of it?’

‘The whole thing,’ said Jim, ‘maybe it will help your hair grow back. That crew cut’s a bit short.’

Lewis stopped tearing at the top of his Pollywaffle paper and looked at Margot.

‘Some scissors slipped on his head and he had to have a crew cut to fix it up,’ she said.

Jim patted Lewis on the shoulder, ‘there’s no need to look so serious about it, we’re here to have fun, aren’t we?’
‘We are, Dad. Fun and fun,’ said Lewis tearing at his Pollywaffle again. Margot fiddled with the buttons on her cardigan and waited for her turn.

‘Give you brother a hand Tiger, I’ve only got one,’ said Jim holding the one that wasn’t behind his back up in the air.

‘You’re a Daddy with one hand,’ said Lewis laughing again.

Margot looked from her father to Lewis. Hot summer wind blew around her hair and into her face. Wordlessly she snatched Lewis’ Pollywaffle out of his hand, tore the end of the paper wrapper and gave it back to him.

Lewis took a big bite off the end of the sweet and smiled chocolate and marshmallow at them. ‘It’s the best one I’ve ever had,’ he said.

Margot made a noise in her throat. It had to be the best one. She was sure Lewis had never had a Pollywaffle before.

‘Well if you like them that much,’ said Jim, ‘we’ll have to see what we can do about hunting down some more.’

‘He’s not allowed to have too many,’ said Margot, ‘he promised Mum.’

‘Did he? Well a promise is a promise. Your turn. Pick a hand Tiger.’

‘I promised too.’

‘Good. Good.’ Jim put both hands back behind his back. ‘You ready? Left or right.’

‘I don’t want to choose,’ said Margot.

Chocolate burst out of Lewis’s mouth and landed on his chin. ‘You don’t want to choose?’ he said amazed.

‘No. I don’t. I don’t want to.’ Margot’s voice began to rise and she looked around and saw some people looking at them. A train, blowing its whistle and making a lot of noise stopped on the platform opposite.

‘We’ll miss it,’ yelled Lewis, ‘we’ll miss the train.’

‘That’s going the other way,’ said Jim.

‘What other way?’

‘C’mon Tiger,’ said Jim, ignoring Lewis’ question. ‘I can’t stand here all day. I’m going to have a chocolate hand soon.’

Lewis burst into laughter again and Margot shook her head.

‘We’re not going on the train,’ she said pulling on the sleeve of her cardigan, ‘we can’t.’
The wind started to push coats and papers and the bottoms of dresses. Lewis’ chocolate covered hands slid down the front of his blue, stripped cardigan. Jim’s sparkling hair started to melt onto his head. The railway man blew a whistle and stood at attention on the edge of the platform with his flag in the air.

‘Da dah!’ Jim whipped the Cherry Ripe out from behind his back like a magician. ‘It’s your favourite, Tiger.’

Margot bit her lips. She tried to look away. She tried to look at the dirty blue train, creeping along beside her. She tried to look backwards, to see herself standing next to Catherine, crossing her heart, making her promise but all she saw was the cherry red wrapper, shining in her father’s hand and promising her other things.

Margot sat on the blue train and ate her Cherry Ripe looking out of the window. The train raced along past the back and fronts of lots of houses. Margot wondered if they would go past their old house. If maybe she would see her pedal car sitting at the gate, looking at the train. She thought about Mrs Coates standing at the front fence and waving as the train went past, like she did.

Jim was asking Lewis questions about school and Lewis telling him about singing Christmas carols and how a boy fell off the monkey bars and broke his head and about the astronaut who spent two weeks in a spaceship the same size as a Volkswagon.

The train stopped and some people got off and some other people got on and then it kept doing that until it stopped and everyone started to get off.

‘Up you get,’ said Jim. ‘Is this it Dad? Is this Melbourne?’ asked Lewis.

‘Nearly,’ said Jim.

Margot folded the piece of her Cherry Ripe that she was saving for Catherine inside its packet and put it the pocket of her dress. Catherine would be happy when she gave her that. So happy that she wouldn’t be cross about the train. She smiled at the thought of her mother’s smile and took Jim’s hand.

‘That’s more like it Tiger,’ said Jim. ‘You had me worried there for a minute.’
They walked across the station platform and out into a very long passage way. They kept walking, walking with lots of other people who were all going the same way. Jim was walking very fast and Margot and Lewis were half walking, half running to keep up.

‘What’s the time?’ asked Margot, ‘is it nearly two hours?’

‘What? Not yet. No. We’ve got lots of time left yet. We have to change. That’s why we’re hurrying.’

‘Change? Change into what?’

‘Here we are Lew,’ said Jim and they turned a corner and came out right in the middle of people and suitcases and trolleys and signs and railway men.

‘This isn’t Melbourne,’ said Margot looking around at the racket.

‘See that red train over there? That’s the one that’s going to take us to Melbourne.’

‘I didn’t think,’ said Lewis, ‘there would be two trains. Did you Margie?’

‘No,’ said Margot, ‘did you think that, Daddy?’

Jim took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his head. ‘It’s hot in here,’ he said. ‘How about some icy poles while we’re waiting?’

Margot and Lewis licked their icy poles and watched the railway men getting the train ready. There were a lot of people getting ready to get on the train. People holding boxes and bags and suitcases and Christmas presents.

‘Christmas shopping,’ said Jim, ‘I forgot how busy it would be with Christmas shopping.’

‘We got a Christmas tree yesterday. It was so big the man had to squash it in the door,’ said Margot.

‘Did he?’

‘We haven’t put the decorations on.’

‘We’re helping Mummy do that, when we get back, aren’t we Margie?’

The red train blew its whistle and Jim tapped his hands on the side of his legs and said, ‘Off we go. You can tell me the rest of it on the way.’

Margot stood at the door of the train and looked behind her. Jim had already helped Lewis up the steep steps and now he held out his hand to help Margot.

‘Up you come, Tiger. Give us your hand.’
‘Daddy…’ Margot wasn’t sure she said that. She wasn’t sure if her father said anything either. Her heart was making too much noise. It had turned into a great big door inside her chest and someone was banging on it yelling – let me out, let me out! – but no one would.

A lady with a pusher, filled with two children was suddenly behind her, panting and thanking God.

‘C’mon Tiger,’ said Jim, jumping down the steps two at a time, ‘this lady needs help.’ He held onto the pusher’s handle and pulled it up into the train.

‘Not a lot of gentlemen left,’ said the lady, holding the door for Jim while he lifted Margot in, ‘I thought we were going to miss it then.’

Lewis waved his icy pole at Margot. ‘All aboard!’ he yelled, ‘it’s going now.’

‘A girl and a boy,’ said the lady, ‘blessed you are.’ She shook her head and wheeled her pusher into the corridor. ‘I got twins. I love them dearly but it’s murder on the trains.’

‘I know some twins,’ said Margot peering at the babies, ‘and they’re girls too.’

‘Well, there you are,’ said the lady and the train shuddered and shook and pulled slowly out of the station.

Margot rubbed her shoulder and the side of her cheek, which had turned bright red from leaning on the window ledge. Everything was fuzzy and the lights inside the train were on, even though it wasn’t really dark outside. The lady and the children were nowhere to be seen and Lewis was curled up in a ball beside her.

Margot felt inside her pocket. The Cherry Ripe was still there but it was soft and squishy and she worried it wouldn’t taste nice anymore. Jim opened the door of the compartment, ‘Hello, sleepyhead,’ he said and Margot thought that maybe she was still asleep because he sounded just like Catherine.

She pushed Lewis’s shoulder. She wanted him awake. Wherever they were, she was glad he was there.

A railway man popped his head in the door and said, ‘The missus is coming. She won’t be long.’
‘Ta, Bill,’ said Jim.
Margot watched Jim brushing down his clothes and bending to get Lewis up.
‘Get a shake on. Mrs Hartnett is going to give us a lift.’
‘Where are we?’ asked Lewis sleepily.
‘You’ll see,’ said Jim, smiling all over his face, ‘you’ll see.’
Margot scrambled off the seat and Lewis did the same, ‘hold my hand,’ she whispered.
‘That’s the way,’ said Jim.
Lewis gave Margot his hand. ‘Where are we, Margie?’
‘Somewhere.’
‘Where are we going?’
‘With Daddy. Aren’t we Daddy?’
‘That’s right Tiger. Look lively.’

They climbed down the train’s dark steps and walked out onto the quiet platform. There was no hot wind and no sun either and Margot pulled her cardigan tight against her body. Jim grabbed her hand and pulled them across the platform and out into the station. He found a long bench seat and parked them on it.

‘Sit here while I go and hunt up Mrs Hartnett,’ he said and then he walked away from them.

Margot bent down and rubbed at the scar on her knee. The Cherry Ripe packet crackled as she moved. She reached into her pocket and took it out. It was squashed and stuck inside the packet. She tore it open and licked up some of the melted chocolate, then handed it to Lewis and gave him a turn.

‘Thank you Margie,’ he said softly as he wriggled closer to her.

Margot ran her tongue around her mouth. She could still taste the chocolate. It was rough and dry and didn’t taste anything like a Cherry Ripe. She looked to where Jim had gone. But there was no one there. No one there except the railway men.

She looked up at the sky. There was still a little bit of daytime up there but some stars had already come out. She knew it was past two hours. Catherine would be at the phone box. She would be standing there and standing there and when it got dark she would be all by herself.
‘It’s funny,’ said Lewis, ‘how sometimes you think things are there and they’re not and sometimes you think things are not there and they are.’

‘I was thinking that too,’ said Margot.

‘Do you want to pretend we’re in koala world?’

Margot shook her head.

‘Or we could look for stars and make a wish. We could do that Margie.’

Margot shook her head again. ‘They aren’t our stars,’ she said, ‘you have to have your own stars.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ said Lewis.

Jim called out, ‘All set’ and they jumped up and ran to him. ‘That’s more like it,’ he said as they clung to his jacket. ‘From now on we’re going to have fun. All day long. Whatdaya say to that?’

‘Will there be any wardrobes there?’ asked Lewis.

‘Not if you don’t look too closely’

‘We haven’t got things that go in a wardrobe anyway,’ said Margot, brightly.

‘That’s right, travel light, that’s what I always say.’ Jim laughed and took a hand in each of his hands and walked them all away.
‘Rose,’ said the lady standing in the doorway, ‘or Nana Rose, if you like.’

She scratched her fingers and blinked her small round eyes and Margot thought about the eyes on the blackbirds in *Sing a Song of Sixpence*.

‘Any tea left?’ She sat down on the last chair and poured herself some. She splashed the milk in, picked up the cup with two hands and breathed into it.

‘So,’ she said, her blackbird eyes crinkling into her face, ‘I don’t suppose you remember me. You were too little. Two tiny little tots when they took you off to the city.’

‘Mum.’

‘Course, I never got a say. Grandmothers don’t.’

‘Mum.’

The lady was wearing a dressing gown made of silky, evening dress material, with sleeves that kept falling down. Her hair was black and white, like a magpie’s and pinned against her head with lots and lots of hairpins and she was wearing lipstick, even though it was breakfast time.

‘Alright Jimmy,’ Nana Rose waved a hand at him and blinked her eyes at Margot. ‘So. You’ve come back then, that’s nice.’

Margot was still staring. She didn’t know what to say.

‘Say hello to your Nana Rose,’ said Jim in a cranky voice.

‘Are you really a Nana?’ Lewis asked.

Nana Rose’s pink lipstick made a crooked smile across her face, ‘I’m the only one left now.’ She drank some tea. ‘Sad to say.’

Margot frowned into her Weetbix bowl. How did you get a Nana?

‘So,’ said Nana Rose, drinking some tea, ‘you’ve come for a little holiday. That’ll be nice.’

‘You’re in a talkative mood,’ said Jim

‘I’m always talkative when there’s someone nice to talk to.’

Had they really come for a holiday? No one said anything about going on a holiday but if it wasn’t one what were they doing sitting in a strange kitchen
with a strange Nana having breakfast with Daddy who was never there at breakfast time before.

‘Are we having a holiday Dad?’

‘That’s right Tiger, a holiday with Daddy and your Nana Rose.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ said Lewis.

‘It was a bit spur of the moment,’ said Jim, ‘but now you’re here you can see your Nana and have some fun.’

‘Does Mum know,’ asked Margot, ‘about the holiday?’

‘I expect she knows by now,’ said Nana Rose.

Jim stood up and walked over to the toaster. ‘Does anyone want toast. Do you want to see if anyone wants toast, Mum?’

Margot ate her toast and Vegemite watching the coloured streamers waving in the doorway. The toast made everything seem normal. Nana Rose even had the same glass butter dish as they had at home but everything else was different. Different bowls, different spoons, different teapot. It was hard to know what to think or what to do with all the different things. She wondered how long a holiday went for. She was on Christmas holidays but that was a holiday away from school not away from home. She thought about their Christmas tree and the decorations she was making and about running in every morning to see if the plum pudding was still hanging in the laundry then Nana Rose turned the radio on and someone started singing a song about a cleaning lady called Sadie.

‘I think I’ll get those table and chairs out for them,’ said Jim, ‘the ones that are under the house.’

‘Good. You can clean out some of the other rubbish under there while you’re at it,’ said Nana Rose.

‘I might. I might just do that.’ Jim took the Weetbix bowls over to the sink and started whistling along to the song on the radio.

‘Dad, Dad,’ said Margot, ‘did you hear that song? Works her fingers to the bone. That’s the same as Mum isn’t it?’
Jim dragged the red and yellow table and chairs out from under the house. 

‘Bit of a going over with the hose and they’ll be good as new,’ he said, holding one of the chairs over his head and pulling spider webs off its legs.

Margot and Lewis helped carry the chairs over to the hose for Jim to clean. Lewis jumped around on the grass trying to get sprayed too but Jim didn’t want to water anyone. He was busy with the chairs and tables. He said if they wanted to do something they could explore the back yard. It didn’t take long. There was nothing to see except the side gate and the fence and a wobbly clothes line made out of a long piece of wire and held up with a crooked stick. The gully trap was good. It was deep and slimy; the sort of place Mrs Snake might hide in.

‘What are we allowed to do now?’ asked Margot, when Jim turned off the hose.

‘What do you want to do?’

Margot put her plait under her nose, like a moustache. ‘I don’t know.’

‘What about you, Lew?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well you’re a good pair.’

Jim gave them some rags and they helped him dry the chairs and table.

‘Are these yours, Daddy?’ asked Margot.

‘They used to be mine, when I was a little tacker.’

‘Whose are they now?’ asked Lewis.

‘Still mine, I suppose.’

‘Do you play with them much, Dad?’

Jim winked and smiled. ‘What is this, twenty questions?’

‘Margot wants to know if her pedal car is under the house too.’

Margot’s hands flew to her face and covered her mouth. ‘I do not. I never said that.’

‘You did so. You said it might be under there and the doll’s house too.’

‘I never did. You’re just a liar.’
‘Now, now, Tiger. That’s a bit steep. What happened to helping clean the chairs?’ He folded his rag over to a dry bit and started polishing the top of the table.

When she was sure Jim wasn’t looking, Margot pulled a face at Lewis.

‘Stop it! Dad, Margot’s being mean to me.’

‘Look you two…’

Nana Rose burst out of the streamers, into the backyard carrying the teapot. She held it upside down and shook the tea-leaves into the gully trap. Then she turned on the tap and said, ‘any more arguing and I’ll wash the two of you down the gully trap with the tea-leaves.’

Lewis burst into tears when he heard that and Margot looked around at the backyard and the tables and chairs and Jim and the hose and the fence and wondered why. Why were they here? The Banksia men flashed into her head and she looked at Nana Rose and thought she looked a bit like Mrs Snake. Mrs Snake who dragged Snugglepot and Ragged Blossom into her deep, dark cave and promised to keep them there. Under the ground and all by themselves for forever and ever. No amen.
Margot and Lewis poked their heads through the streamers and looked into the kitchen.

‘Come in, come in, I won’t bite ya.’ Nana Rose opened the ice-box in the fridge and pulled out a silver oblong tray full of dark red ice-blocks. She dropped the tray on the table and made the sugar bowl jump. ‘Ta dah,’ she said and Margot and Lewis looked at one another. ‘I’ve even got some cones.’ She pulled a chair out from the table and put it in front of the bench. ‘Up you get,’ she said to Margot. ‘I’m getting too old to be climbing up on chairs.’

‘Why don’t you keep them in the bottom cupboard then,’ asked Lewis.

‘Mice. Mice and sticky fingers. I never know which.’

Margot climbed up onto the chair and opened the high cupboard. ‘Look! Look at this it’s full of boxes.’

‘That’s my secret Woolworths. I’ve got everything up there. Junket, jelly crystals, Jex. Not Jex. I don’t keep that up there. The mice don’t go for that. Sugar, porridge, kippers, tinned fruit. Everything.’

‘It’s just like a real shop. A real shop in a cupboard,’ said Margot. She held up a big blue box with a picture of an ice block cone on the front and Nana Rose nodded and she climbed down.

‘How long did it take you to make the shop, Nana Rose?’

‘A fair while. There’s some things up in the back of those cupboards I don’t even know what they are.’

Nana Rose bashed the tray of frozen ice-blocks against the edge of the sink. She grabbed hold of a straight piece of metal that divided the ice-blocks in two, jiggled it around a bit and then bashed the tray against the sink again. Three blocks leapt into the sink. She picked up two of them and popped them into two square cones.

‘Could you save the empty boxes for us, please?’ asked Margot.

‘Do you want to make a shop Margie?’
‘That’s a good idea,’ said Nana Rose, ‘shops. I used to work in a shop when I was a young girl. Moran and Cato. They had the best tea. It came in great big chests all the way from India.’

Nana Rose said she thought she might have an iceblock with them. She didn’t eat ice blocks any more because when you got older ice made your teeth hurt. She moved her cigarette box and her ashtray and her tea cup down to the end of the table so they had plenty of room to sit down and lick. Then she told them the story of her first day at Moran and Cato when she was so young she was probably still a child and she gave a customer salt instead of sugar and the customer went home and put two spoonfuls in her husband’s tea.

‘Did you get in trouble?’ asked Margot.

‘I always got in trouble,’ laughed Nana Rose, ‘couldn’t help meself.’ She put her iceblock on the sink and took a cigarette out of her box. ‘How’s your mother?’ she asked striking a match on the matchbox and blowing smoke up to the top cupboards.

‘I don’t know,’ said Margot watching the cigarette smoke trying to get in with the junket and the porridge. ‘I don’t know because she doesn’t know, about us. Where we are.’

‘She’ll work it out soon enough. She was smart your mother. Used to play the piano at the dances.’

‘I know,’ said Margot, ‘she told me.’

‘She sold that piano. Like everything else. Sold it and went to Melbourne.’

‘We went to Melbourne on the train,’ said Lewis.

Nana Rose blew smoke out of her nose. ‘Could have told you that was a mistake. There’s nothing there that’s not the same as everywhere else.’

Margot sucked the red out of the top of her iceblock and listened to Nana Rose. She thought about last night and the red blanket on the bed in the sleep-out. The moon, shining in the sleep-out window, looked red too and when Lewis fell asleep she warmed her toes on his feet. ‘It’s different though. Here is different isn’t it?’

Nana Rose’s ashtray was shaped like a boat. She squashed her cigarette out in it and blinked her black eyes into the smoke and said, ‘you’ll get used to it. Kids get used to anything.’

Jim walked in from the passage humming something.
‘Well someone’s looking pretty pleased with themselves,’ said Nana Rose.

Jim smiled around the kitchen. ‘Ice blocks is it?’

‘Do you want one, Daddy?’ asked Margot.

‘I might,’ said Jim, ‘I might.’ He opened the fridge looked inside and then closed it again. He walked around the table and ended up back at the fridge.

‘Righto. How’s that ice block, Lew?’

‘Good, Dad. It’s red.’

‘Red,’ said Jim looking inside the fridge again, ‘that’s a good colour.’

‘Do you want me to save you a bite, Daddy?’

‘You can’t save an ice block, Tiger.’

Margot blushed. Of course you could. It was the same as saving the end of an ice cream cone and Catherine did that every time she had one. She took a last lick and handed Margot the end of her baby-sized cone. ‘There you are, love, I’ve saved you the end.’ She always said that, every time, and it tasted so wonderful when someone saved the end for you.

Margot’s ice block was dripping through the cone and onto her fingers. It was making her feel hot rather than cool. She wondered what would happen next, when the ice block was finished. It was the same sort of wondering she had at her first lunchtime at Small Hills Primary School, when she sat in the girl’s shelter shed, eating her peanut butter sandwich in the middle of a long, long, silence.

The plastic streamers blew into the kitchen and Nana Rose said, ‘make way for the ghost,’ and Lewis laughed ice block onto his chin.

‘Righto, Tiger,’ said Jim, rubbing his hands together as though he was going to say something else.

Margot stretched her mouth into a smile and held it there. It made her face ache. She wanted to say something but she didn’t know what she was allowed to say. What she was allowed to ask. Everything will be different now. She remembered Catherine saying that when they moved from their first house to the other house. Maybe that’s what always happened when you went to another house but they weren’t supposed to be at another house and Margot didn’t know what to say about that either.

Nana Rose said she was going to get dressed but she didn’t move. She said sitting around drove her mad and where were Margot and Lewis going to get
clothes from? You couldn’t get clothes out of thin air. You couldn’t wear the same clothes forever either.

Margot looked down at her dress and traced the winding yellow *ric rac* with her eyes. Forever. That didn’t make sense. You couldn’t stay on holiday forever. You went on holiday and then you went home. Like John and Betty. They went to the seaside for a holiday, in a car. Margot remembered reading that. She liked that reader and Miss Stiller said she was surprised. Not about John and Betty but that Margot could read so well.

Jim mumbled something about clothes and Nana Rose blew smoke out of her mouth.

‘Won’t hurt them to manage for a couple of days,’ Jim said crossly.

Margot nodded. A couple of days. Of course they could manage for a couple of days. That wasn’t very long. That was the proper time for a holiday. A couple of days and then they would go home. They had to go home. There were decorations to make, presents to get. Margot had saved up five cents. She was going to buy Catherine a hanky with the letter ‘C’ in the corner. She liked thinking about that, about going to Coles and looking through all the beautiful hankies, one by one by one.

‘I can keep clean,’ said Margot, ‘but Lewis is a grub.’

‘All boys are grubs,’ said Nana Rose. ‘Look at your shirt, covered in ice-block.’

Lewis patted the wet blob, his ice-block had made on his shirt. ‘It’s a bit dry now,’ he said.

‘How many sleeps is it then?’ asked Margot and Nana Rose blew her smoke up past the top cupboards and pulled a strange face. ‘Bob Dyer will give me a Morris Minor if I answer that one right.’

‘I thought you were on your way Mum,’ said Jim, opening the fridge door again.

‘For goodness sake Jimmy, leave that fridge alone, you’ll wear it out.’ Nana Rose blinked into her smoke. ‘On my way am I? In my own house.’

Jim closed the fridge door with a bang. ‘Righto,’ he said and clapped his hands together. ‘Why don’t you sing us a song Tiger?’

‘Me?’

‘Yeah. Don’t you like to sing songs anymore?’
Margot frowned into her ice block. ‘Yes,’ she said quietly.
‘Making a spectacle. That’s what she used to call singing.’
‘Who?’ asked Lewis.
‘It’s hard to sing songs and eat ice blocks all at the same time,’ said Nana Rose.
‘Yes,’ said Margot even though she was staring at her ice block now, rather than eating it.
‘Sing that one you sang with the tea towel on your head.’
Margot looked across at Lewis and her lips went thin. ‘It wasn’t a tea towel. It was a special hat that wise men wear.’
Lewis spluttered. ‘Margie wanted to be Mary but she was one of those wise men with a tea towel on her head.’
‘I was not!’
‘She was so. That Leandra was Mary. She’s the best at everything.’
Margot stood up. ‘She is not. It’s because I was new. You can’t be Mary if you’re new.’
‘That’s enough,’ said Nana Rose, ‘you got to sing a song – that was nice.’
‘She stopped in the middle when her tea towel fell off her head.’
‘That’s a lie!’ yelled Margot.
‘Alright. Alright,’ said Jim. ‘Tone it down.’
‘I didn’t,’ cried Margot. ‘I didn’t stop. I sang it without the tea towel. I promise.’
‘Alright, Tiger. Alright. It doesn’t matter.’
‘It does. It does matter. Away in a Manger. It was Away in a Manger.’
‘Well I can tell you that’s the last time you two are getting ice blocks.’
‘Leave ‘em be,’ said Jim angrily, ‘just leave ‘em be.’
‘Wild. That’s what they are,’ said Nana Rose, ‘wild like alley cats.’
‘Jesus Christ Mum!’
Margot screwed up her face at Nana Rose’s tiny black eyes.
‘You can look at me however you like my girl but it won’t change anything. He’s got you now and he’s not gunna give you back. Ever.’
Margot went cold. Colder than her ice block. Colder than the taste of Hypole sliding down her throat. Ever. That was all the time there was.
‘Well that’s terrific. That’s just bloody terrific Mum.’
‘It’s all your doing,’ said Nana Rose talking through her teeth, ‘no one else’s.’

‘Did you hear that?’ Jim leant across the table and spoke to Margot and Lewis. ‘All my fault. No one else’s.’ His hands started shaking and his eyes looked soft and watery.

‘It was a new tea towel,’ said Lewis squashing the last bite of his ice block inside his mouth, ‘wasn’t it Margie?’

Margot nodded.

Jim reached into his pocket and pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his brow. ‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘it’s a bit hot for songs now.’

‘They said ninety-eight on the wireless.’ Nana Rose stood up and flapped her long sleeves in the air like a bird. ‘Ninety-eight. Feels like one hundred and ninety eight.’ She opened the door to the passage and walked out of the kitchen.

‘Your Nana Rose,’ said Jim folding his handkerchief back into his pocket, ‘she gets a bit…a bit carried away. We all get a bit carried away sometimes.’

‘Do we?’ said Lewis.

‘Sometimes. When it’s hot…you’re quiet Tiger.’

Margot looked down at her fingers. ‘My hands are all sticky.’

Jim laughed. ‘Is that all? Come over here and I’ll run ‘em under the tap.’

Margot walked over to the sink and waited while her father turned on the tap. He winked at her then as he picked up her hand and held it under the water. He washed one hand and then the other. The water splashed through her fingers, onto her wrists and ran up her arms. It was soft and cool, like Tommy’s baby bath water.

‘Better?’ asked Jim.

‘Better,’ said Margot.

He handed her the tea towel and as she dried her hands he bent down and kissed her on the top of her head. There were stars in the kitchen then. Bright baby stars dancing around in the sky. Margot closed her eyes and made a wish.

She wished she already knew everything – like grownups did. Then she wouldn’t make mistakes. Then she would know what to think and what to do. She looked up at her father’s frowning smile. ‘John and Betty went on a holiday,’ she said, ‘and they had lots of fun.’
Twenty Nine

Jim came through the streamers with a bag full of clinking bottles. ‘Look lively,’ he said, hugging the bottles with one hand and dropping a paper parcel on the table with the other.

‘Daddy!’ cried Margot jumping up to meet him.

‘Righto. Stand back, while I put this lot in the fridge, there’s the girl.’

‘Has work finished Dad?’

‘Too right. Got this afternoon off. For my birthday.’

‘Your birthday?’

‘That’s right Tiger. Hop out the way.’

Margot stopped jumping around. Her father didn’t say anything about his birthday this morning, or yesterday or any of the days they’d been on holiday. But he had been gone a lot and maybe today… She held the fridge door open while Jim put the beer bottles in. He didn’t put anything else in there. No birthday cake or lemonade but he was humming and dancing around and that seemed very birthday-like.

‘Where’s your Nana Rose?’

‘Having a lie-down. It’s too hot she said.’

‘It’s that alright.’

‘Are we going to play birthday games, Dad?’

‘First things first, Tiger.’

Jim took the top off a beer bottle with a small metal opener and poured some into a glass. He held the glass to his lips and drank all the beer in one go.

‘You were thirsty Dad.’

‘Thirsty work out there today,’ he said picking up the paper package.

‘Is that pass-the-parcel?’

‘Sort of.’ Jim poured more beer and nodded towards the backdoor. ‘Go and get your brother. It’s for him too.’

Margot took a couple of steps towards the streamers and screamed out to Lewis.
‘Fair go, Tiger. I said go and get him. You’ll wake the dead with all that yelling.’

Margot spun around to face Jim. ‘You shouldn’t say dead, Dad. Not on your birthday.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s bad luck. There’s lots of things that are bad luck on a birthday.’

‘Jesus. If I knew that I wouldn’t have had one.’

Margot giggled. ‘You can’t say that. You have to have a birthday whether you want one or not.’

‘Is that another rule?’

Margot hopped around the squares on the lino thinking about that. ‘I don’t know if it’s a rule or if it’s the law.’

‘Jesus,’ said Jim again.

Lewis stood in the doorway in his underpants, dripping water onto the lino. Jim leant across the kitchen table and pointed a finger at him. ‘Raining is it?’

‘It is Dad. It’s raining under the hose.’

‘Quick. That was bloody quick.’ Jim opened another bottle of beer. ‘Pass-the-parcel,’ he said holding it up in the air. ‘Can’t have a birthday without that.’

‘It doesn’t have a card stuck on it,’ said Margot.

‘That’s what you say but you have to know where to look.’ Jim held the parcel close to his face and read slowly, ‘To the girl and boy with…the same name.’

‘The same name?’ Margot screwed her face up. ‘You can’t give it to two people it has to be one.’ Then she remembered the twins, Sandra and Shona, and she wasn’t so sure.

‘That’s it,’ said Jim, ‘this parcel’s only got one clue.’

‘One!’ cried Margot, ‘it has to have…’

‘Well this one’s got one and you have to have a bloody good imagination to see that. C’mon open her up.’ Jim slid the parcel across the table.

Margot looked at it sitting there as all sorts of proper pass-the-parcel clues flew into her head. The bluest eyes, the prettiest freckles, the one with the biggest smile and Audrey standing on one leg saying Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers over and over again.

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She put her hand on the parcel. It was soft. ‘It feels like a present,’ she said surprised.

Jim pushed his chair back to get another beer bottle out of the fridge. ‘Just open it up without all the guess work.’

Margot pulled at the bow and the string fell into her hand. Lewis dived on the brown paper and pulled something out of its inside. ‘It’s a dress. A dress inside pass-the-parcel!’

‘And other things,’ said Jim, ‘keeping going.’

Margot stood staring at the parcel as Lewis unwrapped two dresses, two pairs of shorts and a shirt with brown checks. ‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘What is it? Clothes. Some new clothes. Mrs Hartnett sent them over. Wasn’t that nice of her? You can try them on and have show and tell.’

Margot picked up a dress made of tiny pink rosebud material.

‘Well?’

‘It’s nice,’ she said quietly.

‘Let’s have a look at yours, Lew.’

Lewis held the shirt up in front of his chest. ‘Bang, bang, you’re dead. It’s a cowboy shirt.’

‘I thought you were an Indian.’ Jim lifted his beer to his mouth. As his lips sank into the froth Lewis made a tiny fist and punched him on the leg. ‘I am an Indian,’ he said laughing.

‘An Indian who thinks he’s a cowboy.’ Jim pretended to cuff Lewis under the ears and Lewis giggled and ducked out of the way and tried to punch him again.

Jim poured some more beer and blew the froth off the top of it at Lewis.

‘Dad! Dad! Don’t do that again. Don’t do that!’ Lewis bounced around the beer glass.

‘No more froth,’ said Jim making his funny sad face and Lewis burst into giggles and started hitting him again. ‘I’m going to kill that evil Daddy,’ he sang.

‘If anyone’s going to die around here – it’ll be of thirst.’ Jim banged his glass down on the table top. ‘Okay Tiger. You’re closest. Get us another.’

Margot took her plait out of her mouth and walked over to the fridge.

‘You’re having fun, aren’t you Lew?’
‘Lots of fun, Dad. Lots and lots.’

Margot took a bottle of beer out of the fridge and put it on the table. She wanted to play and have fun too but the fun at Nana Rose’s house was different to the fun they used to have at their other house. When they had fun now she started thinking about things that made her feel sad. Things she didn’t want to think about. Like her mother kissing her goodbye and Julie standing on one leg and Tommy hitting the back door crying, ‘me, me, out. Me, me out.’

She thought about Catherine taking pictures of fun, walking into the kitchen carrying her Box Brownie and making photos out of smiles and new dresses and pass-the-parcel. She thought she remembered them going somewhere to visit. Having fun with some other people. Some friends. And a swing and Jim pushing Catherine so high her shoe flew off and landed in some roses.

Jim opened the new bottle of beer. ‘Are you going to show us the other one or not?’

Margot picked up the other dress. It was straight and white with big orange circles all over it. She held it up in front of her dress, the dress with the ric rac around the collar, that Catherine made, and stood stiff as a statue, next to the kitchen sink.

‘That’s the ticket,’ said Jim, ‘you’re set now.’ Hair fell in front of his face and he tried to put it back with the back of his hand.

‘So. What did ya do today, Tiger?’

Margot folded the circle dress against her body and tried to think.

‘I had breakfast.’

‘Yep.’

‘I helped Nana Rose do the dishes and empty the tea pot.’

‘Good. Good.’

‘I had a peanut butter sandwich for lunch.’

‘I didn’t,’ said Lewis. ‘I had Vegemite.’

‘And then I watched Nana Rose answer the telephone. Three times.’

Jim poured more beer and spilt some on the table. ‘I don’t know how she puts up with that thing ringing all the time. Who was it?’

‘No one.’

‘Ah…good old Mr No one.’
Margot folded the circle dress back into the paper. She wasn’t sure if that was true. If no one was the same as a wrong number because that’s who Nana Rose said the ringing was.

Margot watched her grandmother holding onto the telephone and putting it back, carefully, without speaking. Margot was careful near that telephone too. It was different to the one in the telephone box because it didn’t have any buttons to push or somewhere to put the money in and Nana Rose told them if they touched it they would get electrocuted.

The telephone didn’t electrocute Nana Rose but it did drive her mad. Sometimes it rang again and again and Nana Rose said she was sick to death of wrong numbers calling her and if they kept on doing it she would call the police.

Margot said she knew a policeman and so did Mrs Wilson and Mrs Wilson had a telephone too and she could tell the policeman all about it. Nana Rose’s itchy fingers started up then and she said she didn’t want to talk about telephones anymore and when it rang again, while they were standing there, in the passage, right next to it, she walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

The telephone didn’t care. It kept on ringing and ringing and when it finally stopped it felt like all the bells in the world had been turned off.

‘Oooh. It tickles,’ said Lewis and Margot looked up from the orange circle dress and saw her father holding his beer glass up to her brother’s lips. ‘It tickles all the way down.’

‘Not once you get used to it,’ laughed Jim. He held out his glass to Margot. She shook her head. ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with you Tiger.’ He made his sad face. ‘I thought you liked birthdays.’

Margot turned her plait around and around in her fingers. ‘I do Daddy,’ she said, ‘I do but…’

‘But! I didn’t think I’d get a but today, Tiger.’ Jim poured more beer. ‘Not on a birthday.’

Margot took a deep breath. She wasn’t sure where the but had come from and while she was thinking about that another one came out. ‘But…’

‘There it is again,’ said Jim nudging Lewis with his elbow, ‘c’mon, Tiger spit it out.’

Lewis spat laughter all over the table. Margot fiddled with the ric rac on the pocket of her dress, ‘that ringing…on the telephone…’
‘Hello! Hello!’ Jim nudged Lewis again and made his hand into a telephone, ‘I’m listening. Hello!’

Lewis clapped his hands in the air and screwed his face up with laughter.

‘I thought…I thought it might be Mummy.’

‘Did you?’

‘Just…it might be.’ Margot’s voice was scraping her throat and tears started to blind her eyes.

‘I thought you said it was no one.’

‘I don’t know. It might be Mummy or it might be no one.’

Jim wrenched the top off another bottle of beer and flicked the bottle cap over to Lewis. ‘I dunno what’s got into you, ever since we got here all ya do is mope.’

‘Yeah,’ said Lewis importantly. He picked up the bottle top. ‘I’m going to put this with the others.’

‘I don’t know either,’ said Margot swallowing a tear, ‘I don’t mean to.’

‘She’s just sad,’ said Lewis.

Jim laughed. ‘There’s not much you can do about that. Life’s sad.’

‘Is it?’ asked Lewis.

‘Not now. Not right this minute. When you grow up, life’s sad then.’

‘I’m not going to grow up,’ said Lewis.

‘That’s the way,’ said Jim.

‘I want to know when we’re going back.’ The words fell out of Margot’s mouth and landed all over her.

‘Back?’ Jim held his beer glass up in front of his eyes and looked through it.

‘Home,’ said Lewis, ‘she means back home, Dad.’

‘Ahh,’ said Jim smiling at his glass, ‘you can go whenever you like.

Anything else?’

Margot shook her head.

‘Good. That’s settled then. Tell you what, how about tonight, I bring you back a packet of liquorice allsorts?’

‘I love liquorice allsorts,’ said Lewis.

‘And cake. We have to have birthday cake, don’t we Tiger?’

Margot nodded and wiped her nose with the back of her hand.
‘And,’ said Lewis clamping his hands on his head, ‘if that was Mummy on the telephone, she hates liquorice allsorts!’

Margot and Lewis sat at the table and chairs and looked up at the sky.
‘Are you still sad, Margie?’ asked Lewis, his upturned head a giant squint on top of his shoulders.
‘No. I’m normal now. I’m closing my eyes so I won’t get blinded.’
Lewis pushed his chair out from the table and balanced it on two legs. ‘What do you want to do?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘Do you think Mummy will come and get us?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘I don’t want to live here anymore do you, Margie?’
‘Would you like a cup of tea?’
‘Yes please. With some sugar.’
Margot picked up the imaginary teapot and slowly poured the tea. She measured two spoonfuls of sugar into an imaginary cup and handed the cup to Lewis.
‘Thank you, Margie,’ he said lifting it to his lips and drinking, ‘that’s nice tea.’
Margot poured herself some too and they drank without speaking.
‘I’ve finished mine,’ said Lewis putting his cup back on the table.
‘Me too,’ said Margot.
‘Everything is better when you have a cup of tea, isn’t it?’
Margot held the teapot in front of Lewis, ‘more?’
Lewis nodded and Margot filled his cup again. ‘What day is it?’ he asked.
Margot looked up at the sky. ‘It looks like Friday.’
‘That’s the last day, isn’t it?’
Margot nodded.
‘The sun can make you cry, can’t it?’
‘Yes. But you have to look right at it.’
‘I wish we had some biscuits.’
‘Here you are,’ said Margot holding out her upturned hand towards Lewis. ‘Teddy Bears.’

Lewis picked up an invisible Teddy Bear and bit into it. ‘How many have we got?’

‘Lots,’ said Margot, ‘as many as you want.’

‘You two are quiet.’ Margot and Lewis turned around and saw Nana Rose untangling herself from the plastic streamers. ‘So quiet, I thought you’d both disappeared.’

‘We’re having a cup of tea,’ said Lewis.

‘Tea,’ said Nana Rose. ‘I’ll get your tea when I’m good and ready. Chief cook and bottle washer that’s all I am around here.’

She stood in front of the streamers with her hands on her hips, looked around the yard and then went back inside.

‘I don’t like Nana Rose,’ said Lewis.

‘Shh,’ said Margot. ‘It’s wicked to say things like that, you’ll go to hell.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Lewis. ‘If they come and get me for hell I’ll just hide in the gully trap.’

Margot smiled. ‘That’s a good idea.’

‘Do you want me to do the dishes now, Margie?’

‘Thank you, Lewis,’ said Margot in her Catherine voice, ‘you can wash and I’ll dry.’

They picked up the imaginary cups and carried them over to the gully trap. Lewis knelt down and peered in. ‘Why do they have gully traps?’

‘For tea-leaves but sometimes people put bad children down there too.’

‘Oooh.’ Lewis moved back from the edge. ‘What happens when they get put down there?’

‘Their parents forget about them and go and get some new children and then they go brown like mice but there are no mouse traps down there, just slime and that’s why it’s too slippery to climb out.’
‘Get away from that gully trap,’ said Nana Rose sharply as she came out of the streamers again, carrying a square biscuit tin. ‘I’ve got something for you, something to play with.’

Margot and Lewis ran over and sat down on the chairs with their backs up straight and watched Nana Rose put the tin in the middle of the table.

‘You can choose one thing each and I don’t want any fights.’

‘Yes Nana Rose,’ said Margot and Lewis together.

‘Ready? Shield your eyes.’ Nana Rose lifted the lid off the tin in slow motion.

‘Pirate treasure!’ cried Lewis.

Nana Rose laughed. ‘Pirate treasure,’ she said, ‘would you listen to it?’

‘Jewels,’ said Margot, ‘lots and lots of jewels. Are they yours Nana Rose?’

‘Course they’re mine. What’d ya think I stole ‘em?’

Margot shook her head. ‘I didn’t. I didn’t mean that.’

‘Pirates steal treasure,’ said Lewis.

‘Well I’m not a pirate. Mind you, I think if I was one, I would have been pretty good at it.’ Nana Rose smiled one of her half smiles and that made Margot smile and say, ‘and brave.’

‘Hmm. I couldn’t claim that. I’d like to. But I’m one of those poor devils that knows who they are.’

‘Everyone knows that,’ said Lewis.

‘You think so,’ said Nana Rose, ‘c’mon, get ready to choose. She moved the tin towards Margot. ‘Girls first. No one can argue with that.’

Margot looked down at all the shining jewels and thought about her mother’s diamond earrings. If there were earrings in that tin she could choose them for Catherine. ‘I’m going to close my eyes,’ she said, ‘and wish for magic.’

She put her hand inside the tin and let it feel around. Some jewels were hard and spiky and some were silky smooth. There were beads and bangles and something with a pin on it that tried to prick her finger but her hand jumped away and landed on a square with rough edges and a funny, leaf shaped bit that that clamped onto her thumb. She snapped her eyes open and cupped the jewel in the palm of her hand.
‘Very pretty,’ said Nana Rose, ‘at least they used to be.’ She grabbed the tin back and started sorting through the jewels. ‘Its mate should be in here somewhere.’

Margot danced the earring around herself like a butterfly. ‘Look, Nana Rose. Look how it sparkles. It’s a good diamond isn’t it?’

‘Paste. That was good enough for me.’

‘Is it my turn now?’ asked Lewis.

‘In a minute,’ said Nana Rose, still searching through the tin, ‘I can’t think where the other one’s got to. Do you want to pick something else?’

‘No,’ said Margot. ‘I want this one.’

‘You can’t wear one earring.’

‘Pirates do,’ said Lewis.

‘I’m not going to wear it. I’m going to keep it in my pocket and take it out and look at it.’

Nana Rose took her hand out of the tin and starting scratching the skin between her fingers. ‘Why would you want to do that?’

‘It’s a secret.’

‘Suit yourself. Ahh, what about this? This is better.’

Nana Rose held an enormous swan broach up in the air. It was big and shiny with a white diamond body and blue diamonds for the wings.’

‘Oh!’ said Margot, ‘it’s beautiful. Its neck is beautiful.’

‘Well that’s the thing about swans. Do you want this one instead?’

Margot closed her hand over the earring and looked at the broach sparkling in Nana Rose’s hand. ‘Where did they come from? All the diamonds?’

‘Outta the ground. You wouldn’t credit that.’

‘No,’ said Margot.

‘When’s it my turn?’

‘Here.’ Nana Rose pushed the tin in front of Lewis and put the swan broach down on the table, ‘off you go.’

‘I want to choose like Margie. Can I Nana Rose?’

Lewis searched through the tin with his eyes closed and his mouth open. His hand got tangled up in a string of glass beads and Nana Rose made him open his eyes while she got it untangled. After that he said he’d have the other beads, the plastic ones, the ones you could pull apart and put back together again. He said
he was going to make the longest necklace in the world and when he was finished he was going to unmake it and make it again.

When all the plastic beads were out of the tin Nana Rose squashed the lid back on and pushed her chair out from the table. ‘Not much use putting this back,’ she said, spinning the swan around and around on the table top with her finger. ‘Where on earth am I going to wear it?’

‘That’s what Mum said.’

Margot’s free hand flew to her face to cover up the words and that reminded her of Catherine too.

‘That’s what she said about what?’

Margot pressed the earring into the palm of her hand. ‘Her earrings but I’m not allowed to tell she gave them to a man to buy material for my party dress and she said he wasn’t going to give them back.’

‘What man?’ Lewis looked up from his beads.

‘The man who growled at me.’

Margot pressed her earring hand against her chest as tears fell down her face. ‘That’s why I’m going to give Mummy this one to make it better.’

Nana Rose picked up the swan broach and started coughing. ‘There’s a good girl,’ she said, ‘come here and I’ll pin this one on you. You may as well have this one too.’

Margot stood in front of her grandmother and felt her boney fingers fiddling with the neck of her dress. She heard some stitches tear as the pin on the swan pushed through the ric rac.

‘Hold still. I nearly ripped my finger.’ When Nana Rose let go of the swan, it fell head first towards the ground and twisted the neck of Margot’s dress into a knot.

‘It’s a bit big yet but you’ll grow into it.’

‘I’m going to make the other earring. I’m going to make it with my beads.’

Nana Rose sighed and rubbed her hand under her nose. ‘You think you know what’s what but you don’t know half of it do you? C’mon. Bring your earring and your beads and we’ll go inside and get some tea ready.’

‘What is for tea?’

‘Loaves and fishes, Lewis, one of my favourites.’
‘Oh boy! What joy!’ Jim came crashing through the side gate singing at the top of his lungs, ‘we had in barefoot daysssssss!’

Nana Rose put her hands on her hips and said, ‘Jimmy Lovelock.’

‘Now, now, now, now. I’ve come home with the cakes that’s what I said I was going to do and that’s what I’ve done.’ Jim plonked a shiny white box on the table. ‘See? Cake.’ He clapped his hands together and looked around.

‘Looks like fun ‘cept for you Tiger, you’re not still moping?’

‘Leave her alone,’ said Nana Rose.

Margot slipped the earring into her pocket and wiped her eyes on her arm.

‘She fell over,’ said Lewis, ‘didn’t you Margie.’

Margot shuddered a nod.

‘She fell over twice,’ said Nana Rose.

‘Jesus Christ! Even I don’t fall over twice.’

‘There’s a first time for everything.’

‘What’s wrong with you?’

‘I’m sick of it Jimmy. Sick to death of it.’

‘What have you got there, Lew?’ Jim bent down to look at Lewis’ neck.

‘Beads. Nana Rose gave them to me.’

‘Did she now? Just the thing for a party. Look lively. C’mon. Look lively. We’re all gunna have a party.’

‘No one’s having a party. These kids need to eat.’

‘Eat! Wait ‘till you see what I’ve got here.’ Jim balanced on the edge of the table and flipped open the white box. ‘Ta dah!’

The box was full of cakes. There were lamingtons and monkey faces and cup cakes with yellowy icing. ‘Birthday cakes! Who wants the first one?’

‘Jimmy!’ said Nana Rose crossly.

Jim put his finger on his lips. ‘Shhhhh,’ he said. ‘It can be my birthday if I want it to be, I don’t remember another birthday this year.’

‘Mine, Daddy, you remember my birthday,’ said Margot moving to his side.

‘Course I remember. Oh boy! What joy and all that business with the cake!’ He laughed. ‘That Violet was a battleaxe.’

‘Jimmy!’

Lewis looked up at Nana Rose who clicked her tongue and said, ‘They’ve got ten minutes then they’re coming inside.’ She patted the top of the treasure tin and walked into the house.

‘Ten minutes. That’s not much time for a party. Down we sit. You can’t have a party standing up.’

‘Can’t you?’ asked Margot.

‘Well you can but I’ve done enough standing for one day.’ Jim grabbed hold of a chair and sat on it sideways. ‘We might do our dance later, Tiger, if I can remember it.’

‘I remember it. I keep doing it just in case I need it for another birthday.’

‘That’s the way.’

‘What about you Lew?’

‘I had my birthday in hospital.’

‘That’s the way. Jelly and ice-cream.’

‘And needles,’ said Lewis laughing, trying to hit Jim on the leg.

‘That’s enough of that. What about a lamington? Tiger?’

‘Before tea? Are we allowed?’

‘Jesus Christ, we’re having a birthday party; there is no before tea. This is it.’

‘Cakes for tea!’ Lewis looked amazed.

‘That’s right no burnt chops or soggy old vegetables just cakes.’ Jim leant his body across the table. ‘That’s what princes eat for tea.’

‘Do they?’

‘Too right, hop in Lew.’

Jim pushed the box of cakes towards Lewis and he took a monkey face and bit into it hungrily. ‘I’ve never heard of that. Of cake for tea.’

‘And me,’ said Margot, ‘I haven’t heard of that either.’

Jim took a lamington out of the box and coconut fell all over him. ‘Yeah well it just shows you, you kids don’t know everything.’

He balanced on the tiny chair and hit the flakes of coconut with his hand but they didn’t go away. He looked over his glasses at Margot and winked. Margot cheered up then. Jim was the best winker in the world. It wouldn’t hurt to have
one little cake before tea. Birthdays were different to normal days, everyone knew that.

Margot stood in front of the cake box, twirling her plait between her fingers. She thought she would have a monkey face, like Lewis, but she picked up a cupcake instead. As her tongue licked at the silver Hundreds and Thousands on top of the pale yellow cake, she saw Catherine, flicking her curls off the strap of her apron, tipping a bright dot of colour into a bowl of white icing.

Margot was standing by her side, watching. Watching the knife stirring the icing sugar around and around, turning the white to orange, the orange to gold and the gold into sunshiny yellow.

The yellow icing was for Steven’s birthday cake and for Catherine’s too. Margot skipped around the kitchen when her mother told her that. She skipped and said she’d never heard of anyone, who weren’t twins, having a birthday on the same day.

Catherine said it was lovely to have a birthday in spring, when there was blossom and lilac and those full-of-perfume jonquils.

‘Righto, Tiger let us in on the joke.’

‘The jonquils.’ Margot looked up at her father and whispered into her cake, ‘they smelt horrible.’

‘They were next to the cake and we had to sing happy birthday with our noses like this,’ said Lewis, squeezing his finger and thumb against the end of his nose.

‘Happy birthday to who?’

‘No one,’ said Margot.

‘Old Mr No one again he’s been busy, very busy today.’

‘Mummy,’ said Lewis helping himself to a lamington, ‘it was Mummy’s birthday and that new da…’

‘Steven!’ said Margot loudly, ‘he’s called Steven.’

‘Umaah,’ said Lewis squashing lamington into his mouth, ‘you’ll get in trouble now.’

‘Your mother,’ said Jim leaning over the table, over the cake box, ‘and Steven.’

He said the word Steven in two halves, the same way the Manboy said Mar-gie.
‘Have a party did you? Sing songs and dance and pin the tail on the
donkey?’

Margot looked at the backdoor. She wished Nana Rose would come tangling
through the plastic streamers, telling her to come inside, to stir the gravy or the
custard, or empty the teapot down the gully trap. But she didn’t come. There
was just the sun melting on the roof of the house, disappearing bit by bit.

Jim took his glasses off and tilted his head up to the red and yellow sky. ‘Do
you want to know the truth? Do you want to know a little bit of truth? Your
mother’s already had a birthday, her birthday’s in May, the day you left.’

Margot kept looking at the sun and thinking the night wasn’t far away even
though everyday it took such a long time to come.

‘And she’ll remember it. She’ll remember that birthday for the rest of her
life.’ Tears dropped out of Jim’s eyes. They ran down his face and onto his
neck and then his shoulders started crying too and he was staring at the sky and
crying like he’d really hurt himself.

Nana Rose did come pushing through the streamers. She came out and told
him to stop. She said he was making things worse because there was no one, no
one who cared what happened to any of them. She made him stand up and she
helped him walk inside the house. His hands were pushing the air, as though he
was playing ‘blind man’s bluff’ and Nana Rose was holding onto his side
saying, ‘nearly there, Jimmy, nearly there.’

Lewis sat down and wiped his lamington hands on the grass. ‘Am I allowed
to have a cupcake now?’ he asked.

Margot scratched the side of her arm. Jim’s glasses were looking at her.
There were no eyes in them but they were sitting on the table, in front of the
cake box, staring. She knew why they were looking. She’d broken her promise.

It had been so easy to make the promise when she was sitting at the table
sorting through all the glittering cards. When Catherine was wearing a pretty
blue dress and she, Margot, had been chosen to help.

Mrs Wilson had come in with two shoe boxes full of Christmas and birthday
cards. Cards she’d been saving for years and years but now she said she was
having a clean out and it was time to get rid of them.
Margot remembered spreading some of the cards across the table. There were angels and fairies and rainbows and reindeers and words in sparkling silver and gold.

Margot had wanted to sort through them all straight away but Catherine said there was no point sitting inside sorting cards on a lovely sunny day but a few days later, when it was lovely and sunny, Catherine put the shoe boxes on the table again and asked if Margot wanted to help.

Catherine cut the pictures off the cards and handed them to Margot to decide which pile they went in. There were piles for Christmas cards, glitter cards and cards with flowers, animals and angels. When the cutting and sorting was finished Catherine was going to divide the cards up so she and Lewis and Julie could play swaps or paste them into their scrapbooks.

‘Happy Easter.’ Catherine said that as she snipped the picture from a card edged in wavy gold glitter. They didn’t have an Easter pile. Not even old people got Easter cards anymore Catherine said. They looked at the picture of two baby ducks sitting on two golden eggs in a box filled with straw and flowers.

‘It’s very special isn’t it Mum?’ said Margot, moving the card from one pile to another.

‘Very,’ said Catherine. ‘Just like you.’

‘Mum!’ Margot squealed at that and waved the Easter card in the air. ‘I think I’ll leave it here just in case there’s another one and I have to start a new pile.’

Catherine smiled and the sun came in through the window and fell across the table and she put her scissors down and said, ‘I suppose I might as well tell you.’

‘Tell me what?’

Catherine traced her finger around a red-lipped Christmas angel.

‘Is Steven going away again?’

‘What? No. He’s staying here now.’

‘That’s good, isn’t it Mum?’
‘I hope so. Anyway, it’s not him I want to talk about… it’s your father.’

‘Daddy?’

‘He’s coming to see you. He’s coming today.’

‘Today! I thought it was next week or after Christmas or a long time away.’

Margot jumped up from the table. ‘Today! He’s coming today!’

‘If he comes,’ said Catherine to the Easter card.

‘Does Lewis know?’

‘Not yet. I thought it was best not to tell you until the day because…in case he doesn’t come.’

‘Doesn’t come?’

‘I know he wants to but just in case.’

‘In case he gets lost.’

Catherine’s eyes blinked at Margot. ‘Anyway. He’s supposed to come this afternoon.’

Margot skipped around the lino singing, ‘this afternoon, this afternoon.’

‘Now,’ said Catherine, in a voice that meant stop skipping around, ‘I know it’s hard to understand. But before you go, there’s a couple of things you have to promise me.’

‘Cross my heart and promise.’

‘That’s the girl,’ said Catherine slowly, ‘but you can’t go round making promises when you don’t know what I’m going to say.’

‘Can’t you?’

‘Not really.’ Catherine got up from the table and opened a cupboard and bought out a round biscuit tin. She pulled the lid off it and handed Margot a biscuit. ‘You iced the faces on them,’ she said, ‘you can have one while I tell you.’

‘Thank you Mummy,’ said Margot taking the biscuit. ‘What time is it?’

‘It doesn’t matter what the time is, if I say you can have a biscuit you can have one.’

‘Even it it’s breakfast time?’

‘Well it’s not breakfast time but even if it was – yes.’

Margot bit into the biscuit, ‘I know. I’ll take one of these for Daddy.’

Catherine closed the lid on the tin. ‘Now…now it’s hard to understand…’

‘You’ve done that bit - it’s hard to…’
‘For goodness sake! I’m sorry, love, I just mean. Could you just listen to me for five seconds without any interruptions?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Now. I think it will be better for Daddy and for everyone, if we don’t say anything about Steven.’

Margot chewed her biscuit and looked at her mother.

‘Because. He might get sad that we’ve gone to live at Steven’s house without him.’

Margot put her hand up. ‘I’m sad about that.’

‘Yes,’ said Catherine, ‘I know, that’s the main reason…please just promise not to say anything about him yet.’

‘Yes Mum.’

‘And also, you are not allowed in any cars.’

‘Yes Mum.’

‘And…’

‘There’s another promise?’

‘Last one.’

‘Three promises just like three wishes.’

‘Yes,’ Catherine blinked her eyes again. ‘He might buy you an icecream or a lemonade or something. I can’t stop that but you mustn’t let an icecream turn your head.’

‘Yes Mum. Can I promise now?’

Catherine rubbed her hand across the bottom of her neck. ‘Do you know what a bribe is?’

‘A bribe? Like a bride?’

‘No. It’s…it’s when someone gives you something so you’ll do something for them.’

Margot screwed her face up and tried to think when that had happened. ‘Is that the same as when you used to give me two cents to walk to school by myself?’

‘Of course not,’ said Catherine crossly, then she took a deep breath and her nice voice came back, ‘that was a reward. A reward for being brave.’
Margot swallowed the last bite of her biscuit thinking about that. She had a reward for being brave and she didn’t even know it. ‘If I’m brave again, will I get another reward?’

Catherine shook her head and said yes and then she said, ‘I’m sorry, Love. Sorry to have to tell you all these things but the one about Steven’s very important. Do you think you can remember that?’

Margot drew a midair cross straight across her heart, ‘Promise.’

Catherine tapped her fingers up and down on the pile of glitter cards. ‘Here,’ she said, quickly picking up the card with the baby ducks and the golden egg. ‘you can have this one.’

‘Now? What about Lewis and Julie?’

‘There’s plenty more for them. Besides you deserve a special card, for helping cut them out.’

Margot took the card from Catherine and danced it across the kitchen table. ‘Two little ducks went out one day. Listen to this Mum. Over the hills and far away. The Mummy duck sang, quack, quack, quack, quack, but only…’

‘Go and find Lewis,’ said Catherine, interrupting the song.

Margot walked her duck card across to Catherine. ‘I haven’t finished my song yet,’ she said in a duck voice.

‘Never mind. You can finish it later. When you get back.’

Margot suddenly remembered she was going to see Jim then and she jumped her duck card up into the air and danced out the door.

‘Jesus Christ. Jesus bloody Christ!’ Jim’s voice yelled out of the house and into the backyard.

‘What’s happened? What’s happened?’ cried Lewis scrambling off the ground and shaking Margot’s arm.

‘I told. I shouldn’t have told.’

‘I know how she operates!’ shouted Jim, ‘I know what goes on!’

Lewis looked across at the shouting. ‘It’s Nana Rose’s fault. She was pushing him.’

‘No she was helping.’
'Written all over her! She thinks I’m stupid. Thinks I’m bloody stupid.'
Lewis’s fingers gripped Margot’s arm. ‘It’s louder now isn’t it?’

‘Shhh.’ Margot stood in front of Lewis and looked at the kitchen window. She could see Jim walking around, yelling at the fridge and the sink and the toaster. He had a medicine bottle in his hand and he was pointing it at things. Nana Rose was standing near the fridge looking at the smoke coming out of her cigarette.

‘Lies! Nothing but a pack of lies and her…her and her bloody promises.’ Jim moved towards the plastic streamers and Nana Rose said something and he turned around and went over to the sink. He leant so far over it his head disappeared.

‘I promised,’ said Margot, ‘and now it’s all broken.’

‘We’ll hide,’ said Lewis looking around for somewhere to hide, ‘and then we’ll come out when they’ve forgotten.’

Margot felt in her pocket for the earring and as she touched it lots of hiding places jumped into her mind. On top of the old water tank, under the sheets on the clothesline, up in the branches of the peppercorn tree. It was good to live somewhere with lots of places to hide.

Lewis said he wanted to hide under the house. He said he wasn’t scared of snakes because he had already been under there when no one was looking. He found a pot lid and he was going to sell it and buy a ticket for a train to go home. Margot looked at the hole in the shoulder of his cowboy shirt. ‘Where did you put it?’ she asked.

‘Behind the toilet. I found a marble too and a wing off a aeroplane. Promise you won’t tell.’

Nana Rose came out of the streamers and walked across to the table and picked up Jim’s glasses. She put her hand on her heart when she saw Margot and Lewis standing near the door to the toilet. ‘Scared me half to death you two, creeping around.’ She put the glasses down and looked back towards the house. ‘Anyway, it’s time for bed.’

Margot and Lewis stayed where they were. Nana Rose opened the lid of the cake box. ‘You can finish the cakes. That will have to do you for tea tonight.’

‘I’m not hungry,’ said Lewis.
‘Out you come. Get out from behind that toilet. You don’t want to you worry about him. He’ll forget all about it tomorrow.’

‘You can’t forget about your birthday though can you Nana Rose?’ asked Margot.

‘No better day to forget. Not when you’re a kid, of course, but after that…it’s not worth the carry on.’

‘I got a day off, a day off,’ said Jim kicking through the backdoor streamers, ‘that’s all I got.’

‘You come with me,’ said Nana Rose holding out her hands, ‘we’ll ignore him.’

‘What are you doin’ over there?’

‘Shut up, Jimmy, you’re scaring the poor things.’

‘Me own kids? You can’t scare your own kids.’

Nana Rose snorted at that and pulled Margot and Lewis out from behind the toilet and marched them across the grass.

‘Who is it?’ said Jim, as though he had a mouth full, ‘who is it?’

‘Your glasses are on the table,’ said Nana Rose, ‘I’m putting these two to bed.’

‘Not yet,’ said Jim, ‘we’ve got party games we still have to have the party games.’

Margot watched her father bending past the plastic streamers and grabbing hold of the window sill. His head was falling around as though his neck was made of elastic. There was a moon behind him, a big yellow moon, shining down on him like a giant birthday cake.

‘No one is playing any games tonight,’ said Nana Rose.

‘You’re no fun,’ said Jim sulkily, ‘she’s no fun is she Tiger?’

Margot looked at Nana Rose. ‘We didn’t blow out any candles out or make any wishes.’

‘He doesn’t deserve a wish.’ Nana Rose swallowed her lips as soon as she said that and then she said, ‘anyway, this whole birthday carry on is ridiculous.’

Ridiculous! Margot caught her breath. How could anyone say that about a birthday?

‘I’m tired,’ said Lewis through a yawn.

‘See,’ said Nana Rose.
‘Yeah. I see, I see.’

‘I doubt that,’ said Nana Rose crossly.

‘On her birthday. She left me on her birthday, just walked out and left me with the house still full of everything and when I came home and walked in, it was as though there was nothin’ in it.’

‘Well there wasn’t was there? That’s why she had to hock her earrings. Remember them? The ones you gave her the day Margot was born.’

Jim spun around and hit his head on the side of the kitchen window. ‘Cath? She loved those earrings.’

‘She did,’ Margot cried, ‘she did.’

‘That’s enough,’ said Nana Rose and she held onto Margot’s wrist so tightly it felt like a Chinese burn.

‘Cakes for tea.’ Jim’s arms fell to the side of his body and he slid away from the window. ‘I brought you cakes for tea.’ He slid down the wall of the house in slow motion, sliding and sliding, until he was on the grass and not moving at all.

Watch me Tiger. This is how you dance sliding. Slide and slide down someone’s cellar door. Watching? Slide and slide till our pants got tore. Then we had to go to bed, got to go to bed. You have to look sad for that bit Tiger, then, we got to stitch ‘em up with a needle and thread, Oh boy! This is it, Tiger. What joy! We had in bare foot…That’s the way. Big kick. Keep going. Big finish now Tiger. But there was no finish. The singing and dancing kept going. It went around and around inside Margot’s head until there was nothing but the slow, slow, sliding of everything.
Margot stared at the drawing on the back page of Nana Rose’s newspaper. It was a drawing of a fire-place with a big, bright fire and a girl and a boy and a very beautiful mother.

The mother was holding a blue baby and smiling at the Christmas tree and the Daddy. The Daddy was leaning on the mantle piece and pointing at a present with his pipe. There were lots and lots of presents, under their Christmas tree. They were wrapped in red paper and tied up with gold ribbons and bows. There were some words above the picture that were hard to read because Nana Rose kept moving the newspaper, except for one word that was so special, everyone knew it.
‘Coles!’ Margot cried, ‘there’s Coles.’

Lewis looked up from his toast and Nana Rose pushed her tea cup out of the way and turned the paper around.

‘What does it say? What does that picture say?’

Nana Rose spread the page out flat on the table and looked at the drawing, “Spend Your Christmas at Coles”, that’s what it says.’
‘Is it Christmas now?’ asked Lewis.
‘Nearly,’ said Nana Rose.
‘When?’ asked Margot.

Nana Rose picked up her cup and drank her tea noisily, ‘Soon,’ she moved the paper around on the kitchen table, ‘I’ll try and work it out. Now, today’s…’

‘Work out how many sleeps, Nana Rose,’ said Lewis, ‘that’s how you do it, isn’t it Margie.’
‘Yes,’ said Margot, ‘that’s how you do it.’

Nana Rose stood up. ‘I think I’ll make another cuppa, see if your father wants one and when he gets up, we’ll get him to work it out.’ She walked to the sink and turned the tap on.

‘Can I have some more toast please?’ asked Lewis.
‘More? You’ve nearly eaten all the bread, you’d think you kids had hollow legs.’
‘We have to go back for Christmas, don’t we?’ said Margot, making a pattern with her toast crumbs on her plate.

‘Don’t let’s start all that again,’ said Nana Rose, lighting the gas under the kettle, ‘you’re having Christmas here in Ballarat and that’s that.’

‘Does Mummy know where Ballarat is?’

‘As far as I know, she does.’

‘I thought she’d come and get us.’

‘I thought that too,’ said Lewis.

‘Well, we all know what thought thought,’ said Nana Rose. ‘One piece or two?’

‘Two please.’

‘May I leave the table and thank you God for what I have received,’ said Margot, jumping off her chair and walking around to the newspaper.

‘You know you don’t have to say that here, it reminds your father…’

‘It’s what we always say when we leave the table,’ said Margot, spreading the Christmas at Coles picture out flat on the table top. ‘Where is this?’

‘Where’s what?’

‘This Christmas tree with all the presents and decorations?’

Nana Rose finished slicing the bread and put the pieces in the toaster, ‘Like it says it’s at Coles.’

‘We’ve got a Christmas tree at home, haven’t we Margie?’

‘Yes,’ said Margot frowning, ‘are we going to get a Christmas tree here?’

Nana Rose opened the door to the toaster and turned the toast around quickly, ‘We might,’ she said scratching her fingers, ‘we don’t usually, not since your grandpa. He always liked a tree.’

‘What grandpa?’ said Margot.

‘Your grandpa Ted. Nana Rose opened the toaster again and threw the hot toast onto a bread and butter plate.

‘Where is he?’ asked Lewis.

‘He’s not with us anymore.’ Nana Rose turned the teapot around and around on the sink. ‘Had an accident. A long time ago. Least that’s what they said it was.’

‘Is he in heaven?’ asked Margot.

‘I hope so,’ said Nana Rose quietly, ‘I hope the poor old devil got there.’
‘A devil can’t go to heaven,’ said Margot, ‘they’re all in hell.’

Nana Rose spread butter on Lewis’ toast and her crooked smile came back.
‘Listen to it,’ she said, ‘seven years old and listen to it.’

‘I’m nearly eight now,’ said Margot, ‘my birthday’s next to Christmas.’

‘I know exactly when your birthday is, remember it like yesterday.  Your father shouted everyone at the Royal George and showed them the earrings he bought for her at Thomas’.  Nana Rose picked up her cigarettes and tapped the box on the bread board, ‘funny the things you remember.’

‘I remember that,’ said Lewis and Nana Rose lit her cigarette and blew laughing smoke across the room.  ‘The devil’s in drink.  That’s what you should remember.  Here’s your toast.’

Margot stared at her grandmother.  ‘Can you take us back Nana Rose?’
‘Me?  It’s not up to me.  I don’t get a say.’

Margot looked down at the picture of Christmas.  ‘Please,’ she said.
‘That’s enough of that.  Besides I’ve got no idea where you live and I doubt he does either.’

Margot looked at Lewis.  ‘Our house is in Page street, next door to the dairy.’

‘That doesn’t tell us much,’ said Nana Rose, ‘there are Page streets everywhere.’

‘We could ask a policeman,’ said Lewis.

‘Yes,’ said Margot skipping across to Nana Rose, ‘a policeman would know.  A policeman would.’

‘Yes, but let’s not get carried away.  Even if I did know where you lived, we’d have to get your father to agree and that…’

‘What am I agreeing to now?’ asked Jim standing in the doorway doing up the buttons on a bright, white shirt.

‘Eavesdroppers never hear any good of themselves,’ said Nana Rose.

‘Eavesdroppers,’ said Jim, ‘I can hear you three yelling all over the house.’

He clapped his hands together and pulled a chair round to sit in front of the newspaper.  ‘Reading the Herald are we?  Anything interesting?’

‘It says it’s Christmas,’ said Lewis.

‘Does it?’

‘At Coles,’ added Margot.
‘Christmas at Coles. Well, I can’t think of much that could beat that. Alright then, who’d like to go?’

‘Where to?’ asked Margot, looking up at Nana Rose.

‘Wake up Tiger,’ said Jim. ‘To Coles. Who’d like to go and see Christmas at Coles?’

‘I would,’ said Lewis shoving the rest of his toast into his mouth, ‘I would.’

‘And me,’ said Margot looking down at the table and twirling her plait in her fingers. ‘I didn’t even know they had Coles here.’

‘Too right they have. Down in Bridge street. Coles is everywhere. C’mon. A bit of a wash. Some clean clothes. Might buy the pair of you something new to put on.’

Margot and Lewis got up and shuffled around the table.

‘Long faces,’ said Jim, ‘can’t have long faces at Christmas.’

‘Kiddies don’t want clothes for Christmas, Jimmy. They want toys.’

‘Toys?’ said Jim making his funny sad face, ‘They have toys at Coles, don’t they? Alright. Toys it is.’

‘Thank you, Daddy,’ said Margot and Lewis together.

‘That’s more like it,’ said Jim smiling all over his face, ‘back in the good books again. What about a cuppa, Mum?’

‘A cuppa this morning is it?’ said Nana Rose, ‘goodness me. Coles, Christmas, cuppas, who knows where it’ll end.’ She poured Jim a cup of tea and it shook when he picked it up.

‘Righto,’ he said, tapping a finger on the Herald, ‘better get your skates on. Coles shuts at twelve.’

The decorations at Coles were glorious. There were gold and silver stars sparkling from the ceiling, big cardboard Father Christmas faces stuck onto the front of the counters, coloured chains looped around the walls and an enormous Christmas tree filled the doorway with its lights blinking on and off, on and off. A sparkling red star gleamed at the top of the tree. Margot and Lewis stood in the doorway staring at it.

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Margot, ‘really and truly beautiful.’

‘How could they get it in the door?’ asked Lewis.

‘It’s a decent tree alright,’ said Jim. ‘Come on then. Where to first?’
‘Toys,’ said Lewis excitedly, ‘toys first.’

‘Righto, lead the way.’

The ladies at Coles stood behind the counters in their pink uniforms smiling red lipstick smiles as Margot and Lewis skipped past. They went past tea towels and coat hangers, past mixing bowls and knives and forks, past bells for bicycles and clocks to sit on the mantelpiece. There were mothers everywhere with children and babies in pushers and prams and when Margot stopped to look at them a hard lump jumped into her throat. She could smell the powder and soap and the bath salts too and she looked at all the mothers and wished and wished she was holding Catherine’s hand and listening to her telling the Coles lady she wanted Red Indian lipstick.

As she turned around to look for Jim, she tried to press the lump in her throat back down into her tummy, which was where she imagined they came from.

Jim was standing behind her, staring at the Starlight counter. He was staring at a picture of a man giving a lady a pink box, tied up with a big Christmas bow. The picture was next to the lipsticks and the perfume and the small round mirrors ladies keep inside their handbags. Margot took Lewis’ hand and walked him back to the join Jim.

‘Is Daddy going to buy a present for Nana Rose?’ asked Lewis, looking up at the Starlight counter.

‘What?’ Jim turned away from the picture with a far away look on his face. ‘That’s a good idea,’ he said, but he didn’t move, didn’t ask the Starlight lady if he could smell anything.

‘What does that picture say, Daddy?’

‘Star bright, Starlight,’ said Jim in a whispery voice, ‘what will you wish for this Christmas?’

‘I know what I’m wishing for,’ said Lewis, ‘an Indian tent.’

‘Tee Pee,’ said Jim, looking at the picture again, ‘an Indian tent is called a tee pee.’

‘That’s what I want. And a pop-gun. I think I had a pop gun but it got left at the other house, that house we used to live in before…’

‘Yes, yes, alright,’ said Jim.

‘All the toys got left there,’ said Lewis.
Jim turned to look at his children. ‘Righto,’ he said sadly.

‘What are you wishing for Daddy?’ asked Margot.

‘Me?’ Jim’s eyes blinked behind his glasses while he tried to think. ‘Too many things. That’s my trouble, Tiger.’ He rubbed his hands together, ‘Righto. Let’s see if we can find those toys.

‘Over there, Dad,’ said Lewis pointing across the counters, to the back of the shop, ‘over there’s the toys.’ He raced away down the aisle with Margot skipping behind him.

‘Hold your horses,’ Jim called and when Margot heard that she tossed her head in the air and jumped around on the wooden floor and felt Christmasy.

The toy counter was piled high with more toys than anyone could think of. There were so many toys it was hard to know what to look at first. There were walking dolls with long golden hair, fluffy white poodles with glasses on their nose, beach balls and music boxes and toy Hills Hoists with their own tiny pegs. Big cardboard Christmas stockings hung up in the air, and whistles and lollies and pretty paper fans were squashed in behind the stocking mesh.

When Jim got to the counter he reached into his pocket and pulled out his handkerchief. ‘Hot in here,’ he said wiping his brow and bumping a tray full of cowboys and Indians with his elbow.

‘Merry Christmas,’ said the Coles lady leaning across the counter to them with a bright Christmas smile on her mouth. ‘Not long to go now.’

‘Bit hot in here, isn’t it?’ said Jim.

‘Yes, it’s going to be a scorcher. Too hot for plum pudding.’ The Coles lady looked happy at that. She pointed her finger at Margot and Lewis, ‘Last minute shopping?’

Jim straightened up and put his hanky back in his pocket. ‘Been away a bit. Thought I’d bring ‘em into Coles for a treat.’

‘You’re a good Dad.’ She winked at Margot. ‘Lucky girl you are.’

‘Yes,’ said Margot, ‘my Daddy’s going to buy us a present for Christmas.’

‘I think he spoils you two,’ said the Coles lady, squeezing her lips into a kiss on her face and looking at Jim.

Jim clapped his hands together. ‘Alright, what’s it going to be?’

‘Can we choose,’ said Margot, ‘can we choose what we want?’
'That’s what we’re here for Tiger, choose away.’

‘The baby.’

‘What?’ Jim’s eyebrows looked over the top of his glasses at Margot.

‘The babydoll. That’s what all the little girls want. We’ve only got lemon ones left.’ The Coles lady flicked her fingers across the collar on her uniform, ‘They’re our most popular.’ She kept her hand pressed against her collar and lowered her voice,’ they’re also our dearest, I’m afraid.’

Jim stared at the Coles lady then picked up a brown plastic Indian and turned it over in his hand. ‘How dear?’

‘It’s two dollars and fifty cents or one guinea in the old money. Second decimal Christmas and it’s still causing confusion.’

Jim dropped the Indian back in its tray, ‘I’m always making mistakes.’

‘Everyone does,’ said the Coles lady happily, ‘it’s keeping us on our toes.’

‘It looks just like a real baby, only better,’ said Margot.

‘It is. Look’. The Coles lady turned around and lifted a lemon baby doll off a long shelf behind her. ‘Have a feel. It’s much better than a real one – doesn’t cry as much or eat as much.’ She handed the doll to Margot and her Christmas smile came back.

Margot took the baby doll and cradled it in her arms. Its plastic arms and legs were joined onto stuffed pieces of material and it flopped around by itself.

‘You can feed it a bottle,’ said the Coles lady, holding a small plastic doll’s bottle up in the air, ‘and then it will wet its nappy just like a real one too.’

‘Ohhh,’ squealed Margot.

‘And it can go to sleep. All you have to do is close the eyelids down.’

‘Ohhh.’ Margot watched the Coles lady pressing her fingers onto the baby’s eyes, ‘it’s so real, isn’t it, Dad? I think I’m going to call her Audrey.’

‘Hold your horses,’ said Jim. ‘This baby’s dearer than a real one. Do you have any others that are a bit…?’

‘Well,’ said the Coles lady, ‘we have these ones.’ She pulled out a small step ladder, stood up on it and took down a large plastic baby doll that was lying on the very top shelf. ‘This one’s fifty two-cents.’ She grabbed the soft lemon baby out of Margot’s arms and gave her the hard, pink one. ‘There you are,’ she said, as if she was giving Margot something special like a barley sugar or a humbug. ‘This one’s nice. It’s got bigger eyes.’
Margot looked at the doll. Its eyes were big and blue and they fell open and closed as she rocked the doll’s big, bald head on her arm. The head was made of hard pink plastic and if you bumped it, it sounded like someone knocking on a door. ‘You can’t feed this one a bottle,’ she said disappointed.

‘You can pretend,’ said the Coles lady, picking up a small babies’ bottle and holding it near the doll’s mouth.

Margot looked at the bottle, feeding the doll’s closed red lips. ‘It can’t do wees and it hasn’t got any clothes on.’

‘It’s big enough to wear something of yours from when you were little. Or you could buy a real baby dress.’

Margot looked up at Jim, ‘Daddy?’

‘Do you like it?’ asked Jim, his eyes opening and closing like the doll’s eyes.

Margot folded her arms around the plastic baby and tried to rock her to sleep but its arms and legs were made of round plastic fat and they pressed against her chest just like the sugar castor had. She stopped rocking the doll and wondered if Jim knew about that. Knew that, on the night he gave it to her, she put it under her bed and lost it. ‘I like her lips,’ she said, ‘she looks like a baby wearing lipstick.’

Jim rubbed his hand across the top of his eyes, ‘that’s the way,’ he said, then he bent close to Margot’s ear and said, ‘sorry Tiger, the other one’s a bit dear.’

The Coles lady took a step back from the counter. ‘I’ll leave you to decide,’ she said and then she pointed her finger at Lewis and told him not to point the pop gun at people he didn’t know.

‘That other one’s too floppy,’ said Jim tapping the plastic baby on the arm.

‘Real babies aren’t floppy, are they Dad?’

‘They shouldn’t be.’

Margot looked up at all the lemon baby dolls, lined up on the shelf behind the counter and chewed her lips together. ‘I think this one wants a Mummy,’ she said, ‘because it’s all by itself.’

Jim wiped his hand across the top of his head and said, ‘How we going with that popgun Lew?’

‘You put the cork in like this and it pops out like this.’ Lewis pointed the gun at Jim and popped the cork and cried, ‘bang! Bang!’

‘No shooting in the shop,’ said the Coles lady.
‘I don’t know why you want a popgun,’ said Jim, ‘Indians don’t have pop
guns.’

‘An Indian,’ said the Coles lady, ‘you should be a cowboy. They’re much
better than the Indians.’

‘I want to be a Indian.’

The Coles lady smiled her Christmas smile again and said, ‘but the Indians
didn’t have guns, just bows and arrows and axes too, I suppose. Guns are much
nicer.’

‘But I have to be a Indian, so I can have a tee pee tent.

‘Oh, that’s different. If you have a tee pee you’ll be the chief. Chiefs can
make up their own rules.’

‘I know that,’ said Lewis, ‘that’s why I’m going to be one.’

‘Well, we’d better get you a tee pee then.’ The Coles lady raised her
eyebrows at Jim. ‘I have to go and get one from the store room, they’re all gone
out here.’ She took out a key, locked her till, walked down to the end of the
counter and disappeared through a small door.

‘I’m going to work at Coles when I grow up,’ said Margot.

‘Well, you could do a lot worse than that, Tiger. A lot worse.’

‘Are we going to get my baby some clothes now?’

‘We’ll see,’ said Jim, ‘we’ll see.’

‘You can’t have a baby with no clothes on.’

‘I know that Tiger but I’m not made of money.’

‘Father Christmas will bring some, won’t he Dad?’

The Coles lady came back out of the door shaking her head. ‘I’m really
sorry,’ she said ‘but we haven’t got any tee pees left. I just sold one five
minutes ago. It must have been the last one.’

Margot and Lewis stared at the toy counter.

‘Five minutes ago?’ Jim rubbed his hands together as he spoke, ‘I’m sure
we’ve been here five minutes. Or longer.’

‘Ten minutes then.’

‘Ten minutes,’ Jim said the words slowly and turned and patted Lewis on the
shoulder. ‘Never mind, Lew. What would you like instead?’

‘A Indian tent.’
‘There’s none left. We can’t just conjure up tents out of thin air, can we? But I’ll tell you what, because you’re being such a good boy about it, you can choose something even better.’

‘There isn’t anything,’ said Lewis tears welling in his eyes, ‘A Indian tent is the best.’

‘C’mon now Lew, look at Margie, she couldn’t have the doll she wanted but she’s not crying about it.’

‘That’s right,’ said the Coles lady.

‘Nigh, nigh baby,’ said Margot cradling the doll in her arms, ‘she’s asleep now.’ She held her sleeping baby up for Lewis to see and two tears fell out of his eyes and trickled down the doll’s shoulder.

The Coles lady pulled a bunch of coloured feathers off the counter and popped it on her head, ‘Look,’ she said, ‘an Indian chief’s headdress.’ Lewis turned his head away, ‘I don’t want to be a Indian now.’

The Coles lady put the headress back on the counter. ‘I was only trying to help,’ she said, pushing her hair back behind her ears.

‘Now look,’ said Jim, ‘you’ve upset the nice lady.’

‘And you wet the baby,’ said Margot, ‘and woke her up.’

‘I didn’t mean to.’ Lewis’ voice was all runny like his tears.

‘The baby’s hungry now,’ said Margot.

‘If you stop crying and choose something else, I bet Father Christmas will bring you a tee pee.’

Lewis looked at the Coles lady through his fingers. ‘Father Christmas?’

‘I’m sure of it.’

‘Getting a bit late isn’t it, even for Father Christmas?’ Jim laughed a bit and ran his hand around the edge of his collar.

‘Oh I’m sure Father Christmas can do it,’ said the Coles lady and she fiddled with the collar on her uniform too.

‘I’m sure too,’ said Margot, ‘and the baby.’

‘Tomorrow is Sunday,’ said Jim.
The Coles lady bobbed down and when she bobbed back up again she was holding a big jar of jellybeans. ‘Here we are,’ she said, ‘let’s see if a few jellybeans don’t help make things better. Hold out your hand.’

Lewis dropped his hands from his eyes and held them out in front of him like a bowl. The Coles lady’s long red finger nails got lost inside the jellybean colours as she scooped out a handful for Lewis, who pushed them all into his mouth and made his face go lumpy.

‘And for the little girl, she’s been good as gold.’ The Coles lady gave Margot some jellybeans and then her fingers skipped across the plastic cowboys and Indians and stopped at the little babies’ bottles, ‘You can have one of these too.’

‘Thank you,’ said Margot standing up as straight as she could and talking in her proper thank you voice.

The Coles lady brushed her jellybean fingers on the sleeve of her uniform and told Jim, ‘They’ll have forgotten all about it by the time they leave.’

Margot put her doll on the counter while she filled the baby’s bottle with her jellybeans. ‘My baby’s going to have jellybeans for tea.’

The Coles lady laughed a loud laugh then. ‘Jellybeans for tea. Imagine that.’

Jim pushed his glasses up onto his eyes and blinked at her.

‘So well mannered, the pair of them and they’re the spitting image of you.’

‘I don’t know about that.’

‘Except the eyes. Your son’s eyes are like yours but your daughter’s…I suppose she got her mother’s.’

‘Julie,’ said Margot, ‘Julie’s got Mummy’s.’

‘Oh. Julie’s your sister?’

‘Yes but she’s not here. She…’

‘Had to stay home,’ said the Coles lady finishing Margot’s sentence. ‘I suppose someone has to stay home and help Mummy.

‘She’s not helping her,’ said Lewis, ‘She’s just…’

‘Righto, Lew, that’s enough chatterbox. You’d better pick something, Coles will be closing soon.’

‘It will,’ said the Coles lady, putting her neck up in the air to read the clock at the back of the cordial stand. ‘Nearly half past. Only half an hour to go. Only two sleeps until Father Christmas comes.’
‘Two sleeps,’ said Margot wide-eyed, ‘is that true?’

‘Fraid so,’ said Jim.

‘Oooh,’ said Lewis, ‘only two sleeps ‘til I get my tee pee.’

Jim laughed and frowned, ‘I hope Father Christmas is listening.’

‘Oh he is Daddy,’ said Margot, ‘he can hear everything.’

‘Do you think he can find us?’ asked Lewis, ‘because we don’t know where we are.’

The Coles lady giggled at that and screwed the lid back on the jellybean jar.

‘Well, I’ve never heard of a child he hasn’t been able to find. Unless…,’ she changed her voice into a whisper, ‘unless, you’ve been bad.’

Margot rocked her doll. ‘I can’t talk,’ she said looking down at her doll, ‘the baby’s asleep.’

‘C’mon Lew,’ said Jim, patting him on the shoulder, ‘what’ll it be?’

Lewis looked up and down the toy counter. He screwed up his eyes at the cowboys and Indians, at the Matchbox cars, the marbles and the plastic army men. The Coles lady thought he might like a drum or a tambourine or a game of Old Maid or Ludo or maybe the popgun again but then he saw the telephone and he pointed at it and cried, ‘That one! Up there!’

The toy telephone was dangling above their heads. Its body was brown and made to look like a rock and its bright orange receiver was shaped like an enormous bone.

‘That’s the Flintstone telephone. They’re new. Do you know Yabba Dabba Do?’

‘A yabba dabba doooooo,’ yelled Lewis.

‘He saw it in hospital, when he had scarlet fever,’ said Margot, ‘and Zoro too.’

‘Yabba dabba doooooo,’ yelled Lewis again.

‘Righto. That’ll do,’ said Jim. ‘Here,’ he reached into his pocket, fished around and gave Margot ten cents. ‘You go and get yourselves a cordial while I fix the lady up for this lot.’

‘A cordial,’ said Margot surprised.

‘A cordial,’ said Lewis.

‘Is there an echo in here? Over there, next to the clock.’
Margot gave her doll to Jim. ‘What do we say when we get there? At the cordial counter?’

‘You say, can I have two cordials please?’

‘What kind?’

‘Whatever kind they’ve got.’

‘They’ve got orange and lemon,’ said the Coles lady.

‘Like the Bells of Saint Clement’s,’ said Margot taking Lewis’ hand as she skipped away singing, ‘when will you pay me?’

‘When I get rich.’

‘Said the bells of…’

The cordial lady looked at Margot’s singing and that made her stop.

‘I never know that bells bit,’ said Lewis pulling his hand away from Margot’s and standing up straight in front of the two large bubbling bubbles of cordial.

They waited quietly while the cordial lady filled up a line of paper cups. The cups were made of blue and white stripes and the cordial lady’s apron was made of stripes like that too. When she finished giving two oranges and one lemon to a lady with three little girls she asked what sort of cordial Margot and Lewis wanted.

Margot answered in her special shop voice and felt so grown up, asking for cordial with ten cents in the middle of her hand; she stood up on her tiptoe high-heels until the cordial lady handed her one lemon and one orange.

The cold, tingly drinks rushed up, out of the red and white paper straws and down their throats. Margot and Lewis swapped tastes and the cold cups from one hand to the other.

‘I’m rich now, Margie?’

‘You’ll have to pay me then.’

Lewis laughed into his straw and his cordial made a loud noise and bubbled up inside his cup. ‘I love orange cordial,’ he said and made the noise again.

Margot looked back at the toy counter and saw the Coles lady putting the Flintstone telephone inside a big paper bag that had a Christmas Coles drawn on the front. When she finished she gave Jim the bag and put a finger into one of her curls and twirled it around and around on her head.

Margot looked up at the gold and silver stars, twinkling from the roof. Two sleeps. That wasn’t long. It was funny how everything seemed fast even when
it was very, very slow. She thought about their last Christmas and the tree in front of the fireplace and the presents wrapped in glittery paper and the paper whistles from the Christmas stockings and Jim, crawling on his hands and knees, giving everyone rides.

Lewis tugged on Margot’s arm. ‘Can you wish on those stars Margie?’

Margot shook her head. ‘They’re not real.’

‘They look real.’

‘They’re a bit real, like all the Christmas things.’

Jim stood next to them and said, ‘what are you two looking at?’

‘Christmas, Dad,’ said Margot, ‘we’re looking at Christmas.’

‘I’ve got Christmas right here,’ said Jim and he held the doll and the telephone up in the air and the cordial lady called out to him, ‘there you are. I was beginning to think those two had run away from home.’
Nana Rose grabbed a white paper parcel from her basket and plonked it the middle of the table, ‘there you are,’ she said, ‘that’s for tomorrow. Leg of lamb. Nana Rose’s special Christmas dinner.’

Margot danced her doll across the table to look at the meat. ‘She’s too little to eat any yet, isn’t she Nana Rose?’

‘How many teeth has she got?’

‘Two.’

‘Can’t eat roast lamb with only two teeth. What are you doing Lewis?’

‘I’m saying hello to Mummy on my Flintstone telephone. Do you want to say hello?’

‘What? Not just now. I’ve got to get up into my secret Woolworths, get a few things organised now the shops are shut. Where’s your father?’

‘He’s writing a letter, he said, isn’t he Margie?’

‘Yes. In his bedroom.’

‘ Hmmmm.’ Nana Rose put the lamb parcel in the fridge and picked up her cigarette box. ‘A letter. I swear that’s a first.’

‘It’s not nice to swear,’ said Margot.

‘It’s not that kind of swearing.’

‘Are there different kinds?’

‘Yes. There’s normal swearing and the one where you swear that something is true – like a promise.’

‘Daddy promised to get some clothes for Audrey.’

‘Who’s Audrey.’

‘My baby. I’m going to call her Audrey because she was my best friend but not now because she doesn’t go to my school, no one from my old school goes to my new school.’

‘I don’t suppose they do.’

‘I do,’ said Lewis. ‘Mummy says hello and did I remember ‘may I leave the table’.’
Nana Rose lit her cigarette and blew smoke at the kitchen window. ‘It’s going to be close to a hundred Christmas day,’ she said, ‘one hundred and twenty with the oven on.’ She put her cigarette back into her mouth. ‘I don’t usually have to put the oven on. Not when it’s just me.’

Margot sat her doll on the table top and watched her grandmother talking and fiddling with the knob on the wireless. She listened to bits of noise with her head on one side the same way the dog on the box listened to his record player. It seemed a long time ago, that dog on the box. She looked down and was surprised to see Mrs Hartnett’s rosebud dress. She didn’t mind wearing it now, even though it didn’t have pockets. Her ric rac dress was filthy. That’s what Nana Rose said when she made her take it off so she could wash it. Margot watched her holding it up above the copper and just before she dropped it into the boiling water, her earring jumped out and landed near her foot.

Nana Rose turned the wireless knob off and clicked her tongue. ‘Nothing decent on the wireless anymore,’ she said, ‘it’s all television now.’

She took a bunch of mint out of her basket and put it under Margot’s nose. ‘Smell that,’ she said, ‘that’s my favourite smell, mint.’

‘I like peppercorns best,’ said Margot, ‘and jonquils.’

‘Jonquils stink,’ said Lewis.

‘That’s enough of that,’ said Nana Rose, putting the mint down next to her ashtray and picking up a leaf that had fallen off. ‘Busy was it? Coles?’

‘Yes and they had a big, big Christmas tree, like the one in the paper,’ said Margot.

‘It was bigger than the door,’ said Lewis, ‘bigger than the North Pole.’

‘Hmmm,’ Nana Rose rubbed her lips together like she’d just put lipstick on, ‘they do things properly in there. Now…now about Father Christmas…’

‘We know,’ said Margot, ‘Dad told us.’

‘What did he tell you?’

‘He doesn’t think he can find us. That’s why he’s writing a letter. To tell him where we are.’

‘That’s why,’ said Nana Rose.

‘And he might come late,’ said Lewis, ‘and Dad’s going to get the tee pee instead.’

‘And some clothes for Audrey. He’s going to get clothes too.’
Nana Rose put the leaf down and picked up her burning cigarette. ‘Sometimes,’ she said, ‘I think he thinks he’s Father Christmas.’

The telephone rang and Lewis picked up the bone on his Flintstone phone and said, ‘Hello, hello.’

Nana Rose squashed her cigarette into the boat and walked out into the passage and Margot heard her saying, ‘Hello, hello,’ too.

No one said anything then until Nana Rose said, ‘it’s not up to me. I wish it was but it isn’t.’

Margot stood at the door to the passage and listened. Nana Rose was wishing something. She said it again. ‘I wish it was.’ Margot held her plait against her lips. There was a real person on the end of the telephone this time. A real person who was making Nana Rose wish things.

Lewis said goodbye to the person on his telephone and stood next to Margot. ‘Who is it?’ he said and Margot put her hand on his mouth.

‘Shhh,’ she whispered, ‘I think it’s Mummy.’

Nana Rose put the telephone down on the table and went and knocked on the door of Jim’s bedroom. ‘Jimmy,’ she shouted. ‘She’s on the telephone. Jimmy!’

Margot pressed her head around the door and saw Nana Rose open Jim’s bedroom door and march in. She listened as Nana Rose shouted and her father laughed and then he was in the doorway, in his dressing gown, trying to catch Nana Rose as she turned away.

Margot grabbed Lewis and ran back to sit at the table. Nana Rose came bursting into the kitchen with her black bird eyes moving everywhere. ‘What have you two been doing?’ she said in the voice grownups ask questions they already know the answer to.

‘Nothing,’ said Margot, ‘playing.’

Nana Rose looked into her face, ‘you’re your mother’s daughter. He can’t change that.’

Lewis scratched his patchwork head. ‘And me,’ he said, ‘I was playing too.’

Jim fell through the kitchen door. His dressing gown was falling around his neck and his glasses were on crooked. ‘Dolls clothes,’ he said pointing at Margot, ‘dolls clothes and a tee pee. I haven’t forgotten.’
‘She’s still there,’ said Nana Rose crossly. ‘She wants to speak to the kids. She knows they’re here.’

‘She doesn’t know that. Unless you told her.’

Nana Rose flapped her arms around in front of Jim’s face. ‘It was always a matter of time. I told you that.’

Jim coughed and held his hand out towards Margot. ‘You hear that Tiger? Just as well someone knows what’s going on.’

Margot picked up her doll and backed around the table towards Lewis.

‘She wants to speak to the kids,’ said Nana Rose again.

‘Tell her they’re not here. They disappeared. Just like that.’ Jim waved his hands in the air like a magician and laughed and Lewis laughed too and Nana Rose got crosser and crosser and said she wasn’t going to tell any lies on the telephone.

Margot held her doll against her body and felt sick. She should run out of the kitchen and down to the telephone and tell her mother to please, please come and get them. But it was her fault. All of it was her fault. The Cherry Ripe, the train, telling Jim about Steven, all of her promises disappeared, just like that and now it was too late.

‘I think I’d better speak to you in the passage,’ said Nana Rose.

‘You can say whatever you’ve got to say in here. They’ve got to learn what she’s like. How she comes across all saintly when really she’s a bloody whore.’

‘Jimmy!’ Nana Rose hit her hand hard on the table as though she was killing a fly. ‘They’ll remember that. They’ll remember that when they remember you.’

‘Fair go Mum,’ said Jim, ‘that’s below the belt.’

Nana Rose scratched the skin between her fingers. ‘My own son,’ she said squeezing her lips together as though she was trying to stop talking, ‘I shouldn’t have to talk like that to my own son.’ She looked like she was going to pick up a ruler and hit someone but instead she pulled the door to the passage wide open and left.

Margot looked across the kitchen at Jim and remembered the empty bottles. They were stacked against the side of the shed. Rows and rows of them, sparkling in the sun. When Margot looked for Catherine, to say the taxi was
there, she found her standing with those bottles, holding the top of her cardigan closed with her hands and whispering goodbye.

‘Mummy is not a horse,’ said Lewis, ‘she doesn’t like horses.’

‘You’re right Lew,’ said Jim quietly, ‘she doesn’t.’

Margot looked around the kitchen for something to say too. ‘We’re going to have roast lamb for Christmas dinner tomorrow. Nana Rose bought one.’

‘Did she,’ said Jim, ‘roast lamb.’

‘Chicken’s too dear she said.’

Jim turned on the tap over the sink and splashed water onto his face and said, ‘Hot today.’

‘At Coles. That lady said it would be hot,’ said Margot closing the eyes on her doll and patting her arm.

‘She did,’ said Jim moving away from the sink and pulling his glasses back onto his eyes, ‘she did.’

The phone noise rang again and, as Lewis picked up his Flintstone bone, Jim clapped his hands together and walked out into the passage. Margot put her doll down on the table. ‘Mind she doesn’t fall off,’ she said to Lewis and she crept out into the passage behind her father.

‘Right as rain. Bloody marvellous.’ That was the first thing Margot heard Jim say into the telephone. There was a long silence then and Margot stuck her head out from behind the bathroom door to make sure Jim was still there. He was holding the telephone with both hands to stop it from shaking. ‘The police!’ He shouted that and that made Nana Rose slam her bedroom door closed. ‘You go to the bloody police,’ said Jim in a slower voice. ‘You tell ‘em how you took...’ The hot water tank started making a gurgling noise and Margot’s heart started gurgling too and there were noises everywhere and even though Catherine was right there on the telephone she was as far away as you could be.

‘China!’

The word filled the passage and the bathroom too.

‘You can go to bloody China!’

Everything went quiet then and Margot held onto the side of the bath and listened to her heart breathing. China. Her mother had gone to China and China was across the sea.
She heard Nana Rose come out of her bedroom. She heard her saying something. Something that sounded like nevermind. The word went around and around in Margot’s head. Nevermind. Nevermind. That was a special word, a word that only Mummy’s said.

When the quiet came back Margot peeped around the door and tiptoed down to the kitchen. Lewis was standing next to the table, holding the baby doll.

‘She woke up,’ he said, ‘like Tommy does.’

‘Nevermind,’ said Margot.

‘Was it Mummy again?’

Margot nodded.

‘Is she coming now?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Tomorrow?’

A big breath came out of Margot’s body. ‘She’s gone to China.’

Lewis nodded. ‘I think she’s gone to sleep again. Do you want to hold her?’

‘Not yet.’

Lewis held the baby doll against his chest and started rocking. ‘Where is China, Margie?’

‘I don’t know. I think it’s where Ping lives.’

Lewis nodded again. ‘They’re a long way away now, the stars, aren’t they Margie?’

‘Some are,’ said Margot thinking, ‘but some are getting closer too.’

Jim walked into the kitchen holding his shoes in the air. He was wearing his trousers and his singlet. ‘Anyone seen the Nugget?’ he asked opening the cupboard under the sink. He started whistling something. Something that didn’t sound like a proper song. He found the Nugget and a brush and put them on the sink with his shoes. ‘Anyone seen the newspaper?’

Margot took her doll back from Lewis and looked at Nana Rose’s Herald lying on the kitchen cupboard. It was folded in half and all the heads were missing.

‘There it is,’ said Jim and he picked it up, spread it out on the table and put his shoes on the drawing of the Christmas tree. He put some Nugget on one of the shoes and rubbed it in with the brush. He rubbed back and forth, back and
forth, until the tops and the sides and the heels were shining black. ‘Always remember the heels,’ he said holding them up for Margot and Lewis to look at, ‘that’s what they notice.’

‘Who?’ asked Lewis.

‘People,’ said Jim, ‘the ones who don’t know you.’

He put the shoe down on the table and folded the bottom edge of the newspaper into a smooth, straight line. ‘The cut out dolls, Tiger,’ he said as he folded the same line of paper backwards, ‘remember them?’

Backwards and forwards. Backwards and forwards. That’s how you fold paper to make cut out dolls. Margot remembered that. She remembered all the folding and cutting, the magic of making newspaper dolls dance on their kitchen table. ‘Yes,’ she said, watching her father’s Nugget covered hands, ‘I remember that.’

Jim looked up from the folded paper and winked at her and for a minute it felt like they were back, back a long time ago, when everything was dancing and winking.

Nana Rose walked into the kitchen with her slippers dragging on the floor. ‘You off again,’ she said looking at the stove, as though it was going somewhere.

‘Off to see about the doll’s clothes and the tee pee,’ said Jim shining his other shoe faster than the first one.

‘Your clean shirt’s on the clothes horse.’ Nana Rose picked the matches up off the stove and lit one but it went black before she turned the gas on.

‘Righto,’ said Jim. ‘Shouldn’t take too long. Who wants a story when I get back?’

‘Me,’ said Lewis.

‘Me too,’ said Margot.

‘Me three,’ said Jim.

‘Tell us a knock knock joke Dad,’ said Lewis.

‘Knock, knock.’

‘Who’s there?’

‘Celia.’

‘Celia who?’

‘Celia later alligator.’
Lewis screwed his face into a smile and hit Jim on the arm. ‘Another one Dad. Another one.’

Jim put his foot on the chair to tie up his shoes, ‘after, Lew, after.’ He stood up and put his shiny shoe feet together, ‘how’s that?’

‘Nice, Daddy,’ said Margot.

Jim put the Nugget away in the cupboard and walked backwards out of the plastic streamers. ‘Doll’s clothes. Tee Pee,’ he said talking through the streamers, ‘the best ones you’ve ever seen.’

Nana Rose lit a cigarette and blew smoke out towards the streamers then she pulled the newspaper across the table and clicked her tongue. ‘Ruined my paper,’ she said holding her cigarette in her lips and screwing the Nugget stained picture of Christmas at Coles up into a ball. She flicked ash into her boat ashtray and shook her head, ‘what a waste,’ she said blinking into the snaking smoke, ‘what a terrible waste.’

The side gate made a bang and Margot looked up at the kitchen window. The blind was pulled down but a little bit of sun winked through a tear near the top.

‘Two sleeps,’ she said to Nana Rose, ‘that’s not long is it?’

‘No,’ said Nana Rose, ‘sad to say, that’s not much time at all.’
Margot lifted herself up onto her elbows and listened to the rain. It was falling on the roof of the sleep-out, quickly, like Miss Stiller’s fingers, tapping on her desk, waiting for someone who was too slow.

Lewis threw his arm out behind his head and made a far away sleeping noise. A noise that sounded like crying and talking together. Margot looked across at his hand. It was lying open and upside down on the top of his pillow as though he was waving to someone. He looked like he did in photos – black and white and still.

Everything in the room was black and white, the bed, the door, the window and the open louvres, where bits of rain skipped across the glass and jumped onto the floor.

Margot crawled down to the bottom of the bed, knelt on the end of it and stared out. A wet moon stared back at her. She could see next-door’s tree trying to shake the rain from its leaves and she could hear the clothesline making a soft, moaning noise.

Come back. Come back. Those far away words came back into her head as she listened to the clothesline and thought about her *ric rac* dress, pegged onto the wire, getting washed all over again.

Father Christmas was out there too, galloping around on his sleigh, calling out to his reindeers through the ice and the snow except there wasn’t any ice or snow, just hot, wet rain and a long-face moon.

Soon. It will be morning soon. That’s what she told herself whenever she woke up in the dark but the morning was always too slow and hard to imagine when you were in bed, looking at the staring shapes of night-time.

Thoughts shuffled through her like muddled swap cards. Glimpses of Catherine and Ping and bright, lantern-blinking boats and Jim, standing behind the Starlight counter crying, ‘Pick a hand, pick a hand’.

Margot picked the storm. A picture of a blue and purple sky with a bolt of silver lightening bursting through it. She’d swopped three cards for that one card because every time she held it in her hand and looked at it, she saw something, something free and strong and brave.
‘Up you get,’ said Nana Rose, standing in the doorway of the sleep-out and blocking out the light. ‘It’s here. Christmas morning.’

Margot and Lewis scrambled out of bed together and danced around Nana Rose.

‘Has he been? Has he been?’ sang Lewis.

‘Well someone left you these stockings,’ and Nana Rose held two red cardboard stockings out from behind her back. Lewis grabbed one and waved it in the air.

‘Daddy does that,’ he said screwing his face up into a smile, ‘that trick behind the back.’

The stockings were the same as last year’s, full of small, hard round lollies, paper whistles that blew in and out and tiny plastic toys. They also held a balloon, a comic and a large cardboard Father Christmas mask.

‘Where did he leave them?’ asked Margot, running her hands over the stocking holes and feeling everything.

‘Where?’ Nana Rose frowned at the question. ‘Where?’ she said again.

‘Because there’s no Christmas tree.’

‘He should have left them on the end of the bed,’ said Lewis, ‘shouldn’t he Margie. ‘That’s where the stockings go.’

‘Yes, well I can’t help that,’ said Nana Rose, ‘he left them in the kitchen.’

‘In the kitchen!’ said Lewis astonished.

‘They’re the same as the ones at Coles,’ said Margot watching Nana Rose’s evening dress dressing gown flapping around her, ‘that’s funny isn’t it?’

‘There’s a car in mine and a clacking lady beetle and did he leave the presents in the kitchen too?’ Lewis laughed at that and danced his stocking around Nana Rose’s arms.

‘Goodness me,’ said Nana Rose, pulling her hands out from her sleeves and scratching at the skin between her fingers, ‘one thing at a time’. She scratched so hard little bits of finger drifted up into the air and out through the window’s louvres.

‘It’s Daddy!’ cried Margot, ‘Daddy’s back!’ She pushed past Nana Rose, dropped her Christmas stocking on the floor, and ran out of the sleep-out. She ran through the empty kitchen, past the bathroom and down the passage, crying,
‘Daddy’s home! Daddy’s home again!’ She crashed through Jim’s bedroom door and stiffened at the sight of his unmade bed.

His dark blue dressing gown was still sitting in the chair next to that bed. It hadn’t moved since yesterday. Since the day before yesterday. Two sleeps. Everything in this room had been just like this for two sleeps and as Margot put her hands on her chest, to feel her breath come back, everything was so still and quiet it felt like a school morning in the middle of winter, not the middle of summer, not like a Christmas day at all.

She stood in the bedroom biting her lip at the unslept-in-bed and its half-on, half-off, brown, heavy quilt. She felt heavy too then, standing there, looking at nothing.

She crossed the passage into the lounge room and stood in front of the mantlepiece. This was where the Christmas tree should be. Instead there was a vase full of plastic orange flowers and two cups and saucers with autumn leaves all over them.

A noise like laughing came from outside the window. She peeped out under the sticky, brown blind, and saw some children riding bikes and a scooter up and down the footpath. She stood there watching them until Nana Rose walked up behind her and said, ‘I’m going to make some cocoa. Cold. Like a milkshake. That’ll be nice, won’t it?’

Margot picked sultanas out of her raisin toast while she watched Nana Rose spilling cocoa down the side of the cocoa box. She was making a mess and talking a lot. She was talking about all sorts of things – the Christmas carols on the wireless, how you wouldn’t get her to go up in a skyscraper and poor Harold Holt’s family. Margot was only half listening. She was thinking about the letter to Father Christmas and maybe he would come tomorrow or the next day when Daddy came back. She thought about cherries on the table and Christmas paper on the floor and pulling bon bons till they ripped apart with a loud gunfire bang.

Lewis ripped his stocking apart and asked if he could eat the lollies. Nana Rose said he could have them on his Weetbix if he liked and he giggled out of his nose when he heard that.

Margot hadn’t opened her stocking. It was lying on the table, next to her toast. She poked a finger through the eye-holes on the Father Christmas mask
and thought about baby Jesus and nails making holes through his hands. ‘It’s his birthday isn’t it,’ she said.

‘Who?’ said Nana Rose.

‘Baby Jesus. Christmas is the birthday of baby Jesus.’

Nana Rose shook the milk bottle so hard you could hear the cream globbing through it. When she opened it she gave Lewis the silver milk bottle top, ‘I suppose that’s right,’ she said pouring milk into the glasses. ‘I hadn’t thought of it like that.’

‘That’s why you have Christmas cake,’ said Lewis.

‘Is it? Well you two seem to know all about it.’ She pushed the glasses of cocoa towards them. ‘There you are. That’s nice isn’t it?’ She swallowed her lips and sighed. ‘It’s nice to have company on Christmas morning again, reminds me…’

‘What?’ asked Margot, ‘what does it remind you?’

Nana Rose rubbed one of her eyes shut. ‘I can’t think now. I was probably going to say, it reminds me of when your father was little.’ She shook her head at that, as though that wasn’t what she was going to say.

Margot sucked the Cocoa off the top of her glass. She hadn’t thought about her father being little, being a child like she was, or even a baby.

‘What did he want Father Christmas to bring him?’ asked Lewis.

‘Same thing every year,’ said Nana Rose, ‘a little brother.’

‘A little brother!’ Lewis spat the words across the table and looked at Margot.

‘Someone to play with. Can’t blame him for that.’

‘He can’t do that,’ said Lewis, holding his arms, aeroplane-like, out from his sides, ‘he can’t ask Father Christmas for a baby he has to ask God.’

‘It was a long time ago.’

‘Or baby Jesus.’ Lewis dropped his arms onto the table. ‘Can you ask baby Jesus for a baby?’

‘You can’t ask,’ said Margot thinking, ‘you have to say a prayer.’

‘I think we said a few of those,’ said Nana Rose moving the milk bottle backwards and forwards across the table top, ‘anyway, that’s enough chit chat, time to finish breakfast so we can get the Christmas dinner on.’
Margot picked her stocking up and looked at Nana Rose through the eye-holes on her Father Christmas mask. Pretending. That’s what Nana Rose was doing. Pretending it was a proper Christmas when it wasn’t.

On proper Christmases you could smell pine needles and Christmas paper and Lily-of-the-Valley bath salts. That’s what she gave Catherine for Christmas last year and her mother kissed her on the head and said she loved those bath salts because Lily-of-the-Valley was her favourite.

Margot blinked behind her mask and her eyelashes scraped against the eye-holes.

‘Oooh,’ said Nana Rose, coughing and pointing at Lewis to pass her cigarette box. ‘Oooh, it’s Father Christmas.’

Margot took the mask away from her face. ‘Can you have Christmas on Sunday?’ she asked.

‘I think so,’ said Nana Rose, tapping her cigarette up and down on the table-top.

‘Sunday’s a funny name for a day isn’t it?’

‘Funny,’ said Nana Rose, ‘what’s funny about it?’

‘Sunday. The day for the sun.’

‘Monday doesn’t make sense then,’ said Lewis.

‘No,’ said Nana Rose, ‘not much sense.’

‘I’m going outside to look for reindeers now.’ Lewis stood up and wiped his cocoa mouth all over his chin.

‘Me too,’ said Margot sliding off her chair and waiting at the streamers for Nana Rose to say they had to do the dishes but she lit her cigarette and said, ‘where’s your dolly this morning. What’s her name?’

‘Audrey but now I think I’ll call her Peggy because I used to have a doll called that.’

‘Peggy,’ said Nana Rose staring into her cigarette smoke, ‘I had a baby doll once and her name was Peggy.’

‘Have you still got her?’ asked Margot.

‘Not anymore.’

‘What happened to her?’

Nana Rose held her cigarette under her chin and the smoke made her eyes water.
‘She died,’ she said, ‘it was a long time ago.’
Margot twisted her plait around her fingers. ‘Did you leave her out in the sun?’
‘No. She was too little for sun. It was inside.’
‘Inside! How can you die inside?’
‘One day she went to sleep and then she never woke up again.’
‘Never, ever?’ asked Lewis.
‘No,’ said Nana Rose.
‘Like Sleeping Beauty,’ said Margot.
‘Sort of, ‘cept she was littler.’
Margot dropped her plait and twisted herself around the plastic streamers.
‘You can play with my baby doll if you want to Nana Rose.’
Nana Rose balanced her cigarette on her boat ashtray and held her nose closed like she was trying not to sneeze. She waved her other hand at them and nodded. ‘Off you go,’ she said in a croaky voice, ‘I’ll call you when I need help to lick the pudding bowl.’
A hot wind blew through the streamers as Lewis pushed past Margot and ran outside. ‘I want Daddy to come back,’ said Margot, looking after him, not moving.
‘He’ll be back,’ said Nana Rose and she put her hands together like she was saying some prayers and held them there, against her lips.

‘I saw one,’ cried Lewis pointing at the sky. ‘It was running slower than the others and it landed in that tree.’
Margot looked up into the tree that grew on the other side of the back fence but she couldn’t see the reindeer. It was hard to see anything because she was looking straight into the sun. She thought about Mrs Wilson’s Christmas cards. The ones with pictures of reindeers with fur saddles and hats with fur and bells too and how those reindeers landed on rooves with windows and chimneys and snow.
‘It must take a long time to get here from the North Pole,’ she said frowning, as new bikes and scooters and the Coles lady leaning across the cowboys and Indians whispering, ‘unless you’ve been bad’, ran around inside her head.
‘It’s gone now,’ said Lewis, ‘Father Christmas was calling it to come home.’
Margot screwed her face up into the fireball sun and searched the blue, flooding sky. It was everywhere, that sky. As big as an ocean and deep like one too. She remembered yesterday, sitting on Jim’s chairs, in front of the side gate, sitting there with Lewis, hoping and waiting but the gate didn’t open. Not once. Not for the whole of Sunday. She imagined diving up into the sky then too. Diving deep inside its blueness and swimming far, far away.

The Christmas roast lamb made crackling noises in the oven. You could smell its cooking smell all over the kitchen and in the backyard too. Nana Rose was chopping up the mint for the mint sauce. She was frowning and chopping very fast.

‘You’re a good chopper,’ said Margot, feeding peas to Peggy as she shelled them.

Nana Rose made a noise with her tongue and her teeth. ‘I used to be. Fingers are getting a bit old now.’

‘I didn’t know fingers could get old,’ said Lewis, looking at his own resting on top of his Flintstone telephone.

‘Everything gets old,’ said Nana Rose, scraping the mint across the breadboard into a tin jug, ‘even you one day.’

Margot fed herself a couple of peas and watched as Nana Rose bent down and opened the oven.

‘How do you know when you are old?’ she asked.

‘You don’t. It creeps up on you.’

‘When,’ said Margot. ‘In the night?’

Nana Rose’s crooked smile fell across her face. ‘Feels like it,’ she said, ‘get your things off the table. Lamb’s nearly cooked.’

Margot picked her doll up and gave her a nurse. ‘Babies get old too, don’t they Nana Rose?’

‘They grow up. That’s different.’

‘What if they get old and don’t grow up?’

‘What if you eat all the peas and there’s none left for dinner?’

Margot watched the skin on Nana Rose’s arm flapping up and down as her wooden spoon stirred the pudding. She wasn’t making a real Christmas pudding
but one with plum jam instead. Real Christmas puddings had to be made a long
time ago and she wasn’t expecting that. Lewis said he wasn’t expecting things
too. He wasn’t expecting Christmas with no Mummy or Julie or Daddy or no
one.

Nana Rose stopped stirring and waved Lewis out of the way with her elbow.
She had to check the potatoes and hunt for the pudding basin and salt the peas.
She wiped the top of her head with her apron and leant on the tap. ‘Ice block
weather,’ she said nodding at the stripes of sun that crisscrossed the sink. ‘We’ll
have to make some more after.’

They took turns licking the spoon and the inside of the mixing bowl while
Nana Rose covered the top of the pudding basin with paper and string and put it
into a large saucepan of boiling water.

‘It was ridiculous,’ she said, ‘all this Christmas carry on.’ She put her hands
on her hips and shook her crooked smile at the stove. Peaches. That’s what
they should be having for sweets. Canned peaches or fruit salad. She thought
she might even have some, up there, tucked away in her secret Woolworths.

‘Peaches,’ cried Lewis, licking his fingers clean of raw pudding, ‘you can’t
find money in peaches.’

Nana Rose laughed at that and moved towards the plastic streamers. ‘Listen
to it,’ she said lighting a cigarette. ‘You won’t find money in Christmas
puddings any more either,’ she blew smoke towards the stove, ‘the new money’s
poisonous.’

Lewis took his hand out of the pudding bowl and looked up wide-eyed,
‘poisonous!’

‘So they say,’ said Nana Rose.

‘Why would they make it poisonous?’ asked Margot.

‘Why would they do a lot of things?’ said Nana Rose.

‘They’re going to take a Christmas pudding to outer space,’ said Lewis.

‘Hmph! That wouldn’t surprise me, there’s that much stuff going on up
there, that wouldn’t surprise me at all.’

‘I wish I could go to outer space,’ said Margot, ‘up into the sky.’

‘Well don’t wish too hard,’ said Nana Rose. ‘Girls can’t go to outer space.’

‘Why?’

‘Yes,’ said Lewis, ‘why?’
Nana Rose held her cigarette up near her nose and thought. ‘Because,’ she said slowly, ‘if the girls were up there too, who’d be left on earth?’

The roast lamb and the potatoes and pumpkin and bright green peas were covered in mint sauce and gravy. Margot looked down at her plate and clasped her hands together under her chin. She was going to thank God but Nana Rose waved a bon bon in her face and said, ‘We wish you a merry Christmas,’ in such a loud Christmas carol voice, she giggled into her hands instead.

‘I always liked that one and “Away in a Manger”.’ Nana Rose’s eyes crinkled across her face. ‘They were my favourites.’

‘What about Jingle Bells,’ said Lewis, his mouth already full, ‘that’s a good one.’

‘Sad to say, I never really learnt the words to Jingle Bells.’

‘You don’t know Jingle Bells?’ Lewis pulled a piece of meat off his fork with his teeth, ‘even Tommy knows that one.’

‘Tommy who?’

Margot chewed her lamb and looked across the table at Nana Rose. Her magpie hair was pinned to the sides of her head and stuck there too with sweat that slid down to her melting, crooked corner mouth. She was sitting in Jim’s chair because it was further away from the oven, even though she said again and again that the whole kitchen had turned into one.

‘Tommy the baby,’ said Lewis.

Nana Rose put the bon bon down on the table. ‘That Tommy’, she said in a whispery voice.

Margot looked across at the knife and fork and the sweet’s spoon that sat waiting for Jim. ‘He knows other songs too. Twinkle, twinkle and clap hands, clap hands when Daddy comes…’

‘He must be a very clever baby,’ said Nana Rose, interrupting.

‘He can’t talk,’ said Lewis.

‘He must be able to talk if he can sing.’

‘He can’t,’ said Margot, her knife sliding across the plate as she tried to cut some lamb. ‘When he tries to talk, his tongue gets stuck.’
Nana Rose scratched the skin on her neck. ‘Poor little thing,’ she said looking across at Jim’s empty place.

‘Do you want to do the bon bon now, Nana Rose?’

‘What?’ Nana Rose looked down at her bon bon as though she couldn’t remember what it was.

Lewis held his up to his face, like a telescope and looked through it. ‘I can see right in mine and there’s a red hat and a blue thing.’

Margot screwed up one eye and looked though hers. ‘Red hat too,’ she said turning the bon bon around in her hand, ‘and if you keep turning it like this it looks like one of those things that turns around and around with all the colours inside.’

‘Kaleidoscope,’ said Nana Rose.

‘That’s what it is,’ said Margot putting her kaleidoscope-bon-bon down on the table. ‘You know a lot of things don’t you, Nana Rose?’

‘Me?’ said Nana Rose, forgetting to chew with her mouth closed, ‘course I don’t.’ She finished her chewing, put her knife and fork on her plate and pushed it away. ‘I enjoyed that,’ she said sucking her tongue across the front of her teeth. ‘You kids can pull the bon bons if you like.’

‘I’m saving mine for later,’ said Margot.

‘Me too,’ said Lewis.

Nana Rose shrugged, ‘well I’m not saving mine for anything. Come on.’ She held the Christmas bon bon out towards Margot. It was creamy white, covered in red and green holly and edged in gold glitter. ‘They’re too nice to break,’ said Margot, wrapping her fingers gently around the glitter holly.

‘They are nice,’ said Nana Rose. ‘Funny. I’ve had them in a cupboard for so long, I can’t even remember where they came from.’ She gripped the table with one hand and the bon bon with the other. ‘Ready,’ she said in a loud voice as her sharp tug pulled the bon bon apart. It made a cracking noise, like a whip, and Margot jumped backwards in her chair.

‘I won,’ said Nana Rose, holding the torn bon bon up in the air. She pulled out a yellow crown, a tiny plastic thimble and a scrap of folded paper.

‘What does the joke say?’ asked Lewis, filling his mouth with more roast potato.
Nana Rose unfolded the paper. ‘I can’t read that,’ she said screwing up her eyes, ‘you read it for me.’ She pushed the paper across the table to Margot.

Margot smoothed it out with her hand and put on her reading voice. ‘What kind of flower can you eat?’

‘Cauliflower,’ said Nana Rose, ‘I know that one.’

‘Me too,’ said Lewis, ‘cauliflower.’

‘It’s not cauliflower, it’s…, ‘Margot bent down over the barely there paper, ‘something long…for-get-me-nots…no. Nuts. Forget-me-nuts.’

Lewis squashed more roast potato into his mouth. ‘It should be cauliflower,’ he said, ‘forget-me-nots is stupid.’ Some chewed potato sprang out of his mouth on the word ‘stupid’ and landed near his plate.

‘That’s enough of that,’ said Nana Rose.

‘Did you know forget-me-not means don’t forget me?’ asked Margot.

Nana Rose scratched the top of her hand. ‘Well you’d expect that, wouldn’t you?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘I didn’t too,’ said Lewis.

The telephone’s ring made Nana Rose jump and her crown fell over her eyes and blinded her. She pushed it back onto her head and stood up. ‘It’s probably no one,’ she said, hurrying towards the ringing.

‘No one’s ringing my Flintstone phone,’ said Lewis, ‘no one today.’

Margot picked up some peas with her fingers and pushed them quickly, into her mouth. ‘I’m going to listen,’ she said, and she was off her chair and sliding across the lino to the doorway.

‘Yes. This is Mrs Lovelock.’ That was the first thing Margot heard Nana Rose say and then she said, ‘His mother. He doesn’t have a wife.’ She sounded cross and Margot waited for her to say something else but instead she held onto the telephone receiver, quiet and still as a statue.

What’s the time Mr Wolf? That’s what she felt like saying, standing there in the dark passage, behind Nana Rose, wondering if she was going to turn around suddenly and catch her.

Who was it on the telephone? Not Jim. He wouldn’t ask for Mrs Lovelock. Not Catherine. China was too far away for telephoning.
Nana Rose shook her shoulders and made noises in her throat. She tried to say yes and thankyou but the telephone receiver was pressing on her neck and stopping her from talking.

Her crown fell off and landed on the floor. Margot thought about picking it up and holding it for her until the telephone was finished but while she was thinking that, Nana Rose starting coughing.

She coughed so hard she shook. Her head and her shoulders, then her chest and body too. All of her shaking and coughing, harder and harder until her black bird eyes found Margot and blinked a tiny silence.

When her coughing came back she threw her free arm towards the kitchen. She threw it again and again, hitting the air with her hand, coughing a word out to Margot.

‘Water.’

The word burst out of Nana Rose as she dropped the telephone receiver and leant against the wall, gasping, like she was under some water.

Margot galloped back to the kitchen. She cantered through the doorway and across the lino. She grabbed a glass off the sink and turned the tap on so hard, water exploded over the floor and down the front of her dress.

‘I don’t want a tee pee anymore,’ said Lewis, ‘I just want Daddy…’

Margot didn’t hear the rest. She was galloping back with the water. She was saving Nana Rose.

Nana Rose was gone. She wasn’t at the telephone or in the loungeroom. She was in her bedroom, making a noise, opening and closing all the drawers on her dressing table. Margot stood in the doorway holding the glass of water with two hands.

Nana Rose was still coughing but not as hard. She didn’t see Margot standing in the doorway. She was too busy looking for something.

‘I’ve got the water, Nana Rose.’

‘Doesn’t matter. I have to find the HBA book.’

‘What’s a HBA book?’

‘A book for the hospital.’

Margot watched Nana Rose fling open drawer after drawer and mess up everything that was in there. When she couldn’t find the hospital book she put
her hands on the dressing table, looked at herself in the mirror and then waved Margot into the room.

‘The water.’ That was all she said. She drank the whole glass at once and said, ‘it’s too late now, they’ll just have to go without.’ She put the empty glass on the dressing table and put her hands on her chest. ‘I have to go to the hospital,’ she said, rubbing one hand against the other, like you would if your fingers were cold. ‘I won’t be too long. You’ll be alright here, by yourselves for a while?’

Margot looked down at the floor. ‘Now,’ she said in a small voice, ‘you have to go now.’

‘Not for long. There’s a good girl.’

Margot looked down at her blue plastic sandals. Father Christmas bought those sandals for her last year and some bathers with a sea horse on the front.

‘It’s still Christmas, isn’t it Nana Rose?’

‘Yes. Yes, it still is.’

‘Daddy might come back.’

Nana Rose held her hands in a ball under her chin and shook her head. ‘He can’t. He’s in the hospital.’

‘Daddy? Daddy’s in the hospital?’

Nana Rose nodded and shook her head at the same time, ‘sad to say.’

‘If I had my nurse’s uniform I could make him better again.’

‘I’m sure you could.’ Nana Rose stood up straight and put a hand on Margot’s shoulder. ‘You’re going to have to be brave, you’re a brave girl aren’t you?’

‘Yes. I’ve got a scar on my knee like a star.’

Nana Rose clicked her tongue and patted Margot’s shoulder. Margot waited for her to say something else but she dropped her hand and stood in front of her without saying anything.

Lewis ran up behind her, tugged on her dress and said, ‘when’s the jam pudding?’

‘Goodness me,’ said Nana Rose, picking up a hankie and dragging her small black handbag across the top of the dressing table, ‘the jam pudding, I forgot that’s where we were.’ She squashed a hat on top of her head, pushed past Margot and Lewis and walked away towards the kitchen.
Margot shared her pudding and custard with Peggy. She told her Nana Rose had gone to the hospital because Jim was sick but that was alright because the hospital was the best place to be when you were sick. She put her spoon down and helped Peggy to nod and agree with her.

Peggy was wrapped up in the tablecloth Nana Rose had given her. Nana Rose said she looked more like a Pansy or a Denise wrapped up like that and Margot said, ‘what about Marilyn,’ but Nana Rose shook her head. You weren’t allowed to call a baby Marilyn, Marilyn was a name for a grownup.

They opened their bon bons when their pudding was finished and unfolded the crowns and riddles.

‘What is always coming, but never…arrives?’ read Margot. ‘Give up?’

‘No.’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘That’s stupid,’ said Lewis then he looked at his riddle and tore it in half because it was stupid too.

Margot pushed her empty pudding bowl away and thought about Nana Rose hurrying and the hot water burning her arm as she tried to get the pudding out. She’d tried to help but Nana Rose was too busy for help. She threw the pudding and custard into the bowls and said she wouldn’t be long.

‘Can I come? Can I come?’ That was the question that kept going around and around in Margot’s head but of course she couldn’t come. Children got in the way at hospitals and someone had to look after Lewis.

She ran her hand across the top of Peggy’s plastic head and then put her crown on her. ‘There are lots of terrible things,’ she said to Peggy, ‘terrible things that can make you sick.’

‘Chicken pox,’ said Lewis, ‘and scarlet fever.’

‘Mumps and measles.’

‘And that thing Terry had.’

‘Whooping cough,’ said Margot.

‘You can fall over and cut yourself.’

‘Or you can fall out of something.’

‘Or you can get run over,’ said Lewis.

‘Only if you’re on the road.’
Lewis screwed up his eyes and nodded at Margot. ‘You know a lot of things, Margie, a lot of lot of things.’

Margot flicked her plaits behind her shoulders and closed Peggy’s eyes. ‘She’s going to sleep now,’ she said softly, ‘she’s going to blow you a kiss.’

‘Is she?’ Lewis moved closer to the doll and held his chin out to catch the kiss.

Margot moved Peggy’s hand up to her red, plastic lips and threw a kiss towards him. Lewis’ fingers bounced off the side of his cheek and curled into his hand. ‘I’ve caught it! I’ve caught it!’ he cried and Margot rocked Peggy from side to side and felt like blowing a kiss herself.

Margot held her swan brooch and her earring up into the sun and watched them sparkle. The sun was melting over the roof of the house and soon the moon and the stars would come out. Nana Rose didn’t say what to do if it got dark.

She wandered down to the back fence and stood watching its tall woodenness, stretching along the whole backyard. The next-door neighbour’s tree’s rusty coloured leaves rattled and shook, as two magpies flew up and out of its branches, calling to her, with a long, summer cry.

She wondered how long summer was. She wondered what would happen if Jim or Nana Rose didn’t come back. Would they be allowed to stay here and grow up by themselves? She turned back towards the house and squinted into the sun. ‘I wish I may. I wish I might.’ It was funny you couldn’t make a wish on the sun, the brightest thing in the sky.

Margot turned the key in the back door in case a Banksia Man tried to get in. She scooped two big spoonfuls of cold jam pudding into two bowls and handed one to Lewis.

‘Here’s your tea,’ she said.

‘What about Nana Rose?’ asked Lewis.

‘I saved her some.’

The moon shone in the kitchen window. It looked like it was pasted on, like the paper moon in the window at Julie’s kinder.

‘Why doesn’t she come back?’ asked Lewis.
‘She’ll be here soon,’ said Margot, ‘want to play I Spy?’
Lewis shook his head.
‘You can start.’
Lewis rubbed the back of his hand across the jam on his chin and said, ‘I Spy, with my little eye…something beginning with…D.’
Margot looked around the kitchen. ‘D. Are you sure it starts with D?’
‘D,’ said Lewis frowning, ‘it’s D.’
‘Door?’
‘Yes. Your turn.’
Margot looked around the kitchen for words. Something beginning with…Something beginning. The fridge came on and she looked up at it and said, ‘F’.
‘Fridge,’ said Lewis, ‘it’s the fridge.’
‘I don’t want to play anymore,’ said Margot.
‘That’s alright,’ said Lewis, ‘we know everything in this kitchen already.’
‘We know everything in all the kitchens.’
Lewis scraped his bowl with his spoon. ‘We could make up a new game about kitchens.’
‘That’s a good idea.’
‘What will we call it?’
‘I don’t know yet, we’ll think about it tomorrow.’
Margot took her bowl over to the sink.
‘Are you scared, Margie?’ asked Lewis, following her.
‘Scared of what?’
‘The night-time.’
Margot put Lewis’ bowl in the sink with hers and turned on the tap. ‘It’s a bit scary but you have to be brave.’
‘Like the Three Musketeers, ‘cept we’re only two now aren’t we?’
‘Nevermind,’ said Margot. ‘I’m going to do the dishes.’
‘And me,’ said Lewis, ‘I’m going to do the dishes too.’

Margot pushed the light-switch down and the black loungeroom burst into colour.
‘See?’ she said, stepping off her tiptoes and looking around the room, ‘there’s nothing.’ She walked in and jumped up onto the chair next to the heater in the fireplace and waited for Lewis.

Lewis stood in the doorway. He didn’t like loungerooms. He didn’t like them the same way he didn’t like wardrobes.

‘Watch this, Lew,’ said Margot, ‘this one’s good for jumping.’ She bounced up and down on the big, flower-covered chair and dust sprang up and down with her.

‘Umaah,’ said Lewis. ‘You’ll get in trouble doing that.’ He stepped inside the room and looked around. ‘I didn’t come in here before.’

‘I did. I came in to look out the window.’

‘What’s out there?’

‘Nothing. Some bikes were there this morning but before that it was nothing.’

Margot sprang out of her chair in mid jump and threw herself into the only other chair. It was made of very old leather with holes in the seat and springs coming out the bottom.

‘You can’t jump on this one,’ she said sinking into its middle, ‘you’d crash on the floor.’ She stretched her arms out to Lewis and he held her hands and pulled her out of the chair’s middle.

‘See,’ she said, up on her feet again, ‘it’s better in here, isn’t it?’

They sat down together on the soft flower chair and waited for Nana Rose to come back. Lewis wanted to lie down properly but neither of them was brave enough to unlock the back door and walk through the dark night to the sleep-out.

Lewis sank into the chair and stared at the blind. His eyes closed and opened and closed again and his head started to flop around like the one on the real baby doll at Coles. Coles seemed a long time ago. Longer ago than her cat hat or the ballerina fence or those Volkswagons taking children away.

Lewis’s heavy head fell on Margot’s arm. His eyes stayed closed and Margot kept as still as she could. Soon. Nana Rose will be home soon.

Her hand was close to Lewis’s head. She could feel his new, growing hair with the tips of her fingers. His hair was warm and soft and alive. She thought about baby Tommy’s head when his eyes went black and swollen. She thought
about the head of the doctor, holding the needle, with its long black thread, making stiches in her leg, one by one by one.

Lewis was sleeping now and her arm had gone to sleep too. She squeezed some of herself out from under him and he sank deeper into the chair. Deeper and quieter. Everything was quieter now, much, much quieter.

She looked across to the blind. It was the sort no one could see in through. Catherine liked blinds like that. She imagined her mother standing there, gripping the cord, holding it tight in case it leapt out of her hand and spun back to the very top of the window.

‘Night, night, love.’ That’s what she always said when she pulled the blind closed and got them ready for sleeping.

Tears wet Margot’s cheeks when she thought about that. Hot, stinging tears that slipped past her nose and slid into her mouth.

She wriggled an arm out from the chair and tried to wipe her face. Her fingers had gone fuzzy and she couldn’t feel properly. Lewis’s arm slid onto the arm of the chair and glitter sparkled on the tips of his fingers. Christmas. She was crying tears on Christmas. She pressed the bottom of her hands into her eyes and saw the baby Jesus nailed up on the wall. He was crying on his birthday too. He was crying everyday, all the year round.

She tried to swallow the tears back down into her throat but she had wished it on herself. She had wished it on her birthday and now it was too late. It was all too late for everything.
The note on the kitchen table said, ‘EAT YOUR WEETBIX AND HAVE A WASH.’

‘Who put that there,’ asked Lewis, running his fingers over the big writing.

‘Nana Rose.’

‘When?’

‘When she came home and put us into bed.’

‘Into bed,’ said Lewis. ‘Was I there?’

‘When we went in the kitchen and saw the ants. Remember? They were all over the pudding.’

‘Ants. I didn’t know you could get ants here.’

‘You can,’ said Margot. ‘Nana Rose hates ants. She was crying when she saw them.’

Nana Rose came back with a big parcel of fish and chips for lunch. She dropped them on Jim’s table and tore the paper open.

‘Best I could do,’ she said. ‘Everything’s shut on boxing day.’

Lewis squashed a chip into his mouth and then spat it out when it burnt his tongue. Nana Rose growled. She said he shouldn’t spit at the table and he should watch what he was doing and use his head.

Nana Rose put a chip in her mouth and then she held the top of her nose, between her eyes, and said she didn’t mean it. She didn’t mean to growl. She growled too much. Next year she was going to stop. In 1968 she wouldn’t growl at all.

Margot watched her put another chip into Lewis’ hand and show him how to blow on it so he wouldn’t get burnt. ‘Is Daddy better yet?’ she asked when Nana Rose was finished.

Nana Rose moved her head around on her neck. She couldn’t talk properly because her mouth was full of batter.

‘When’s he coming back then?’

‘Food first,’ said Nana Rose. ‘Talk later.’
They ate their fish and chips without talking then, except for Nana Rose saying to watch out for bones, when she nearly choked on one.

Some tiny rain drops fell out of the sky and landed on Margot’s dress but Nana Rose said it was only a sun shower and there was no need to go inside. She was sick of being cooped up inside. She took a hanky out of her handbag, found a clean bit and wiped her mouth and then she said, ‘I forgot to buy cigarettes, I’ve had so much to think about.’

Margot picked the crispy bits off her potato cake. She asked Lewis if he wanted the rest of it but he was too full too. ‘We can save the rest for Daddy, he loves fish and chips doesn’t he Nana Rose?’

Nana Rose held her hanky inside her hand and pressed it against her mouth. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘he always said yes to fish and chips.’

‘And beer,’ said Lewis. ‘He likes beer too.’

‘And chops,’ said Margot, ‘when we were at our other house chops were his favourite.’

Nana Rose stood up and walked over to the side gate and said, ‘A million times. He must have come in and out this gate a million times.’

Margot folded the fish and chips back up into a parcel. ‘Will I take them inside then?’

‘If you like and pop the kettle on, there’s a good girl.’

Margot picked the still warm parcel off the table and walked towards the house. She stopped at the plastic streamers and watched as they danced from side to side.

One, two, three. Back, two, three. Waltzing. The streamers were waltzing. Jim had taught her the waltz. He had held her hand and twirled her around and around on the concrete outside their backdoor.

He said when she got big, he was going to pin a flower on her dress and take her to the dance. They were going to do the waltz and the foxtrot and maybe the cha-cha too. They were going to spin around and around and win all the trophies and be the best dancers anyone had ever seen.

Margot spun around to Nana Rose. She was going to tell her about the dancing and about her party dress but Nana Rose was blowing her nose and she thought she’d wait, and tell her after.
Nana Rose put double the normal amount of tea in the teapot. She said her nerves were playing up and strong tea would fix that. Lewis was sitting on the kitchen floor playing with his Christmas stocking racing car.

Margot was drawing on a piece of silky white cardboard. She was making a get-well card for Jim. The cardboard had been wrapped around the new pair of stockings Nana Rose was wearing.

‘Lucky I had these,’ Nana Rose said and Margot agreed. A cardboard card was much better than one made out of paper.

Margot drew Jim standing next to the sun. The sun was shining in the window. It was shining on Jim and on the presents and on the Christmas tree too and when she finished her drawing and turned the picture around to look at it, she was happy it looked a bit like the picture for Christmas at Coles.

Nana Rose was going back again. Back to the hospital to take the card.

‘Daddy’ll get better when he sees that, won’t he?’ said Margot, and Nana Rose turned the teapot around and around on the table and said, ‘They didn’t have any Tiny Tips at the milk bar and she didn’t know why other teas took so long to brew.’

The telephone rang. Nana Rose got up and went out into the passage to speak to it. When she came back she had her hat on. ‘A quick sip of tea and I’m off then,’ she said pouring some into her cup and drinking it standing up.

‘Daddy?’ said Lewis, ‘was that Daddy?’

Nana Rose’s tea cup jiggled on her saucer. ‘It’s not up to me. If it was…well it isn’t. Not now.’

Margot looked up from her card. Nana Rose wasn’t making sense. What about the G? That’s what she wanted to know.

‘Nana Rose, does the G look like a G in GET or does it look like S?’

Nana Rose’s blackbird eyes blinked at Margot’s card. ‘It’s a G.’

‘It looks a bit like S.’

‘It’s lovely,’ said Nana Rose.

Lovely? Margot traced her finger around her letter G. That was a strange word for Nana Rose to use.

‘She was just a slip of a girl,’ said Nana Rose talking to her teacup. ‘Too young, some said and too pretty as well.’

‘Who?’ said Margot.
‘All that changed of course.’ Nana Rose put her cup down and scratched the skin on her fingers. ‘She should have been harder. Not stood for it. But you can’t though, can you? You can’t stand up against that sort of thing…not for long anyway.’ Margot watched Nana Rose put her handbag on her arm and squeeze it against her body. ‘I’m not saying it’s anybody’s fault but she couldn’t stand the truth.’

She pressed her lips together like she was trying not to talk. ‘Not alone there of course. Is she?’ she said, squeezing the words out quietly.

Lewis drove his car into a table leg and Margot looked down at the crash. What was Nana Rose doing, standing there in her dark blue dress with her hat and her stockings on talking to her cup of tea?

‘Do they know what he’s got?’ she asked.

Nana Rose rubbed her hands up and down her arms and shook her head. ‘He had everything once but that doesn’t help us much now does it?’

Margot slid off her chair and handed Nana Rose the get-well card. ‘This will make him better. See? I put my name and Lewis’ and I drew me looking like a Tiger.’

Nana Rose took the card in her scratchy fingers and bent over and kissed Margot on the top of her face. ‘You couldn’t wish,’ she said, ‘you couldn’t wish for a pair like you two.’

Margot looked at Nana Rose’s going-out hat and wondered if she knew about the rules for making wishes. If it was your birthday you *could* make a wish like that and if it wasn’t you could wish it on the stars.

She was going to tell Nana Rose about the rules but Nana Rose was in a hurry. She patted Lewis on the head and walked across the kitchen. ‘This is it then,’ she said, ‘sad to say.’

Margot put her plait in her mouth and watched Nana Rose disappear through the waltzing streamers.

‘Will she be back soon?’ asked Lewis from under the table.

‘I think so,’ said Margot, looking down at the pink lipstick kiss smiling on the side of Nana Rose’s teacup.

‘I know,’ she said spitting her plait out of her mouth and bobbing down to tell Lewis, ‘let’s get her teapot ready, for a surprise, for when she does come back.’
Margot knelt at the edge of the gully trap and watched the tea-leaves fall from Nana Rose’s teapot. When she stood up, she saw Catherine.

‘Mummy!’ The word leapt out of her and the teapot dropped from her hand. It hit the side of the gully trap and crashed to the bottom.

‘Mummy! Mummy! She cried it out again and again, the word that felt like the world, that filled the backyard and the whole sky too and felt as warm as the sun.

Like a racing sleep-walker, Lewis burst through the streamers, spun around and around and shouted, ‘Mummy! It’s Mummy!’ too.

‘It’s over now. It’s over,’ Catherine kept saying that but she was on her knees and holding Margot and Lewis’ heads on her own head and it didn’t feel over, it felt like the middle of something.

‘I didn’t want to go, Mummy, I didn’t, I didn’t.’ Margot kept saying that too and Catherine’s tears wet Margot’s face and she said, ‘Shhh. Shhh. I know, love, I know.’

Catherine was taking them back. Back to Julie and Tommy and the Christmas tree and presents and it was finished. All of it was finished now.

Catherine moved in and out of the door of the sleep-out. The wind was shaking the bottom of her dress. Her hands were shaking too. ‘Hurry!’ she said in a racing voice. ‘Hurry, we’ve got to hurry!’

Lewis dragged his Flintstone telephone off the floor. ‘Look, Mum, look. It works better than a real one.’

‘Now,’ said Catherine, as though she couldn’t hear what Lewis was saying, ‘we have to go now.’

Catherine’s voice gave Margot butterflies. They were running away. Running from Daddy and Nana Rose and the sleep-out and the secret Woolworths. They had to go now. Right now. In case they got caught. In case Nana Rose came back or Jim from the hospital, in case it was already tomorrow and they’d have to leave the tee pee and Peggy’s clothes behind, just like her doll’s house and her pedal car, just like they did when they ran away last time.

Peggy was lying on the bed wrapped in Nana Rose’s tablecloth. Margot didn’t know if the tablecloth was a lend or for keeps and then the side gate
banged and Catherine was saying, ‘please love’ and taking her hand and Lewis’s too and tugging them gently away.

Margot grabbed Peggy’s hand and tore her away too. Away from the tablecloth and the bed and the sleep-out. Away from the tea party chairs and the furious, flapping streamers. Out past the banging side-gate and the dark kitchen window and into a waiting black car.

Margot clung to the dashboard. She watched all the fences running along beside them and the houses too, rows and rows of them silently left behind.

It was hard to see properly with leaves on the windscreen and bits of sticks too and the car, pigrooting around the road like an angry horse racing away.

There was a traffic light coming and Margot called out, ‘Red! The traffic light’s red!’

Catherine pulled the gear stick down towards the bottom of the steering wheel and the car stopped and waited for the light to go green.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Catherine but her hand was a white fist around the gear stick – and that didn’t look very sorry.

‘It’s the wind,’ said Margot.

‘A north wind,’ said Catherine, and her eyes flicked up into the rear-vision mirror as though that’s where the wind was.

‘Green!’ cried Margot, ‘it’s green now,’ and Catherine pushed the gear stick up again and the car sped away from the light.

‘It goes fast this car,’ said Lewis.

‘We have to drive fast. Don’t we?’ said Margot.

‘What?’ said Catherine, ‘what?’ She pressed against Margot’s arm as the car turned a corner and skidded and bumped into the nature-strip. Margot fell sideways across the seat and squashed Lewis into the door.

‘Ow!’ he cried. ‘That hurt!’

‘It wasn’t me,’ said Margot as she pushed herself back up on the seat and looked at Catherine. She thought her mother would say something. Something about the car or where they were going or something about the wind or the road but Catherine was breathing quickly, and staring straight ahead and turning the
steering wheel with two hands like Margot did when she was an ambulance and her pedal car had to drive fast too.

‘Mum?’

‘I have to drive. I have to drive.’ Catherine’s words came out with her breath and landed on the window.

‘She has to drive,’ said Lewis, holding his telephone against his chest.

Margot held onto the seat with two hands. She wished she had Peggy to hold but Peggy was in the back seat and she couldn’t get her now. She looked out at the road. It was going over a hill and past a football oval and one of those places where they put dead people. She couldn’t remember the word. She wanted to ask Catherine but not now, later. Later when the car had stopped and the wind had stopped and they had all stopped running away.

The car roared over another hill and landed on the other side with a bang.

‘We’re alright,’ said Catherine in a not-all-right voice and car slowed down and it felt like they were stopped.

‘Are we there?’ asked Lewis.

Catherine shook her head. Lewis wriggled off his seat and said he was going to sit on the floor.

‘It’s a long way,’ said Catherine, looking around as though she didn’t know where they were going.

Margot knelt up on the seat and looked out the back window. Everything was starting to feel a long way away. Everything she knew. All the things she thought she knew.

‘Look out!’ cried Catherine and she stopped the car so suddenly Margot flew off the seat and landed on the floor with Lewis.

‘Watch out!’ he yelled, ‘you nearly broke my telepho…”

‘Mum!’ cried Margot, trying to climb back onto her seat, ‘what is it? What is it Mum?’

Catherine was sitting back from the steering wheel with her hands on her throat. She was looking at something. Something she didn’t want to be looking at.

Margot tried to pull herself back up on the seat but her dress was caught around her leg and her knee was stinging. She put a hand over the sting and squeezed between the seat and the dashboard. It was a man. Catherine was
looking at a man. He was running across the road, in front of the car. He was running to chase a ribbon.

‘I nearly…’ said Catherine, ‘I nearly hit him…that man.’

‘You’re not allowed,’ said Lewis throwing his Flintstone telephone on the seat and dragging himself up after it, ‘you’re not allowed to run people over.’

Margot watched the pale pink ribbon twisting and turning and whirling away. It looked like the sort of ribbon you’d tie around a birthday cake knife. The man, looked like…‘Daddy,’ said Margot, ‘Daddy had to go to hospital.’

‘I know, love,’ said Catherine, ‘Rose told me.’

‘Nana Rose? She told you?’ said Margot, ‘how did she tell you?’

‘This morning. I called on the telephone and she told me…she told me…you were asleep.’

‘I was asleep when the ants came in,’ said Lewis.

‘We had to sleep on our own, Mum. On the couch,’ said Margot. ‘Do you know Nana Rose?’

‘I used to. Not now.’

A car tooted. Catherine looked up into the rear vision mirror and then she put her hand on the key. ‘Stalled,’ she said and she looked up at the street again and Margot did too but the Daddyman was nowhere to be seen.

Catherine fiddled with the knob for the wind-screen wipers and they came on and scraped dirt across the glass.

‘A sun shower,’ said Margot and Catherine wiped her face with the back of her hand and nodded her chin.

A bridge was stretching out in front of them. It was narrow and wonky looking and it seemed to go on and on forever.

‘A bridge,’ said Lewis, kneeling up on the seat and rubbing the window so he could see it better. ‘A very old bridge.’

The rain started to get harder and harder and the sky was grey and black. Rain was coming in through the back windows and Catherine said as soon as they were off the bridge she would stop the car and close them.

Margot looked down into the angry water as the car bumped over the bridge. It was a long way down. Down deeper and darker than any water she had seen before. She hugged her legs and tried not to think about all that water.
wouldn’t think about it until they were across, across the drawbridge, across to
the side where nothing bad could get you – that’s what drawbridges were for.

The windscreen wipers bashed at the rain and made all the windows foggy.

‘I don’t like it,’ said Lewis trying to clean his window with his hand, ‘I don’t
like this bridge.’

‘Don’t look at it then,’ said Margot.

She held her legs up under her chin and looked at her star scar. She ran her
fingers across it. It didn’t hurt anymore but it still felt funny, different to how
the rest of her leg felt. The skin was thicker and redder too. She tried to lick it
but the car was bumping around the bridge and her tongue kept missing it. She
pulled her dress down over her knees and looked down into the water. ‘Why do
you think he was chasing it?’ she said softly.

‘The ribbon?’ said Catherine. ‘To rescue it, I suppose.’

Margot looked down into the water again. ‘You’re rescuing us, aren’t you,
Mum?’

Catherine coughed. ‘That’s what it feels like, doesn’t it?’

‘No,’ said Lewis talking with his hands over his eyes. ‘We can’t get rescued
because nothing happened. Did it Margie? Nothing happened to us.’

‘No,’ said Margot thinking, ‘not to us. Everything happened to everyone
else.’

After the bridge Catherine stopped the car on the side of the road and said, ‘I
have to close those windows.’

She sounded out of breath, like she was bent in half, like the trees were bent
in half, trying to keep their branches away from the rain and the loud explosions
of thunder and the lightning cutting holes in the sky.

‘We’ll wait,’ said Catherine, ‘we’ll wait until it passes.’

‘How long does a storm take?’ asked Lewis.

Margot waited for Catherine to tell him but she put her fingers on the
windscreen and left them there without saying anything.

‘A long time,’ she said in a far-away voice, ‘you were gone a long time.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Lewis, ‘do you Margie?’

Margot looked at the streaks Catherine’s fingers made on the windscreen.
They were long, wet streaks, like tears cutting through the fog on the glass.
She rubbed her hand across her star scar and felt sick. Two hours. That’s all the time they were supposed to be and because of the Cherry Ripe and the train and the promises – all her broken promises – they weren’t two hours, they were a long time, a very long time, like forever.

‘I was going to say a prayer but we weren’t allowed to say “grace”,’ said Margot.

‘No,’ said Lewis, ‘we weren’t allowed.’

Catherine grabbed Margot’s hand. ‘What else love,’ she said, ‘what else?’

‘Father Christmas bought me a Christmas stocking,’ said Lewis. ‘Nothing else because he didn’t know where we were too.’

Catherine squeezed Margot’s hand and looked into her face. She was waiting, waiting for Margot to tell her. ‘Rose…was she…was she nice?’

Margot didn’t know the answer. She didn’t know what Catherine wanted her to say. She looked at her mother’s worried eyes and said, ‘She was, Mum. She was nice,’ and then she felt the bones in Catherine’s fingers start to shake.

‘Not nice like you, Mummy,’ said Margot trying to think, trying to undo the shaking hand. ‘A bit nice. Just a bit.’

‘She gave Margie some cardboard and she blew on my chips.’

Catherine opened her mouth but no words came out. Her whole face looked torn, like she’d hurt herself on something and Margot knew that was her fault too and she tried to think of something, something that was not her fault.

‘Daddy…’ she said, ‘Daddy made us eat cakes.’

‘Shhh,’ said Catherine, her hurting eyes blinking at the windscreen.

‘For tea. We had to eat cakes for tea.’

Catherine ran her hands around the steering wheel. ‘Doesn’t matter now, we’re going home. Soon as the rain stops.’

‘We did,’ said Lewis, ‘we did.’

‘And he said you went to China.’

‘Stop it now love.’

‘He told us. He told us you were gone away. And he…’

‘Please love.’

‘…gave Lewis beer to drink.’

‘He didn’t Margot’s lying!’

‘He did Mum, he did and Lewis drank it.’
‘I didn’t Mum. I didn’t.’

‘Lewis drank it. Lewis drank beer!’

‘Stop it!’ Catherine put her arms over her ears, ‘stop it! Please stop it!’

‘It wasn’t my fault, Mum, it wasn’t.’ Margot pulled at Catherine’s arm. ‘We had to go on the train. We had to. And I wasn’t going to eat my Cherry Ripe I was saving it for you Mummy but when it got dark we had to eat it. We had to!’

Catherine made a groaning noise and her head and her hands fell on the steering wheel and she stayed like that. Not moving. Not making a sound.

‘What?’ said Lewis, ‘what’s happened?’

‘Mum,’ said Margot. ‘Mum.’ She put her hand on Catherine’s arm. It was soft and warm like Mrs Wilson’s lamb.

‘Make her better! Make her better!’ cried Lewis.

‘Mummy,’ whispered Margot, ‘it’s better now. It’s all better now.’

Lewis knelt up behind Margot and whispered too, ‘say it again, Margie, say it again.’

Catherine’s shoulders moved and then her neck and her head moved too.

She sat up from the steering wheel, leant back against the seat and closed her eyes.

‘Some air,’ she said, ‘I have to have some air.’

She opened her eyes and the door of the car and disappeared into the rain.

‘Don’t go!’ yelled Margot, jumping out after her, ‘don’t leave us Mummy.’

‘Margie!’ screamed Lewis, ‘wait Margie!’

Margot grabbed Lewis’ hand and dragged him along with her and under a tree.

‘She’s there. Just there see?’

She pointed to the small patch of light blue dress. The dress was moving in and out of all the browns and yellows and greens. Blue and green should never be seen. Why Mummy? Why? She could see her clearly now, holding onto the trunk of a tree and bending in half like a full-of-rain branch.

‘Make her come back!’ cried Lewis, ‘make her come back!’

‘Look!’ ‘She’s found…a rainbow. It’s a rainbow. See?’

Lewis wiped the rain away from his eyes. ‘I can’t see. I can’t…’

‘There. It’s there in the sky next to Mum.’

‘In the sky.’
'Mum! Mum!'
'She’s coming. She’s seen us. She’s coming now, Lew, she’s coming.'
'Now?'
'See there? See? She’s nearly here. She’s there, she’s…'
'I can. I can see now Margie.'

Margot watched her mother’s sandals walking towards them through the wet, fallen leaves. She got bigger and bigger walking through those leaves and when she took their hands the hairs on her arms were wet and on her head too and tiny curls bounced above her eyes and dribbled water onto her lashes.

‘Are we going back now Mum?’ asked Margot.
‘Back?’
‘In the car?’

Catherine shook her head but she took their hands and all walked back together.

The car door was still open and the seat was wet and they climbed along the seat and slipped around like fish.

Catherine threw Margot her cardigan from the back seat, then she slipped in beside Margot and closed the door on the rain.

‘Dry your faces with that,’ she said, then she lifted the skirt of her dress to dry her own face and her arms too.

Margot stared at her. That wasn’t right. Wiping your arms with your dress wasn’t right and when Catherine turned away to wind the window down, that wasn’t right either – putting the window down when it’s pouring rain outside.

Margot tried to think of something to say. Something to make it alright.
‘That Dad business.’

Catherine stopped winding the window. She stopped straight away but she didn’t turn round.
‘Yes, love,’ she whispered.
‘That’s finished now isn’t it?’

Catherine’s shoulders went limp and her hand fell away from the window.
‘Every night,’ she said, ‘I wished. I wished on the very first star…you’d come back to me.’

‘And we did, Mum, didn’t we?’
‘You did. And Lewis did...’
Catherine turned and looked at Margot. ‘Two. Two little ducks went…’
‘Dad,’ said Margot, ‘not Dad. You weren’t wishing for Dad too?’
‘I was,’ said Catherine, ‘God help me, love. I was.’ Tears fell down Catherine’s cheeks and disappeared into her dripping hair. ‘I tried. I tried love, I tried for all of us.’
When Catherine stopped crying Margot put her hands around her mother’s neck.
‘Nevermind. Nevermind Mum,’ she said.
Margot pulled her dress around her legs and wriggled up on the seat.
‘Mum, I just remembered, I’ve got something. Something special.’
‘Have you, love?’ said Catherine, blowing her nose on the end of her dress, ‘have you?’
Margot pressed her hand inside her wet, stuck-together pocket. ‘Don’t look, don’t look.’ She slid her hand out of the pocket and hid it behind her back.
‘Ready? Pick a hand. Pick a hand Mum.’
‘That one,’ said Lewis pointing to her left hand.
‘Not you,’ said Margot, ‘you know what it is.’
‘Do I?’ said Lewis, screwing his face up to think, ‘it’d be good if it was a towel.’
Catherine wiped her eyes and shivered. ‘Lewis’ hand. I’ll pick that hand too.’
‘Are you sure,’ said Margot. ‘Are you sure you want that hand?’
Catherine put both her hands on the bottom of her neck and closed her eyes and as Margot passed the earring from her right hand to her left, she thought her mother looked like Mary did, when the angel came to visit.
‘I’m sure,’ said Catherine.
Margot unwound her left arm from behind her back and slowly opened her fingers.
When Catherine stared at Nana Rose’s earring without saying anything Margot said, ‘it’s made of diamonds. Like those ones you gave that man. Remember?’
Catherine closed Margot’s hand over the earring and held it in her own.
‘You break my heart,’ she said in a breaking voice and even though Margot knew that was supposed to be good, it sounded like something terrible.
Margot and Lewis stood in the room where the dog on the box used to be and looked at the Christmas tree. It was covered in hanging bells and red and gold stars and more tinsel than they had at the North Pole.

Margot was surprised to see the empty room full of Christmas, glowing with blinking Christmas lights and cards on the mantelpiece and a red couch with wooden arms and chairs like that too.

She wanted to know why the dog wasn’t there and Catherine told her Steven had taken the box outside, to empty the ash onto the garden, and he left it there and it fell apart in the rain.

Margot looked at the Christmas tree, with her head leaning sideways, the way the dog would have done. It was funny how looking like that made her feel gloomy and not like the dog at all.

‘It’s a real Christmas tree isn’t it?’ she said.

‘With lights,’ said Lewis, ‘and an angel.’

‘You can thank Steven for those. He hooked up the lights and he managed to get the angel on properly as well,’ said Catherine looking at him and smiling with her lips.

Margot looked at Steven too. He was sitting on the chair near the window. He was wearing slippers with his pants and he was swinging his foot as though he was listening to music. There was music. Piano music. It was coming from a wireless on the table near his chair.

‘Classical music,’ said Catherine when she looked to where Margot was looking, ‘Steven likes to have music to listen to.’

‘And me,’ said Julie, as her ponytail bounced around on top of her head. ‘I like to listen too.’

Father Christmas had found them after all. He had found them at their house with the Christmas tree. At the house that was ready for Christmas.

Julie helped Catherine give Margot and Lewis their Christmas presents. Lewis got a silver space rocket and a new pop gun. Margot got a toy Hills hoist clothesline with tiny coloured pegs and a present that wasn’t from Father Christmas at all.
‘It’s from all of us,’ said Catherine taking Margot’s hand and putting a small box into it, ‘merry Christmas.’

She pulled the gold ribbon away from the box and opened the lid. It was strange getting a present that wasn’t from Father Christmas on Christmas day. Then Margot remembered it wasn’t really Christmas anymore and everything that happened this Christmas was strange.

‘It’s a heart,’ she said Margot as she lifted a necklace out of the box. ‘A heart on a necklace.’

‘Yes,’ said Catherine, ‘do you like it?’

‘It’s like a grown-up’s necklace isn’t it?’

‘I suppose it is,’ said Catherine taking the necklace out of Margot’s hand and holding it in front of her face, ‘look you can open it.’ She pressed a tiny button on the bottom of the heart and it broke in two.

‘Why,’ said Margot, ‘why does it open?’

‘It’s to keep a photo in.’

‘So it’s a secret then,’ said Lewis. Catherine locked the hearts together and held the necklace up again. ‘That’s why it’s called a locket.’

‘A locket,’ said Margot, ‘so you can lock someone in the heart?’

‘Yes,’ said Catherine.

‘Who’s photo are you going to put in it? Me?’

‘Margot can decide that Lewis, when she’s ready,’ said Catherine. ‘Come on last play and then it’s time for bed.’

‘Bed!’

‘Back in your own beds,’ said Steven, ‘think of that.’

Margot put the locket back in its box. ‘I’ll wear it tomorrow,’ she said, ‘tomorrow when I think of a photo.’

‘Alright, love,’ said Catherine.

‘Will you read us a story, Mum?’

‘A quick one. After I put Julie and Tommy to bed. It’s been a big day for stories already.’

Margot sat up in bed and held Catherine’s hand. ‘Everyone is different now, aren’t they Mum?’
‘Different?’
‘Julie is bigger and Tommy can walk and he can run. He can’t talk though, can he?’

‘He’s got a stutter,’ said Catherine looking down at Margot’s hand, ‘that doesn’t mean he can’t talk.’

‘Doesn’t it?’

‘What about me?’ said Catherine. ‘Do you think I’ve changed too?’

‘Not you Mum. You’re the same, but grown-ups don’t change do they?’

Catherine squeezed Margot’s hand. ‘Time for sleeping now. I think Lewis fell asleep standing up.’

Margot smiled. ‘That’s a joke isn’t it? You can’t really fall asleep standing up.’

Catherine moved forward, as though she was going to stand up.

‘Did you get a good joke, Mum, in your bon bon?’

‘No,’ said Catherine patting Margot’s hand. ‘Something terrible. The usual. Time for sleep now, love.’

Margot didn’t want to sleep. She wanted Catherine to stay sitting on the end of her bed. She wanted her to talk and talk and tell her stories, all the stories of everything that had happened.

‘That man with the ribbon,’ she said tightening her grip on Catherine’s hand.

‘Hmmm.’

‘It might have been Daddy. It might have been.’

Catherine looked over to Lewis. ‘Our eyes,’ she said, ‘sometimes our eyes play trick on us.’

‘Do they,’ said Margot.

‘Sometimes.’

‘Have your eyes played tricks on you?’

‘When you were gone, they did.’

‘How?’

‘Well, sometimes when I was walking down the street, or taking Julie and Tommy to the park, I’d see a little girl and I’d think…’

‘Or a little boy,’ said Margot.

‘Or a little boy. And I’d think that’s them. That’s my little girl and boy. They’ve come back.'
‘But it wasn’t was it?’
‘No,’ said Catherine, closing her eyes for a second, ‘no it wasn’t.’
‘And what did you think then?’
‘My eyes were playing tricks on me, that’s what I thought and sadly, they were.’
‘Sad to say,’ said Margot.
‘Yes,’ said Catherine, ‘yes.’ She sighed, and bent down and kissed Margot on the head, ‘time to go to sleep now love.’
Margot opened her eyes as wide as she could. ‘I’m not tired. I’m not a bit tired.’
‘You should be,’ said Catherine, ‘I am.’
‘One more Mummy, just one more.’
‘One more what?’
‘About you and when we were away.’
Catherine ran her hand down Margot’s cheek, ‘What if tell you another one tomorrow?’
‘Tomorrow,’ said Margot, ‘I don’t like tomorrow.’
Tommy walked into the bedroom. ‘Mmmargie. Hhhome,’ he said and pointed at her.
‘Yes,’ said Catherine. ‘What are you doing out of your cot?’
‘DdDaddy gget me.’
‘Daddy,’ said Margot, ‘that sounds funny, doesn’t it?’
Catherine picked Tommy up. ‘Come and say goodnight to your big sister. Quietly, though, Lewis is nigh nighs.’
Catherine held Tommy up over Margot’s face. A thick dark curl fell across his eyes. Clap hands. Tommy didn’t always have a stutter. Clap hands. He used to sing. He used to play games and sing. His eyes blinked his curl away. His eyes were dark. Deep, dark, blue. Same eyes. Same eyes Tiger and now Tommy, Tommy had the same eyes too.
Catherine kissed Margot on the top of her head. ‘Night, night, love,’ she said.
‘Night, night, Mum. Night, night.’ Margot said that again and again after Catherine turned the light off and tip toed Tommy away.
She turned onto her side and stared at the window. Night, night. She thought about Nana Rose and the teapot broken in the gully trap and Jim.

Her eyes felt tired and she reached out her hand to Lewis but he was sleeping. He was sleeping alone, in a bed all by himself.

She turned back to the window and looked for a star. She thought she saw one falling through the sky. Come back. Come back. The words filled her head, like voices in church, like hymns and prayers and Jim saying, ‘righto Tiger.’

That Dad business. She remembered Catherine’s face. Remembered the look of something on her face. God help me. God help me, love. Love. Maybe that’s what it was.

She wriggled down into the blankets and looked out at the night. The word kept falling in and out of her head. It felt like a prayer and like a wish and a secret. God. It was the sort of thing God talked about.

She closed her eyes and tried to think of a prayer but love, love was the only thing she could think of.
Margot skipped down the driveway and along the side of the house. She
stopped at the front gate and looked down the street. A car went past and a boy
on a bike and then it was there too, the moving van, coming down the road like a
giant creeping box.

‘It’s coming! It’s coming!’ She leapt off the gate and danced around the
grass. ‘The moving van is coming.’

Lewis came running out of the front door. ‘Where? Where?’

They stood side by side on the footpath watching the moving van find their
house and then they watched Steven, waving his arms around and showing it
where to go.

‘Backwards,’ said Lewis, ‘they’re going to go backwards.’

‘Vans always go backwards,’ said Margot.

The moving van stopped across the road and two cars had to stop too. A man
put his head out of the window and drove backwards through the gate and
crunched along the gravel.

‘She’s right!’ he shouted, and the van stopped and his door flew open and his
boots hit the ground with a thud. ‘Morning all,’ he said in a loud voice.

The other man hopped out too and the two moving men shook hands with
Steven and then they were ready to start.

‘Stand back kids,’ said the first moving man and his big arms dragged the
giant doors open and then he jumped up into the van and threw down a
drawbridge.

‘Can I help? Can I?’ asked Lewis.

‘Sorry son. Furniture moving’s a dangerous business.’

‘Is it?’ Margot looked at all the blankets and trolleys and hooks inside the
van. ‘I didn’t know that.’

‘If something falls on you,’ said Steven.

Margot pulled her mouth into a line across her face. ‘I know that,’ she said,
‘I know if something falls on you it’s dangerous.’

‘Is the wardrobe going?’ asked Lewis.

‘No. The wardrobe will stay behind. It is too big and it’s too ugly too.’
‘Yabba dabba dooooo!’ yelled Lewis and he ran around the grass, up the verandah steps and into the house.

The moving men put a piece of wood on the step and wheeled their trolley up and over it and inside too.

‘So,’ said Steven, walking slowly over to the gate and looking left and right down the street, ‘are you happy, Margot?’

‘Happy?’ Margot squinted. That was a funny question.

‘About moving to the country.’

‘About that.’ Margot hopscotched around the grass. ‘Yes, I am happy about that.’

‘Why?’

‘Because Mummy’s happy and everybody else and I’m happy too.’

‘Good,’ said Steven.

‘We’re moving properly this time.’

‘Properly?’

‘Last time we didn’t. Last time we left everything and a taxi took us.’

‘Yes. I remember.’

Margot stopped her hopscotch and looked at Steven’s back leaning against the gate. What did that mean? He wasn’t there. ‘How do you remember?’

Steven ran his fingers through his hair. ‘I remember,’ he said, ‘I remember your mother, she told me about it.’

‘She told you? It’s a secret. She said we were never going to tell anyone.’

Steven took his cigarettes out of his pocket. ‘A secret. But now you tell it to me.’

Margot’s hand slammed across her mouth.

‘I told you about the taxi,’ she said looking over her shoulder to the house, ‘a taxi’s not a secret.’

‘No.’ Steven lit his cigarette and turned round and looked at her. ‘A taxi is not a secret.’

Margot pulled at the locket around her neck.

‘It is difficult, Margot, but you must try and understand…your mother…your mother has risked everything for you.’

‘For me?’
'For you and your brothers and sister. She has been brave for all of you. Very brave.'

Margot kicked the grass and killed a small white daisy with her sandal. ‘I know that,’ she said. She wanted to say other things too but she kept looking down at the dead daisy and feeling angry. Angry with Steven for making her kill the flower and angry with herself because she didn’t know, she didn’t know anything about Catherine being brave.

‘There you are,’ said Catherine walking down the driveway with Tommy holding her hand, ‘I’ve been looking for you two.’

She stood next to Steven and looked at the moving van. ‘Is everything alright?’

‘Yes,’ said Steven, ‘I think it is.’

‘Coming through!’ called the first moving man as he pushed the fridge on the trolley out the front door and down the wooden plank. ‘Always do the toughest one’s first,’ he said bumping the fridge up along the drawbridge with his shoulder. ‘Double bed next. Help hold her in position.’

‘And you, love? How are you going?’

Margot stood on top of the daisy and fiddled with her plait. ‘Good,’ she said in a small voice, ‘good.’

‘That’s good,’ said Catherine.

‘All ready to go then?’ Mrs Wilson stood on the nature-strip holding her pet lamb on a lead.

‘Yes,’ said Margot. ‘The moving men are nearly finished and our car’s packed up too and when we go away we’re not coming back.’

‘I’m sure there’s no argument about that,’ said Mrs Wilson.

‘I want the lamb to go too,’ said Julie patting it on the head.

‘I dare say she would go, if she had half a chance.’

‘We might get a lamb at our new house,’ said Lewis, ‘it’s in the country and lots of lambs live there.’

‘Some,’ said Mrs Wilson, ‘but down where you’re going they’ve got more cows.’

Margot stood with Mrs Wilson and the lamb and watched the moving men packing the chairs and the kitchen table and the boxes of toys and clothes,
packing everything inside their van. It was funny to think you could pack up
everything inside a house and move it somewhere else.

She told Mrs Wilson she’d thought about their new house over and over but
it was hard to imagine a house in a place you’d never been.

Mrs Wilson said she’d never been to a new house. She said she was born in
the dairy and she was going to die there too. She said Margot was lucky. Lucky
to be off seeing something new. She said the way things were going it was
better to do that than wait around till they all got blown up.

Margot nodded and tickled the lamb under its chin. Mrs Wilson always said
nice things.

Tommy came whizzing along on the tricycle Father Christmas had bought
him. He was pedalling so fast his legs looked like part of the bike.
‘You’re not allowed to ride on the footpath,’ said Margot.
‘We’ll keep an eye on him,’ said Mrs Wilson, ‘he’s better out here than under
the feet of those muscly men.

Tommy pedalled around Margot and called out in his twisted-tongue voice,
‘Mmmmmargie bbbbbirthday.’

Mrs Wilson let the lamb put its head down to eat some grass on the nature
strip. ‘You didn’t tell me it’s your birthday, Margot.’
‘Tomorrow, Mrs Wilson. It’s not till tomorrow.’
‘Well happy birthday for tomorrow.’
Margot thanked Mrs Wilson as Catherine walked towards them.
‘We’ve got a birthday girl,’ said Mrs Wilson.
‘We have,’ said Catherine, ‘nearly finished here and Tommy you shouldn’t
be out on the footpath.’
‘Don’t worry,’ said Mrs Wilson, ‘we’ve got our eye on him. Tomorrow,
that’s the...?’
‘Thirteenth. The thirteenth of February.’
‘One more day and she would have been a Valentine.’
‘Yes, I suppose she would,’ said Catherine, ‘I hadn’t thought of that.’
‘What’s a Valentine?’ asked Margot.
‘Someone who’s born on Valentine’s day or sweetheart’s day they used to
call it when I was young,’ said Mrs Wilson. ‘You ask your father. I’ll bet he’s
sent a few Valentines in his time.’
Margot looked at Catherine and watched her face turn red.

‘When he’s finished all the moving business,’ said Catherine in her visitor voice, ‘you can ask him then.’

Margot bit the inside of her lips together and tried to make herself look normal.

Catherine said it wasn’t a lie. Pretending Steven was her father was bending the truth, not breaking it but every time they did pretend, it felt like lying and her face felt like a lie too.

‘Wasn’t a Friday, was it?’ asked Mrs Wilson.

‘Tuesday,’ said Catherine.

‘Full of grace.’ Mrs Wilson’s eyebrow stretched up high above her eye, ‘I suppose we can always do with more of that.’

‘Out the way girlie,’ said the moving man zigzagging backwards across the grass with Catherine’s dressing table.

Margot looked at Catherine. That wasn’t fair to say that, she wasn’t in the way.

She left everyone watching the swaying dressing table and slipped past the pom pom tree and snuck along the secret side of the house.

She pushed through the tangle of leaves and stones and some evil looking purple flowers she couldn’t remember seeing before, and stopped at her bedroom window.

The window shutters were opened flat against the wall and she stood on her toes and pressed her face against the glass.

There was nothing in her room now. Nothing except the bluey lino on the floor and cold, grey-looking walls. The little white light-shade was still there on the light globe and the door – that was there too but it wasn’t a bedroom anymore. It looked like a room at the top of a tower. A room to get rescued from.

It was strange looking at her room like that. Looking at her room with nothing in it. Nothing in it…Nuthin’ in it…the voice in Margot’s head strangled her throat.

‘Hey, No Name. Did you hear the one about the empty house?’

‘Go away!’ she cried as she leapt away from the window and raced out through the leaves and over the stones. ‘Go away!’
She ran from away from that voice as fast as she could, racing around the pond and across the wood pile. Skidding past the laundry and shooting under the wire archway and the prickly yellow roses, around the fallen water tank and down, down to the gum trees and the empty metal clothes line.

‘He’s come back,’ she cried as she grabbed hold of the pole and held herself against it, ‘the Manboy! The Manboy’s come back.’

The pole would save her. The pole had saved her before, had hidden her safe between the washing until the Manboy’s voice went away but now there wasn’t any washing, there wasn’t anything to save her, just hot chalky metal burning into her hands.

‘Margot! Margot!’

A man’s voice filled the back yard.

Margot fell away from the pole and ran towards it. ‘Daddy! Daddy! I’m here! Over here!’

The voice walked out from behind the water tank and Margot squealed and skidded to a stop. It was Steven. The voice belonged to Steven.

‘Caty said I would find you down here.’

‘Find me?’

‘To tell you we’re ready. We are ready now, to go.’

Margot held her stinging hands against her face. They were ready now. Ready to go to away. She felt her heart beating in her chest like a tom tom. She looked behind her at the towering gum-trees and the burning pole whispered a silent goodbye.

Catherine lined everyone up along the fence to wave goodbye to Steven and the moving van.

‘Why is Daddy going in the truck?’ asked Julie.

‘To make more room for us in the car,’ said Catherine, ‘it’s a long way.’

‘Will he be there when we get there,’ asked Lewis.

‘He should be,’ said Catherine.

‘So we’re going to see him again?’

‘For heaven’s sake Lewis, what sort of a question is that?’ Catherine sighed and walked towards the house. ‘C’mon, they’re gone now. You can all wait
over there, in the shade, while I check the house and make sure everything’s switched off.’

‘Can I come Mum?’ asked Margot.

‘No, love. You stay and keep an eye on the others. I’ll only be a minute.’

Margot looked down at the grass. That wasn’t fair. The moving van and Mrs Wilson and everybody else had gone and she wanted to go too. She wanted to go where Catherine went.

She looked up and saw her mother disappearing through the front door. A minute. She was only going to be a minute but a minute could take all the time in the world.

Lewis jumped up and tore pom poms off the tree and threw them at Julie and Tommy ran over to the tree to play too.

‘Sit down Tommy,’ said Margot but he didn’t do as he was told anymore. Now he could run he always ran away instead.

Margot stood up and looked at the house. Why was Catherine taking so long? Why did the coming and going of everything always take so long. She felt sad when she thought that and her eyes started to water. She wiped them with her hand and then she looked up at the sun. It wasn’t proper crying if you were looking at the sun.

The front door banged and Catherine was standing beside her.

‘You were a long time,’ said Margot.

‘I can’t always run my life to please you, Margot,’ said Catherine in a niggly voice.

Catherine turned away and looked at the house. Margot watched her standing there as still as Mr Wolf. The day they arrived she did that too. They all stood there on the grass, looking at the house, waiting, and now everything was happening the same way only backwards.

Catherine was coming out, not going in. She wasn’t searching in her handbag for a key she was bending down and putting it under the doormat.

‘That’s that,’ she said twirling her finger around a curl near her face, ‘that’s goodbye.’

‘There aren’t any forget-me-nots, are there,’ said Margot.

‘Not yet. It’s too early yet.’

‘Is it, Mum? It feels late. It feels much later.’
Catherine opened the doors to the car. ‘In we get,’ she said, helping Lewis and Julie and Tommy into the back seat. ‘Margot’s hopping in the front with me.’

‘That’s not fair,’ said Lewis. ‘I want to sit in the front.’

‘You can take turns. C’mon love.’

Margot slid along the seat next to Catherine and looked out of the windscreen.

‘What sort of a car is this?’ she asked.

‘What sort of a car?’ said Catherine getting the map out of her bag and smoothing it out on the seat, ‘an Austin. It’s called an Austin.’

‘It’s Steven’s car isn’t it, Mum?’ said Lewis.

‘That’s right.’

‘But he doesn’t drive it,’ said Margot.

‘Not yet.’

‘So why…’

‘He bought it for us,’ said Catherine pulling her dress down under her legs and closing her door, ‘it bought for me when…anyway…that’s where it came from.’

‘That’s where,’ said Margot and she put her hands over her eyes and burst into tears.

‘Now what,’ said Catherine leaning across the car seat, ‘c’mon love, please don’t cry.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Lewis, ‘it’s not her birthday till tomorrow.’

‘I can’t,’ said Margot, ‘I can’t.’

‘Please, love,’ said Catherine putting her hand on Margot’s arm, ‘I can’t keep everyone sitting here, it’s too hot.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You’ve said your goodbyes.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘Yes. You said goodbye to the pond and the tank and that Hills Hoist you’re so fond of.’

‘I didn’t. I didn’t!’

‘Love. I saw you. I saw you running around the yard saying goodbye. I’ve never heard anyone say so many goodbyes.’
‘When he left I didn’t. When he left I didn’t say goodbye.’

‘Who?’

‘Daddy! I didn’t say goodbye to Daddy!’

‘Oh Margot.’

‘He just went out the door and I didn’t say goodbye.’

‘I know, love, I know.’

‘He said he going to get the doll’s clothes and tee pee and then he was gone and he’s not coming back now is he?’

‘I don’t know. Love, I don’t know.’

‘And now there’s no one. There’s no one who loves me.’

‘Margot that isn’t true! You know that isn’t true.’

‘It is true! I know it’s true! That’s why I’m going to wish it. Tomorrow on my birthday. I’m going to wish Daddy comes back. That’s what I’m going to wish every, every birthday. Tomorrow and forever.’

Margot flung the car door open, leapt out and fell onto the nature strip and sobbed.

‘Margie! Margie!’ Lewis was running around her calling out and Julie too and Catherine’s voice, ‘leave her, leave her,’ and then a car door banging and Catherine screaming, ‘Tommy!’ and Margot feeling Tommy’s arms hugging around her neck.

‘Mmargie bbbbirthday,’ said Tommy, clinging onto Margot, ‘bbbirthday.’

Margot knelt on the grass and hugged him like a doll. ‘He didn’t mean it. He didn’t. I know he didn’t. It wasn’t Tommy’s fault.’

Margot tried to stand up and lift Tommy too but he was too heavy and he slid out of her arms and Catherine scooped him up.

‘It wasn’t,’ said Catherine, ‘you’re right.’

‘It’s wrong to hit a baby, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why? Why did Daddy…?’

‘Shhh,’ said Catherine, ‘please stop it now. You’re frightening Tommy. You don’t want to do that do you?’

Margot shook her head.

‘I am,’ said Julie. ‘I’m frightened too.’

‘You see,’ said Catherine.
Margot shuddered and dropped her head onto her chest. She didn’t want to see. She didn’t want to see anything anymore.

Lewis bobbed down and looked up into her face. ‘I’m going to make a special birthday card when we get to our new house. A special card for you Margie.’

Margot nodded again. She wanted to say thank you but her mouth was full of tears.

‘I’m going to put everyone back in the car,’ said Catherine quietly, ‘and you can stop crying and then I’ll come back and get you. Alright?’

Margot nodded and shuddered and nodded again. She tried to talk. She wanted to say that nothing was ever like she thought it would be and everything she thought would be something – was nothing.

She lifted her head and looked up to the blue summer sky. February is the hottest month. Catherine always said that. And the bluest too. Forget-me-not blue, up there in the sky, up with the sun-bright clouds. Catherine was standing under the sky and the sun was shining on her face too. ‘Time to come away now, love,’ she said, taking Margot’s hand.

‘I know,’ said Margot, looking up into her mother’s face, ‘I know.’
Volume Two

Who Speaks? Who Sees?
Shaping, Sustaining and Shifting
Point of View

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing)

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INTRODUCTION

This exegesis is an analysis of the complexities involved in the creation and sustainment of point of view in Sonya Hartnett’s award-winning 2002 novel, Of A Boy and in my own manuscript, The Birthday Wish.

Impetus for this study springs directly from questions and problems that arose during the writing and redrafting of my creative project and my objective therein to investigate by what method I could best create a child’s consciousness in a work of fiction for adults.

I encountered many difficulties in meeting this objective. These difficulties centred on point of view and its relationship with character and narrator. This was not solely because creating and sustaining point of view is a demanding and exacting task but also because I wanted to discover whether I could create a child protagonist using third-person point of view – a perspective through which an entire narrative could be focused. And if this was possible, I needed to investigate what made it so and what the strategies and devices I might employ were.

It was after many false starts and frustrations in trying to meet this challenge that I was directed to the theories of critic and academic Gérard Genette and his theory of

1 Hartnett, Sonya. Of A Boy, Viking, Camberwell, 2002. Please note that all future references to this novel are from this edition and accordingly, I will from hereon, reference only the page number.
‘focalization’ in particular, as espoused in his book *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*.²

While Genette’s theory of focalization (a renaming or ‘rechristen(ing)’³ of a tripartition typology with which to indentify the relationship between narrator to character and character to narrator, as initially classified by Jean Pouillon and Tzvetan Todorov)⁴ did not prompt me to write a child character or a narrator in a way that corresponded specifically to his definition/understanding, it was instructive in several ways. Firstly, the idea of focalization enabled me to define what I was attempting to achieve. Secondly, Genette’s method assisted me in refining these attempts, and lastly and most importantly, they inspired me to find a way to compress the external point of view with the internal point of view so as to create a narrative focus that foregrounds the child’s perspective at all times.

Accordingly, to best demonstrate how I arrived at this point and why, I will analyse how point of view in *The Birthday Wish* can be understood through Genette’s focalization and the relationship that this proposes between the narrator and what is narrated.

I conducted my exegetical research through a close examination of narrative, including literary devices and the decision-making processes I undertook to enable me to write a child character – seven-year-old Margot Lovelock. My interest centred on the relationship between internal and external focalized points of view and the ways in which these could be shaped to control and sustain ‘the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective’ and ‘the narrator’.⁵ Genette makes a crucial

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³ Ibid. 189.
⁴ Ibid. 188-189.
⁵ Ibid. 186.
distinction between these two perspectives, perspectives he identifies as ‘mood’ and ‘voice’ in order to end the ‘regrettable confusion’ often caused in confining the parameters of analysis of narrative method through the term ‘point of view’.\(^6\) In order to identify and clarify the difference ‘between the question who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?’ and the very different question ‘Who is the narrator?’ Genette distils these questions into the clear and concise ‘who sees?’ and ‘who speaks?’\(^7\) Considering my own manuscript through the prism of these questions, freed me from the confusion, frustration and at times bewilderment I encountered while trying to understand the ways in which the point of view of the child could be sustained, refracted and controlled. Genette’s theory of separating, identifying, indeed, recasting point of view as ‘who speaks?’ and ‘who sees?’\(^8\) provided a key to unlock my narrative method at the same time as it informed and consolidated ways in which I might understand and ultimately manipulate mood and voice.

During the writing of my manuscript, I sought out many novels written as if from the perspective of a child. I did not confine this reading to third-person texts only, but, for reasons I will address in the exegesis proper, eventually decided that this perspective was best suited to both the themes and tone of my book.

In Sonya Hartnett’s *Of A Boy*, I found a novel that would make for an interesting and challenging extension to the research I was undertaking in this exegesis. Not only does this novel share many similarities with my book (it includes a child protagonist, voices many similar themes, is set in Melbourne in a past decade and is written in third person) but also, ultimately, it would be the differences between our books that would yield the greater insights.

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Ibid. 186.
\(^8\) Ibid.
These differences are best understood not merely through an analysis of the craft Hartnett uses to create and sustain point of view but through an examination of how her shifting point of view establishes and maintains a constant juxtaposition between her ‘subjective perception’ and her ‘external reality’. These terms are to be found in Dorrit Cohn’s *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*; a study for theories of presenting consciousness in fiction. An investigation into Cohn’s narrative modes, for reasons I will again leave to the exegesis proper, reveals much, not only about how Hartnett uses shifting points of view to achieve a continuous, but not exclusive, narrative focus on the child protagonist, nine-year-old Adrian, but also why these shifts allow such a focus.

Although Cohn does not address child consciousness specifically, her analysis and categorisation of ‘modes’ of presenting consciousness in fiction, in both third-person contexts and first-person contexts, offers a clear and concise premise from which to advance propositions to underpin an exploration of modes of creating such consciousness.

In particular Cohn’s chapter on *Psycho-Narration* and her sub-chapter on *Narration of Sub-Verbal States* provide useful insights into representing a child’s point of view in a work of fiction (analysed through the prism of Henry James’s character of Maisie Franage in his novel *What Maisie Knew*) as well as relevant observations regarding the effect such a point of view has in shaping the broader narrative.

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10 Ibid. 49.
11 The word ‘focus’ here should not be confused with Genette’s ‘focalization’.
13 Ibid. 47.
In *Of A Boy*, Hartnett’s shifting points of view help shape the tension that feeds directly into the novel’s central trauma. This trauma is concerned with child kidnapping and the attendant traumas of disappearance and loss. This provides a narrative backdrop that links the child, Adrian, or the internal perspective to the wider world or external reality/perspective. In this way Hartnett’s novel is not only formally inventive but relies heavily upon point of view to animate such invention.

In the course of the exegesis I will examine the ways in which Hartnett’s narration shifts rapidly from one mode to another and why these rapidly shifting glimpses from narrator to character and character to character paradoxically produce a consistent and cohesive perspective from seemingly disparate points of view.

Although Cohn’s modes of narrative are not, of course, the only way one can tease apart the complexities of Hartnett’s control of point of view in *Of A Boy*, they provide a solid basis upon which to produce a detailed deconstruction of the way point of view is operating, whilst facilitating an analysis of the possibilities these modes offer to a writer in constructing, sustaining and focusing point of view.

To this end it is my intention not merely to determine ‘who sees?’ and ‘who speaks?’ but to establish the ways in which point of view is shaped, shifted and sustained in Hartnett’s novel and in my own manuscript with a view to understanding the way a child’s consciousness, specifically, can be created.

It is my hope, that by scrutinising how point of view is constructed in these works of fiction, through the prism of Genette’s methods and Cohn’s modes respectively, this will illustrate the relationship that exists between the creation of a child’s point of view and narrative devices and may also provide impetus for further investigations.
Theory Overview: Gérard Genette

In order to examine and redefine the way point of view in a work of fiction is approached and understood, critic Gérard Genette developed a concept of ‘focalization’. In so doing Genette circumvents the term ‘point of view’, a term he argues obfuscates the ways in which perspective might make meaning in a work of fiction. Instead he proposes three types of focalizations, a lexicon to explore the ways in which a narrator may contextualise, control or even subsume what is narrated.

These focalizations posit a distinction between ‘the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective’ and ‘the narrator’. This distinction that was formerly ‘almost universally disregarded’ is one Genette believes is necessary to identify and separate the complexities of ‘who sees?’ and ‘who speaks?’ in a work of fiction.

Genette categorises focalization as: ‘zero focalization’ and ‘internal and external focalization’. Zero focalization is the name given to a ‘nonfocalized’ narrative or one where the narrator is all knowing, all seeing. Internal focalization, is the term Genette uses to describe what happens when the narrator ‘says only what a given character knows’ and external focalization is an inversion of zero focalization where the ‘narrator says less than the character knows’.

Within the second or internal type, Genette utilises three sub-headings to explain the different ways internal focalization may be rendered. These sub-headings of “fixed”, “variable” and “multiple” are explained, respectively thus: fixed focalization

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14 Genette. *Narrative Discourse*. 188.
15 Ibid. 186.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid. 189.
18 This type of narration is frequently referred to as omniscient. For reasons of clarity and in the context of analysing the relationship between the creation of a child’s point of view and narrative devices in my work and Hartnett’s this term is not specifically applicable, and therefore is not one I will be using in the course of this exegesis.
is a ‘restricted’ focus, usually confined to one character; variable focalization allows for a change of focus where the ‘focal character’ is firstly A and then B and then A again; and multiple focalization is where one event or incident is perceived or narrated by several different points of view.\textsuperscript{20}

The purpose of these focalizations is not only to clarify a distinction between ‘who sees’ and ‘who speaks’ but to enable or perhaps necessitate scrutiny into the relationship between the narrator and the narrated or how point of view or narrative orientation is made possible.

**Theory Overview: Dorrit Cohn**

Dorrit Cohn’s exploration of the ‘modes for rendering consciousness’ in fiction begins by creating ‘three basic techniques’ from ‘simple linguistic criteria’ (it is Cohn’s assertion that the names she gives to these techniques ‘identifies both the subject-matter and the activity it denotes’) in order to redress what Cohn views as a paucity of research in the subject and to therefore expand and clarify the ways further research may be conducted.\textsuperscript{21}

In this exegesis my analysis will be confined to an investigation of ‘consciousness in a third-person context’\textsuperscript{22} and thus I will confine my overview herein to the modes of narration that directly apply to this context and to Sonya Hartnett’s *Of A Boy*. These modes of narration are psycho-narration and narrated monologue.\textsuperscript{23}

Cohn identifies the mode of ‘psycho-narration’ as ‘the most indirect technique’ or narrative mode, one that formerly lacked any ‘fixed name’ and consequently struggled

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\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. 189-190.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 19.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. 11-12.
to be understood, being handicapped by various inadequate and/or unhelpful
descriptions, such as ‘stream-of-consciousness’ or ‘omniscient description’.\(^{24}\)

Cohn thus joins the psyche (interior consciousness) to the act of narration and in so
doing rewrites the way an interior consciousness may be read. That is to say that by
identifying ‘both the subject-matter and the activity it denotes’\(^{25}\) Cohn identifies the
relationship or nexus that exists between the narrator and what is narrated. She
proposes a technique that acknowledges this nexus, one that ‘attempts to convey the
unconscious, the vague, the unuttered feelings’\(^{26}\) which may produce ambiguity
between ‘the narrator’s discourse’ and ‘a character’s consciousness’.\(^{27}\) In so doing she
sets out to redress a ‘neglect[ed]’\(^{28}\) born of a prejudice to suppose that ‘all fictional
psyches…come at the reader directly, without the aid of a narrator.’\(^{29}\)

Cohn maintains that the technique of ‘narrated monologue’ is ‘the least well-
known in English criticism’ and this is the result of mistaking this mode, one Cohn
summarises as ‘a character’s mental discourse in the guise of the narrator’s
discourse’, for ‘narrative analysis’ or ‘interior monologue.’\(^{30}\) Again, Cohn joins these
techniques to create both identification with and an expansion of the possibilities they
bring to narrative investigation. She identifies this mode as the most complex of the
third-person narrating contexts, a complexity which springs from the ambiguity that
necessarily results when one discourse (being the character’s) is transposed or
translated as being the discourse of another (i.e. the narrator’s).\(^{31}\)

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
\(^{25}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) Nikolajeva, Maria. Imprints of the Mind: The Depiction of Consciousness in Children’s Fiction in
\(^{27}\) Ibid.
\(^{28}\) Cohn. Transparent Minds. 11-12.
\(^{29}\) Ibid.
\(^{30}\) Ibid. 11.
\(^{31}\) Ibid. 103.
The aim of these narrative modes is to provide a basis from which one can question and explore the ways in which consciousness is created and sustained in works of fiction. In so doing Cohn’s modes are useful (in ways often different to but rarely directly at odds with Genette) not only as techniques for analysing and understanding the relationship that exists between the narrator and the narrated, but also for probing the ‘seamless junction’\(^\text{32}\) that exists between modes and their context and how this too, helps create consciousness in fiction.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.
CHAPTER ONE

CHILD CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE CREATION OF PERSPECTIVE IN The Birthday Wish

The creative impetus for my novel The Birthday Wish came from a desire to write a story about the vulnerability and irrepressibility of children. Early on it became clear that such a story was best told, to my mind, from the perspective of a child. How I could shape and sustain such a perspective proved so perplexing and arduous that I came, very often, close to abandoning the endeavour. Ultimately however, the challenges involved in attempting to create a child’s consciousness, in a work of fiction for adults, persuaded me to press on, to experiment with narrative techniques and to write my way through the many difficulties this point of view presented.

The Birthday Wish is a story told through the perspective of what Genette terms ‘internal focalization.’ Genette, as outlined in the introduction, circumvents the term point of view, in favour of a system of diegetics which aims to define the nuances, tendencies and breadth of narrative possibilities that, he believes, are frequently overlooked, misunderstood or contracted by such a term, which can be simultaneously as broad as it is narrow. Hence his thesis of ‘focalization’ proposes a system of related diegetics to examine ‘who speaks?’ and how.

Genette, referring to the point of view or ‘internal focalization’ in Henry James’ What Maisie Knew, argues that this ‘internal focalization’ is of the ‘fixed’ variety, ‘where we almost never leave the point of view of the little girl.’ In my novel, the story is also told exclusively through the point of view of a child, seven-year-old Margot Lovelock, and it is instructive to analyse the creation of this perspective or

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33 Genette. Narrative Discourse. 189.
34 Ibid. 186.
35 Ibid. 189.
consciousness through an examination of the effect such focalization can have on third-person narration.

In *The Birthday Wish*, the exclusivity of Margot’s point of view appears absolute. Accordingly, Margot is present in every scene. There are no scenes where she is not physically present in the action or in proximity of the action. This method of narration produces an ‘internal focalization’ of the ‘fixed’ variety\(^\text{36}\) which moves Margot from an autodiegetical perspective, via the use of dialogue, to what is closer to a heterodiegetical perspective, via the creation of an outside narrator, whose function is not omniscience but to contain or to fix the point of view. In so doing the narrator ‘orients the narrative perspective’\(^\text{37}\) rather than using ‘the full potentially limitless knowledge’\(^\text{38}\) that a third-person narrator has recourse to, even while the book is written in third person. Hence the inclusion of a narrator, allows the perspective to broaden but it does not allow it to shift. It does not reveal ‘characters’ most intimate thoughts\(^\text{39}\). The perspective remains ‘focused’ through Margot’s point of view.

Consequently, whether the narrator is narrating what Margot sees, thinks or feels, as demonstrated in the examples below, the perspective is always skewed towards the sight, thoughts, feelings and interpretation of the child protagonist.

Catherine pinned her hair on top of her head with bobby pins. She was getting ready to leave, to go to work. She had a job in the city, in a hotel, in a black dress. (66)

The same eyes. That’s what everyone said they had. But Jim’s eyes were not the same. They were flat and wild, like the eyes of the wicked Banksia Men. (82)

\(^{36}\) Ibid. 189-190.

\(^{37}\) Ibid. 186.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.
Catherine opened her mouth but no words came out. Her whole face looked torn, like she’d hurt herself on something and Margot knew that was her fault too and she tried to think of something, something that was not her fault. (258)

Jim put his hand up and Margot thought he was going to wave but instead it stayed up in the air like a hand who’d forgotten what it was doing. (168)

Thus the ‘character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective’ and ‘the narrator’ are throughout, part of a whole but importantly they are not and cannot be the same.\(^{40}\) To quote Genette, ‘the narrator takes on the speech of the character, or, if one prefers, the character speaks through the voice of the narrator, and the two instances are then \textit{merged}\(^{41}\).

Consequently, the ‘who sees?’ is Margot – i.e., the narrative is focalized through the child. However, the answer to the question ‘who speaks?’ is not Margot. She is not the narrator. The narrative is third-person, free indirect discourse and this ‘merger’ between what the character sees and what the narrator says is crucial to controlling and containing the point of view.

The narrator is ‘merged’ with the character, often, as cited in the examples above, through the invocation of childish inflection, written as free indirect discourse. In this way ‘the narrator takes on the speech of the character’ and in so doing ‘who speaks?’ and ‘who sees?’ appear to belong to the character, Margot, because ‘the character speaks through the voice of the narrator’ but the speaking and seeing are, nonetheless, crucially, separate. The friction produced from the juxtaposition between symbiosis and tension, created, in \textit{The Birthday Wish} through the merger of sight with speech

\(^{40}\) Genette. \textit{Narrative Discourse}. 186.

\(^{41}\) Ibid. 174. Genette’s italics.
and speech with sight, is integral to creating and sustaining the point of view of the child (thus creating child consciousness).

1.1 Who Sees? Who Speaks?

Margot Lovelock has two voices. One is internal and the other external. The degree of separation between the internal and external voices is crucial to controlling and containing the point of view.

What Margot sees is ‘focalized’ to such a close degree through the way the narrator tells us what she sees, that the ‘who sees?’ (Margot) and the ‘who speaks?’ (the narrator) conflate to create one perspective as demonstrated in the following passage:

Margot ran out of the front gate and down the street. She rushed along looking at the train clanking along the tracks and the street lights popping on and the people hurrying home because the night was coming, the night was coming and when it came, that was all you could think about. (46)

In the first sentence it is the narrator who tells us what Margot is doing. The narrator does not describe the ‘how’ of Margot’s running but the where. The ‘telling’ is not descriptive but merely informative. This brevity lays the foundation for the complexity of the second sentence, which merges action with reaction as what Margot is doing, ‘rushing’, and what she is looking at, ‘a train, street lights, people’ are subsumed by what she is feeling until feeling eclipses action whilst at the same time it is created by it.
In this way the actions of rushing, clanking, popping and hurrying (a veritable anxiety of verbs) combine to shape Margot’s thoughts and feelings. Thus the external narrator, who gives us this discourse, does so to lead us to Margot’s internal thoughts, or what she sees. The juxtaposition of common verbs with repetition leads us to an instance of the idiomatic or vernacular ‘you’, connoting ‘I’ which diminishes the separateness of the external narrator to such a sharp degree as to almost render this perspective indivisible from Margot’s. Hence, although this passage is narrated by an external voice, it is linked to Margot’s internal voice through language, sentence construction and tone. Thus, as readers, we are cognisant of the child’s perspective despite the fact that in this instance this perspective comes to us from without rather than within. That is, the external narrator is ‘focalized’ through Margot to such a close degree that when the narrator speaks, the character, Margot, appears to speak too.

This conflation of perspective controls the point of view by harnessing it to Margot and this in turn becomes the novel’s major organising principle in so far as the trajectory of the story and the drama within this novel are always focalized through the perspective of the child. That is, all narration – interior and exterior – sits within the psychological space of the child, Margot.

Indeed it was finding a way to collapse these perspectives that became both the artistic and the technical challenge in writing this novel.

Initially, I created a broader third-person perspective by including multiple points of view. These were the points of view of Margot’s parents, Catherine and Jim. In these early stages of writing I could not see how to, nor did I think it desirous to, limit the point of view to Margot in a way that would propel the narrative to make it of sufficient interest for an adult reader. It was only by ‘experimenting’ with and examining what point of view was, how it could be manipulated and the attendant
impact this manipulation could have upon a manuscript that led me to Genette and his theory of focalization.

The decision to excise other points of view and rewrite their perspectives from Margot’s, radically changed not only tone and mood but also the way in which other characters could speak.

I will examine the narrative devices that were employed to create such a closed or focused perspective below. In so doing it is not my intention to deconstruct Genette’s terms of focalization but rather to discover how a writer can arrive at this point. To this end I will analyse points of view (both third-person internal and external as detailed above) and their attendant linguistic challenges.

1.2 Point of View and Narrative Perspective

Excluding Margot, there are eight other significant characters in *The Birthday Wish.* These are Margot’s parents, her brothers and sister, her ‘new’ father, the Manboy, and Nana Rose. There are numerous peripheral characters including neighbours, school friends, shopkeepers, schoolteachers, policemen and strangers. All of these characters are only depicted when Margot is present. Without Margot as witness, in the conventions of my novel, they cannot exist. Thus Margot is not only the character who ‘orients the narrative perspective’42 she does so exclusively, despite the use of a third-person voice.

When I began, I considered writing Margot in first-person (a perspective that might appear to offer greater control of the narrative than third-person) but I also wanted the story of her parents, Catherine and Jim to have some perspective outside

42Ibid.
of Margot’s, even while this perspective shift is subtle.\textsuperscript{43} Hence I decided to write my novel from a third-person perspective.

At about thirty thousand words, or a third of the way through this manuscript, I realised I was having problems in controlling and ‘focusing’ the point of view of not only Margot but also her parents. In addition, because narrative control was tenuous, confusing or both, the roles of the more peripheral characters became that too.

Who speaks? and who sees? became crucial to creating a clear narrative trajectory. [Of course, it might have been prudent to consult Genette at that point and allow him guide me through some of the deep-water complexities that point of view presents the writer. Unfortunately, I am not convinced that at this early stage in the manuscript’s development, I would have either fully comprehended or adhered to such guidance. It was only after ‘discovering’ that a balance between an internal perspective and an external perspective could be arrived at, that I found Genette and his thesis of focalization instructive.] Few, if any of my characters had a clear point of view and the role of the external narrator jumped from character to character via long sections of narrated monologue that felt contrived at best and quasi-authorial at worst.

To solve this problem I decided to concentrate all points of view through the principal child character. Such a decision had an element of risk attached to it. Firstly, would this one voice, albeit a hybrid constructed from the internal and the external, be able to sustain an entire novel? And secondly would adults be interested in reading a novel told exclusively from this perspective? Rather than dwell on these factors, I attempted to turn any risk to my advantage by harnessing it to the mood of the novel. Accordingly, as I erased the points of view of other characters, I not only extended Margot’s point of view (in so far as making a decision that she must be physically

\textsuperscript{43} I would like to note that in this regard I was influenced by M.J. Hyland’s Man Booker nominated novel, \textit{Carry Me Down}, in which John Egan’s parents are so remote and unknowable that the reader doesn’t even learn their names until the novel’s final pages.
present for action to occur or be reported on) but also attempted to counterbalance this broadening of perspective by contracting the narrator’s point of view.

The result of extending Margot’s point of view whilst at the same time contracting that of the narrator (achieved in practice not only through excising other points of view but also through careful manipulation of language) produced a narrating voice which is interconnected to what Margot sees. Consequently, ‘who sees?’ and ‘who speaks?’ seem, as in the example below, to be the same:

Nana Rose scratched the skin between her fingers. ‘My own son,’ she said squeezing her lips together as though she was trying to stop talking, ‘I shouldn’t have to talk like that to my own son.’ She looked like she was going to pick up a ruler and hit someone but instead she pulled the door to the passage wide open and left. (226)

A cursory reading, of this passage, tells us they are not the same. ‘She said, she looked, she pulled’ clearly connote a teller or narrator but the way this narration is shaped around Margot’s literal, childlike descriptions, attenuates the narrator’s perspective, and thus privileges or foregrounds Margot’s perspective. Thus the perspectives of the narrator and what is narrated are ‘merged’ to create an interdependent whole.

After removing the points of view of Margot’s parents (a process which involved excising point of view shifts from the narrative, where the ‘action’ cut directly to discrete scenes in which Catherine or Jim were alone and reflecting upon past events or on what the future may hold) I found it was necessary to rewrite what needed to be retained from these reflections, not directly from Margot’s point of view (it not being my intention to rewrite Margot as an oracle) but by filtering the essence of missing scenes through her perspective.44 To this end I began to search for a way to a)

44 Appendix One (an example of a Catherine scene excised from manuscript)
broaden Margot’s perspective, whilst simultaneously keeping that perspective firmly contained and b) discover a way to write the narrating voice as part of this closed perspective. The conundrum was this: how could the primary narrative perspective and the perspective of an outside narrator appear the same but remain distinct?

Genette, in his book *Narrative Discourse*, not only helped provide answers to this puzzle but also defined and articulated what the puzzle was. In reading his book I realised I was searching for a way to write, ‘a story whose significance escapes’ the child narrator because the child’s point of view is controlled by a ‘restriction of field’, a term Genette borrows from Lubbock, and one that accurately portrays what I have, after learning of this term, subsequently attempted in my novel.

The term ‘restriction of field’ resonated, evoking the sense of looking out (perhaps with field-glasses) whilst remaining within, so I took this idea to my manuscript where I sought to create a semblance of it, to assist with point of view.

After much consideration and experimentation ‘on the page’ I decided that in my novel Lubbock’s ‘restriction of field’ could be rewritten as a ‘bridging’ point of view. Thus by contracting and ‘restricting’ the external narrating voice, compelling it to be linked to Margot and her internal voice, a bridge between her and the other characters or wider narrative could be achieved.

Once I had found a solution to controlling point of view creatively, I then set about finding a way to put this into practice. How was I going to meet this creative challenge technically?

Writing the external narration through the language of Margot’s internal voice enabled me to compress these two voices. Thus when we read the following passage the voice we hear is Margot’s as well as that of the narrator. This merging of external

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45 Genette. *Narrative Discourse*. 189.
46 Ibid.
perspective with the internal prompts the reader to interpret the action through
Margot’s comprehension of it:

Jim was growling like an angry dog, saying words Margot didn’t understand and he
pushed Catherine into the fireplace and then his hand flew through the air and hit
Tommy in the head.

He missed when he tried to hit him again and Margot was in between Catherine
and Tommy, frozen, until Jim punched the windowpane and hundreds of pieces of
glass crashed into the room.

Margot threw herself over the top of her baby brother and screamed, ‘He didn’t
mean it! He didn’t! He didn’t!’

Lewis and Julie were screaming too and Catherine was on the floor. On her hands
and knees. Looking like she’d forgotten how to walk. (82)

By focalizing the perspective this precisely, I have attempted to harness the
narration, not only what the narrator narrates (i.e. what information is disclosed) but
the way this is narrated (i.e. how language is used), to Margot’s sensibility, to her
seven-year-old consciousness, in order to include her perspective, even when the
perspective is not hers.

This technique of connecting internal perspective with the external enables the
writer to show the reader what the child comprehends and fails to comprehend
simultaneously.

Thus this small passage, of an assault on a baby at the hands of his father, is
narrated through the perspective of a participant eye-witness who is not only as partial
as any witness but whose partiality is further compromised by the tension that exists
between who sees and who speaks.

Accordingly, this narrative is controlled and revealed by a series of disclosures that
are pieced together slowly as Margot attempts to understand them. In this particular
example the aftermath of the assault and how Margot makes sense of it are dealt with in passages that occur later in the narrative as both past tense action and present tense reflection as detailed below:

[Margot] had to have seven stitches and while the doctor sewed her up Catherine kept saying how brave she was. She said Tommy could be dead if it wasn’t for Margot. The doctor said he was lucky, a very lucky baby and such a good boy too.

Catherine told the doctor he was always good. She said the window was an accident. And Margot said that’s why it wasn’t fair to hit Tommy and Catherine said Margot didn’t know what she was saying. (86)

And,

The ambulance is here. Speeding up the path. What happened? A window fell on a baby. That’s alright. The doctor will fix him up. Have you got an engagement ring? Good. Put that on his finger while I get the sewing out. We’ll have to sew him up. Just like a doll. Don’t worry. You can sew up people too. If they come apart. Hold still. It might hurt a bit. (87)

These two passages are, respectively, examples of Margot’s external and internal perspectives that function as interconnected perspectives on the same incident. In so doing they not only control the dissemination of information (always filtered through Margot because she must be present, or have been present, for any such reporting or reflection to occur) but also suggest the conflict and the chasm that exists between the inner and outer lives of a child or, put another way, between what is knowable and unknowable.

In drawing Margot’s parents, Jim and Catherine, largely through their child’s eyes, they too become at best unreliable and at worst unknowable.
In order to ameliorate both these tendencies I decided to have the narrator refer to them as Jim and Catherine but not without exception. In keeping with the structure or the overarching organising principle of my novel – that point of view is created and sustained by ‘merging’ the narrator with what is narrated – the characters of Catherine and Jim and mother and father or mummy and daddy are similarly merged but remain crucially separate from each other.

I felt this was a necessary distinction to make not only for narrative clarity (often this demarcation came perilously close to causing confusion) but importantly to create the semblance of distance in a myopic perspective whilst at the same time giving these characters a dual narrative function, in so far as they exist as both parents and autonomous adults. This is set up from page one and is controlled by the relationship between subject and the narrator. Hence when the subject is Catherine, her name is used to tell us who speaks and when the subject is Margot, she refers to Catherine as ‘mother’ as a child would do.

That hair made Margot back away but Catherine’s eyes flew open she and said, ‘Happy birthday, love,’ so Margot stopped backing away and stayed instead.

Margot tried to pretend she couldn’t see her mother’s hairbrush arm. She tried to look at the wall…(6)

The same system applies to Jim as in the following:

Backwards and forwards. Backwards and forwards. That’s how you fold paper to make cut out dolls. Margot remembered that. She remembered all the folding and cutting, the magic of making newspaper dolls dance on their kitchen table. ‘Yes,’ said Margot, watching her father’s Nugget covered hands, ‘I remember that.’

Jim looked up from the folded paper and winked at her…(229)
This oscillation between parent and adult underpins one of the conflicts at the heart of this novel, namely, the inability of Catherine and Jim to reconcile their roles as both parents and adults.

There are two Jims, a sober one and a drunk one, as there are two Cath[erines, the mother and the woman. Both these characters struggle to reconcile these personality divisions and once their narrating ‘voices’ were written out of the manuscript it was necessary to find a way to retain this division.

The noun ‘mother’ is imbued with the possessive, as in my mother, and thus its usage, signals Margot’s internal point of view. Use of the mother’s name – Catherine – is thus aligned with the corollary of this perspective, (whilst the internal and the external in another context may be viewed as opposites, in this context their symbiotic relationship is closer in description to corollary) namely Margot’s external point of view. This strategy affords the mother and the woman a degree of separateness whilst also it draws attention to the limitations this point of view necessarily has. That is, the reader understands that everything Catherine and Jim say and do is filtered through the eyes of their seven-year-old daughter and that glimpses of a wider perspective, provided by the narrator, are skewed to this perspective too. Thus part of the function of the external or focalized narrator is not to communicate to the reader what the child narrator fails to comprehend but rather to reinforce the child’s perspective. Hence Margot’s world-view is always and only negotiated through what is available to her as a seven-year-old.

This is not as limiting as it might first appear. In searching for narrative ‘resources’ that could be harnessed to this point of view and potentially extend it, I found much that was useful.
1.3 The Disguised ‘I’

The Birthday Wish also uses the idiomatic or vernacular ‘you’ in passages of free indirect discourse. This inclusion produces a disguised ‘I’, a narrative strategy which connects the reader to Margot’s consciousness and also helps control the novel’s movement from present tense to past tense and back again. The story begins in the present. Margot is swinging on the front gate waiting for her birthday to begin. The narrative then moves to the immediate past as we find Margot creeping into her parent’s bedroom – ‘Of course her birthday had started hours ago, in the half-dark morning, when she slid out of bed, crept past her sleeping brother and sister, and tiptoed into her parents’ room.’ (6)

What follows on from this, the novel’s first page and throughout, is in third-person, through Margot’s external focalized narrator, punctuated by brief forays into a semblance of immediate monologue or first-person with the inclusion of the disguised ‘I’.

Describing the nightdress her mother is wearing Margot thinks: ‘The one with the lace around the neck and around the arm-holes too. The one where you could see the hairbrush hair, curling out under her arms.’ (6) The vernacular ‘you’ or disguised ‘I’ promotes empathy for the child protagonist by allowing the reader to see as Margot sees. This is because an approximation of first-person narration is evoked; even while the disguised ‘I’ is a manifest example of idiomatic free indirect discourse where ‘the narrator takes on the speech of the character’.47 Thus the use of the disguised ‘I’ creates further opportunities for the external narration and the internal perspective to coalesce and this in turn reinforces the merger between the narrator, or who speaks, and the narrated, or who sees.

If third-person point of view functions similarly to the concept of the ‘fourth wall’ in theatre (a term used to describe the invisible ‘wall’ that separates the actors from the audience) the disguised ‘I’ tears that wall down. It contracts the distance between the narrator and the narrated because the intimacy of the vernacular ‘you’ persuades us that Margot can, by a narrative sleight-of-hand, take over the role of the narrator. Thus, the disguised ‘I’ draws the reader firmly into Margot’s world so that she might see not only what Margot sees, but importantly, how she sees. In so doing the narration is focalized through Margot to such a close degree that together the combination of free indirect discourse, childlike inflection and the disguised ‘I’ help create and sustain the point of view of the child (an example of child consciousness). For example:

Margot looked down at her dress and traced the winding yellow *ric rac* with her eyes. Forever. That didn’t make sense. You couldn’t stay on holiday forever. You went on holiday and then you went home. Like John and Betty. (184)

One could also make a case that the disguised ‘I’ disrupts the flow of third-person narration and therefore produces a discontinuity between ‘who sees’ and ‘who speaks’ rather than encouraging a fusion between the two.

Indeed, I employed the disguised ‘I’ in *The Birthday Wish* specifically as a technique to disrupt the third-person point of view, but with the aim of evoking empathy, not disruption. I must acknowledge here, that my first forays into the disguised ‘I’ happened intuitively. It was not until I was searching for narrative devices that could broaden Margot’s focalized third-person perspective that I decided to include this narrative technique systematically. In order that this disguised ‘I’ appear ‘spontaneous’, I contrived to have it punctuate the narrative seemingly at
random. To this end, I injected the disguised ‘I’ into the text in an attempt to moderate the claustrophobic sense a child’s narrow narrative perspective, of focalized third-person, may produce, while at the same time exposing the narrowness of a child’s world and freedoms:

She wanted to dance around the kitchen, around the whole house and sing out too, ‘Happy birthday dear Margot!’ But you couldn’t do that. You had to stand still and wait until the singing was finished and get ready to blow all the glittering candles out. (27)

Consequently, in this passage the vernacular ‘you’ is present to show more about the ‘rules’ Margot knows and to which she must adhere. Hence the ‘interruption’ of the third-person point of view with the disguised ‘I’ can contain and reinforce the narrative perspective whilst paradoxically broadening it.

‘The ‘restriction of field’ is maintained, even reinforced while the ‘strict’ third-person narration is seemingly usurped. Without a first-person perspective, the disguised ‘I’ allows the reader a close approximation of this perspective.

If we transpose the ‘you’ for ‘I’: ‘But I couldn’t do that. I had to stand still and wait…’ (27) we have a tone change, in terms of a more petulant quality, but the most significant change is the effect on child consciousness. If Margot spoke these lines in first-person she would age. Consequently, in the following sentences, changing the disguised ‘I’ to actual first-person (e.g. ‘…where I could see the hairbrush hair, curling out under her arms’ (6) or ‘At school I was allowed to smile or look serious. I used the same face as the teacher’) (96) rewrites Margot’s observations as those of a more mature voice. Thus in first-person these childlike observations risk being rendered flat and dull. They are not sophisticated enough to be interesting in first-person discourse because the ‘I’ of first-person paradoxically makes such observation
more sophisticated and so the artlessness and the juvenile in lines such as: ‘you used the same face as the teacher’, is lost. (96)

What is gained by the inclusion of the disguised ‘I’ is a surrogate first-person point of view. This surrogacy disguises the slippage from third-person perspective into a verisimilitude of Margot’s stream of consciousness whilst retaining a crucial distance from that consciousness. In this way the transition from third-person point of view to the disguised ‘I’ and back again, helps skew the external narration to Margot’s internal perspective and in so doing the external narration (who speaks) and the internal narration (who sees) converge.

1.4 First-Person Perspective

If as in The Birthday Wish the narrator and the narrated are so intricately and complexly connected why not write in first-person? The answers to this question can be found by looking at the story I wanted to write: the story of a child. This child was to be in the middle of an adult story, a story beyond a child’s understanding. The over-arching theme of this story would be the powerlessness of children and the ways they might overcome or circumvent such powerlessness. Therefore at the beginning, it seemed to me, that endowing Margot, the irrepressible but vulnerable child, with first-person point of view would be too empowering a position for her to take.

Margot’s story, in first-person, would be exclusively hers, and would not to my mind adequately tell the adult story too, that of her parents, Catherine and Jim.

I am reminded here of M.J. Hyland’s Carry Me Down,48 a story told in the first person, from the point of view of eleven-year-old John Egan. In this novel, Hyland tells the story of John and his parents exclusively from John’s point of view and in so

doing the child protagonist, an unequivocal unreliable narrator, not only affects the reliability of all the characters he encounters, his parents included, but controls the discourse to such a degree that the other characters remain peripheral even while they are central to the story. John’s unreliability feeds into the novel’s themes, the nature of truth and lies, but the first-person point of view encourages the reader to empathise with John and thus underplay his unreliability. In this way, Hyland, with extraordinary flair and deftness of touch, creates empathy for a character whose obsessions and tendency to violence ought to create antipathy.

This empathy is not arrived at simply because the protagonist is written in first person but because of the way this perspective controls all other perspectives in the narrative. Consequently, in Carry Me Down, the other primary characters (John’s parents and his grandmother) are characters that move through John’s story. Theirs is not a story with any outside perspective but one that is always communicated through John’s exclusive point of view, and whilst such a myopic focus gives the narrative a compelling, dramatic tension it provides little opportunity for insight into the lives of other characters.

In The Birthday Wish I wanted Margot to move through her parents’ story, not visa versa. I wanted to explore the gulf that exists between adult truths and child truths. Third-person perspective, even tightly controlled, allowed me to do this because broadening the point of view, however small this ‘broadening’ might be, enables the reader to ‘read’ both the adult point of view and the child point of view simultaneously. Therefore when Margot arrives home from school to find Catherine sitting on the bed, nursing her injured hand and trying to explain what happened, the reader interprets too. Below and throughout The Birthday Wish, there are two stories

Ibid. This is due to John Egan’s disadvantages both emotional and physical and also intellectual in so far as his heightened intellect (manifest in his ability to memorise long tracts of written text and make word plays/puns that rival an adult’s capability) rarely keeps pace with his emotions or feelings.
at play, Catherine’s and Margot’s, and via the third-person perspective these stories are woven around each other to create a whole that is greater than the words on the page:

Catherine shook her head. ‘I know Margot. I’m sorry. I know what happened…’

Margot stepped sideways away from Catherine and ran her tongue around her teeth. She knew. Catherine knew. How did she know? She’d come straight home from school. There wasn’t time to know what happened.

‘Don’t look like that, love, please. The sugar castor’s gone and I can’t change that.’

Margot’s tongue went flat inside her mouth. ‘The sugar castor?’

‘I’m sorry.’ Catherine looked down at her hands. Two of her fingernails were swollen with black blood. She curled them under her hand and said, ‘I jammed them…in a drawer.’ (78)

In third-person it is not incumbent upon Margot to tell the whole story. The story is not only hers; even though ‘we almost never leave the point of view of the little girl’ it is also the narrator’s. Told via a series of ‘sleight-of-word’ shifts, the external narration paradoxically reinforces the fixity of the internal focalization, as it repeatedly recalls the narrative perspective to Margot’s point of view.

These point of view shifts, even while they are focalized around Margot’s perspective, create gaps in the narrative, which the reader fills in. These gaps allow the narrative to move from disclosure to concealment and back again. They position Margot as complicit in the narrative, but not as complicit as she would be if her perspective was the only one.

50 Genette. Narrative Discourse. 189.
Thus third-person, even a closely focused one, with its ability to foreground and background the narrator and what is narrated simultaneously, seemed better suited to my young protagonist.

1.5 Logic, Focalization and Child Consciousness

_The Birthday Wish_ borrows external texts in the form of songs, jokes, prayers and stories to help sustain the logic of child consciousness around the logic of internal focalization. These borrowings are inserted into the narrative not only to extend Margot’s perspective, but also to incorporate wider evocations of childhood in general.

The children’s classic, _The Story About Ping_, first published in 1933 tells the story of a Chinese duck who lives on a riverboat with his family on the Yangtze River. When he is the last to return to the boat, he hides to avoid the punishment of being hit with a cane. In my novel this story is first introduced thus:

Mrs Black held up a picture of Ping, swimming around on a big dark river, trying to find someone to save him.

Margot already knew the story so when Mrs Black said, ‘And the master hit Ping several times across the…what do you think you’re doing young lady?’ she thought, that isn’t in it. That’s not the story of Ping the Duck. (74)

It is not necessary for the adult reader to know this story even though it is referenced twice more. What is important is how the inclusion of this and other children’s texts help construct and reinforce Margot’s point of view. Whether the reader is familiar with Ping the Duck, The Little Match Girl, The Little Red Hen, The Three Musketeers and Snugglepot and Cuddlepie or not, these stories reference the

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child’s world of imagination and play and in so doing extend the way the child’s point
of view can not only be written into the narrative but can be sustained throughout it.

Pasting fragments of songs, nursery rhymes or jokes into the wider text extends
linguistic possibilities by merging one or more texts to make a new one, and impacts
directly on the logic of child consciousness. For example: ‘Hey Lew. What goes black
white, black white, black white?’ ‘A penguin falling down the stairs,’ (111) and
‘Ark! That’s what Noah said when he heard the rain falling.’ (125)

To this end May Gibbs’ Banksia Man53 character is referenced and distorted not
only to help develop the novel’s themes but to position these themes firmly within the
logic of child consciousness. The inclusion of the Lord’s Prayer, (130) similarly,
enables Margot to express a level of anxiety beyond the reach of a seven-year-old.

Language choice is equally important. In my manuscript, simple language is
woven through a series of language complexities to make the simplicity possible.
Margot’s language must be kept within her seven-year-old language capability, not
only to sustain her point of view but also focalization around her point of view. So
when Jim asks: ‘What sort of a book is that for a girl?’ Margot looks at him and
thinks, ‘He looked a bit cross.’ (49) The word ‘cross’ stands in place of all the words
it cannot be. To say, for example, that her father seemed ‘angry’, a word also
available to a seven-year-old, is not appropriate because the context is not great
enough for anger and the question holds no subtext for a child.

The simplicity of sentences such as, ‘He looked a bit cross,’ balances similar plain
language in the heterodiegetical perspective, or when the narrator speaks.54 In these
examples and throughout, simple words are rendered less so due to complex sentence

53 Gibbs, May. Snugglepot and Cuddlepie. Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1940.
54 ‘He looked around and his tongue came slowly out of his smile and licked a white pimple that sat on
the side of his lip.’ (135)
construction. However, this complexity is disarmed by the child-like artlessness of the syntax even though the sentence is highly constructed and controlled.

Thus, language selection, sentence construction and fragments borrowed from other texts also play a significant role in not only shaping and sustaining the logic of child consciousness, but in shaping and sustaining the focalization of this consciousness.

1.6 From Gérard Genette to Dorrit Cohn

Understanding and controlling point of view is complex. Using Genette’s theory of internal focalization as a springboard to an investigation into or experimentation with the ways point of view is created and sustained in *The Birthday Wish* prompted me to think about the way such focalization may be similarly used in other texts. Searching for a narrative that also privileged the child’s point of view, but remained in third person, led me to Sonya Hartnett’s novel *Of A Boy*.\(^{55}\)

This novel is also told from a third-person perspective but the way this perspective is both created and controlled differs greatly from the techniques I have employed in my own book. Thus exploring the ways Hartnett creates child consciousness from third-person perspective, was, I felt, better understood by recourse to Dorrit Cohn and her analysis of ‘narrative modes’\(^{56}\) rather than Genette’s focalization.

That is not to say that my novel would not benefit from an examination of the ways in which narrative modes are shaped, shifted and sustained, however, for reasons I have detailed above, the primary challenge in *The Birthday Wish* was finding ways to articulate ‘only what a given character [in this specific case Margot]

\(^{55}\) Hartnett, *Of A Boy*.

\(^{56}\) Cohn. *Transparent Minds*. 
knows’. Thus my book and its attendant narrative problems and questions are directly related to, and therefore best understood, by an exploration of Genette’s focalizations.

Hartnett’s novel is what Cohn terms ‘a modern psychological novel’, a form which uses ‘psycho-analogies…to describe a mental instant.’ As such, an exploration of Cohn’s ‘modes’ and the ways these can create and sustain perspective between, rather than through, the narrator and what is narrated underpins the analysis of my own novel by highlighting that which it is not.

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57 Genette. Narrative Discourse. 189.
58 Cohn. Transparent Minds. 37.
59 Ibid. 37.
CHAPTER TWO
MODES OF NARRATION IN SONYA HARTNETT’S

*Of A Boy*

Sonya Hartnett’s control of point of view in her novel, *Of A Boy*, is sustained and balanced by narrative complexity born of the cohesion she creates from seemingly disparate points of view. These points of view and their relationship to each other can be understood by an analysis of what Dorrit Cohn in her seminal work on the subject defines as ‘narrative modes.’ The ‘modes’ employed in this novel are ‘psychonarration’ and ‘narrated monologue’ and it is my intention here to demonstrate the ways Hartnett uses these modes not to shift but to fracture the differing third-person points of view within her narrative. I will argue that these fractures not only enable other ‘interpreters’\(^{60}\) to contribute to the point of view of the leading character, nine-year-old Adrian, but also, cumulatively, they produce a series of point of view fragments and that these, and their relationship to disclosure, logic and a complex foreground/background nexus, sustain narrative cohesion by controlling and balancing the multiple points of view in order to create a critical and continuous focus on the protagonist.

I chose Hartnett’s novel, as opposed to other contemporary novels with child protagonists, such as the aforementioned *Carry Me Down* or Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In the Night-Time*,\(^ {61}\) because it is my belief that *Of A Boy* not only addresses similar questions to my own, in relation to creating and sustaining third-person point of view, but best exemplifies the differences between the ways these questions are answered or the problems solved.


Indeed, so great were these differences that it was necessary for me to seek a theorist other than Genette around which to analyse point of view in Hartnett’s novel. This is not to say Hartnett’s novel sits beyond an interpretation by Genette but it is my assertion that her varied point of view complexities are better suited to analysis through Cohn’s theory of ‘narrative modes’. Whilst it is true that variations from one point of view to the next do focus Hartnett’s narration around a particular character, [this varied point of view, is close to but not best explained by Genette’s ‘variable focalization’;\(^{62}\) this being a sub-set of his ‘three-term typology’\(^{63}\) for classifying point of view] these shifts yielded more insights, in my examination, when analysed through Cohn’s modes of narration. This is because Hartnett varies her point of view through the control of narrative modes and it is these shifts, not only from one character to another but from one mode to another, that enable her to keep her child protagonist under constant scrutiny, even when he is not the focus.

2.1 Who Speaks? Who Sees?

When, towards the end of the novel, eleven-year-old Nicole prods Adrian in the shoulder and says: ‘If you don’t come with me…I’ll hate you forever. I’ll never speak to you again’(176) his response begins in psycho-narration mode, which segues into narrated monologue at the beginning of the third sentence:

He ogles her in panic, his fingers aching on the wire: his blood feels as though it’s changed to oil when she pulls away and starts to climb. The fence rattles and shudders as she claws her way up, rippling like a tune. She will climb to the top and then into the clouds, and he jigs about in dismay. He can’t, he can’t, get left behind. He can’t go home without her, he cannot lose somebody else. He’s not shocked to discover he’s abandoned his plan, that he’s no longer even pretending to be running

\(^{62}\) Genette. Narrative Discourse. 189.
\(^{63}\) Ibid. 188.
away – he always knew he wasn’t that boy, who could take his life in his hands. But he cannot, *he simply cannot*, go to sleep tonight knowing Nicole has spurned him, that he’s now completely alone. (176–177) [Hartnett’s italics]

Hartnett uses psycho-narration to establish the scene and then moves into narrated monologue to tighten the tension as she moves from what Adrian feels (he is panicking, his fingers are aching, his blood is changing) to what he thinks. This transition begins with Adrian’s concern about Nicole. These concerns push the psycho-narration into narrative monologue and back to psycho-narration at the end of the sentence as Adrian, ‘jigs about in dismay’.

These shifts in narrative modes, even while they describe what the fence is doing it ‘rattles and shudders’, what Nicole is doing ‘climbing a fence’ and where this climbing will end ‘in the clouds’ are shifts which shape and sustain Adrian’s point of view. All thoughts, feelings and action in this scene, while related by a narrator, are related *in lieu* of Adrian’s consciousness because here and throughout this novel, Hartnett’s ‘narration of external reality is intimately related to subjective perception’.64 The ‘external reality’ or what is happening, in this scene, is underpinned by ‘subjective perception’ or what Adrian feels, via a complex manoeuvring between psycho-narration, direct narrative discourse ‘the fence rattles and shudders as she [Nicole] claws her way up’ and sustained narrated monologue. Consequently, through the prism of these changing narrative modes, Adrian is simultaneously cast as the subject of the scene and the scene’s primary witnessing character. Thus point of view remains tethered to Adrian even as it pulls away from him.

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64 Cohn. *Transparent Minds*. 49.
This scene, the beginning of the novel’s seven and a half page denouement, where two children drown, or more accurately, disappear in the water (a resolution of sorts in so far as the novel begins and ends with the disappearance of children but an open-ended text too, as disappearance by definition has no resolution other than its opposite) illustrates how point of view is shared by the narrator and Adrian throughout, and how the efficacy of this sharing is contingent upon shifts in the modes of narration.

These shifts control tension by sliding the points of view from one mode to the next, as mentioned above, but these transitions are frequently fractured by short, sharp point of view changes. For example:

He cannot leave her: he cannot do nothing.\textsuperscript{65} A good boy unto the end,\textsuperscript{66} he can not go home without her.\textsuperscript{67} So he tries.\textsuperscript{68} (183)

These points of view fractures occur throughout and due to their frequency and consistency produce something of their opposite. That is Hartnett’s point of view multiplicities paradoxically make for a coherent text, whose complexity is enhanced by her point of view fracturing, which ultimately produces a tense, foreboding narrative of menace; menace which portends to the disappearance at the novel’s end, while at the same time holds in sharp relief, the disappearance at the novel’s beginning.

Accordingly, it is my assertion that these fractures in point of view are better understood as fragments that disrupt the narrative at the same time as they contribute

\textsuperscript{65} Psycho-narration, connoting Adrian’s point of view.
\textsuperscript{66} Narrator point of view fracture.
\textsuperscript{67} Psycho-narration, as in the first sentence, but in changing ‘cannot’ to ‘can not’ Hartnett injects an emphatic urgency into the tone.
\textsuperscript{68} Direct discourse, connoting Adrian’s point of view.
to it. Fragmenting the point of view in this way, not only produces a cohesiveness born of its seeming opposite but also keeps the narrative surface as slippery as the quicksand Adrian fears. (If, which is not my intention here, an analysis of metaphor was called for, this technique, it could be argued, is narratologically symbolic of the broader themes of this novel; namely, an examination of the tenuous and arbitrary relationship between existence and non-existence.)

2.2 Orienting the Character-Narrator Relationship

The many glimpses into Adrian’s subjective perspective create an opportunity for the narrator to move into psycho-narration mode – as we learn what the child feels, thinks, realises, wonders and worries – and out of it too. These articulations of the psyche not only facilitate a move into psycho-narration but also actively shape Adrian’s character by attributing words to him, often repeatedly, which assist in sustaining a particularity of being, which in turn helps orient the narrator-character relationship. For example:

He [Adrian] worries that one day his grandmother will forget to pick him up from school. He thinks he could walk home if he had to, though the walk would take a long time, but when he tries to travel the route in his head, the streets twine and mingle like spaghetti in a can, disorienting him in his chair. Each time the school bell signals the end of another day, he feels a chill down his spine: maybe today is the day. To be lost or forgotten or abandoned and alone are, to Adrian, terrors more carnivorous than any midnight monster lurking underneath a bed. (27 – 28) [my square brackets]

69 Hartnett. *Of A Boy*. ‘Adrian worries about all sorts of things. Many of his fears he keeps private, sensing that there’s something a touch ludicrous about them, but that does not lessen their power. He is afraid of quicksand – scared that one day he’ll be walking along the street and find that the footpath is gobbling him down.’ 26.
This passage begins in psycho-narration mode with the narrator positioned as if inside Adrian’s head, narrating Adrian’s fears. The second sentence is a long, complex thought, whose complexity is paradoxically ameliorated by repetition, alliteration ‘could, would, when’, energetic verb use ‘twine, mingle’, imaginative metaphor ‘streets…like spaghetti in a can’ which then shifts into direct discourse ‘disorienting him in his chair’. The last sentence in this passage attributes the fears of abandonment and loneliness ‘to Adrian’, an attribution that is strengthened by the use of child-like language with the alliteration ‘midnight monster’ but now it is the narrator who speaks, and this transition from psycho-narration to direct discourse is seamlessly rendered through linguistic and grammatical control.

This control of language and grammar is an example of what Cohn refers to as ‘the discretion of the narrating voice’ and how this voice ‘yields to the figural thoughts and feeling even as it reports them.’\(^70\) In this way Hartnett moves from the child’s point of view or consciousness, to other characters’ points of view and to the narrator’s point of view, which can be trenchant: ‘But school is a terrible place for a rejected child’ and, at times, almost didactic: ‘A child often lacks the experience to see immediately what he’s lost.’\(^{127}\) However, in this narrative context, even slippages such as these foster poignancy, by distancing the narrator from the characters, and this enables the reader to reflect upon Adrian’s plight from a wider perspective or an ‘external reality’. This extended perspective changes the story of ‘a child’ into the story of children and also illuminates the novel’s broader themes of disappearance, loss and abandonment.

The modes of narration then, and the ways in which consciousness is connoted and point of view is sustained, are carefully controlled and nuanced from *Of A Boy’s*

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\(^{70}\) Cohn, *Transparent Minds*. 31.
beginning to its end as the ‘subjective perspectives’\textsuperscript{71} are continually interrupted by an external perspective; a disruption that produces a narrative of perspective fragments which, in turn, create and inform the novel’s compelling dread – a dread that translates to Adrian’s fate.

2.3 Disclosure and Modes of Narration

The opening pages of \textit{Of A Boy} set the scene for a story about children told from the point of view of a narrator. We do not know who this narrator is but the way the narration merges facts (‘The first witness was changing a tyre’\textsuperscript{(2)} with what may be fact or may be speculation (‘on his knees uncomfortably on a stone driveway’\textsuperscript{(2)} reads initially, something like a newspaper report. The unidentified narrator, for this is what it must be, since it has no discernable gender or affiliation, has a pervasiveness that hints at the foreboding of an oracle, which is undermined by the meandering tone, a tone that reinforces the meandering route and pace of the children themselves:

\begin{quote}
The route they’d take to the milkbar would bend around four corners of the suburban neighbourhood: two right turns, two left. Their neighbourhood was a modest one, and the distances between the corners were not great. The result of all the twisting was that no one who saw the Metford children walking through that clear afternoon would see them for very long. (2)
\end{quote}

This pacing takes its cue from the journeying children. The focus is on the children’s vulnerability, their temporality (both literally and metaphorically – the children will shortly disappear and the state of childhood disappears shortly too) and on the fragility of their world. The narrator’s language is simple but evocative too, often due to the inclusion of a well-chosen adjective: ‘He wore his lank hair fashionably

\textsuperscript{71}Ibid. 49.
long’(3) and the sentence structure is complex. ‘The girl’s pale hair caught the light, a flag of sunshine down her spine; the boy’s blue shadow yearned out from his feet, lean and gangle-limbed.’(3)

However, the hegemony of these narrating elements is undermined, in these opening pages, by casting the adult characters, and by association the narrator too, as witnessing characters. Since the route the children took to the milkbar72 was circuitous, (‘The route they’d take to the milkbar would bend around four corners of the suburban neighbourhood’(2) the witnesses witness different things at different times and this introduces, from the novel’s beginning, an element of irresolution which shapes the way the narrative is, and will be, interpreted.

These ‘witness statements’ (bent around glimpses of the children) are narrated in precise, and at times lyrical, detail (‘As she walked away the teacher smiled to see the difficulty the older girl was having, prising coins from her brother’s clenched hand.’4). This juxtaposition between the articulation of the precise and the lyrical, creates a concord between the narrator and the narrated and unifies the various testimonies (or points of view) into a narrative whole, whilst establishing a focus on those who cannot speak: the children. In so doing they preface the story of Adrian. What the wider story will compass and they way it will be narrated are thus, already suggested in the first few pages.

These opening five pages – a narrative parenthesis more than a preface – are controlled through inscrutable narration,73 beginning and ending in the past tense and using the same key word and subject in the first and last sentences, namely: ice-cream.

72 Here and throughout I defer to Hartnett’s spelling for the word ‘milkbar’.
73 That is to say that the narrator is unknowable. He/she is an indiscernible character with no discernible agenda. As a third-person narrator outside of the narration the reader is unable to identify whether the narrator has any stake in or position on the world that they’re describing. In this way the narrator is in the novel’s early pages and will remain throughout, mysterious and impenetrable.
The cohesive crafting of these elements creates and sustains the point of view whilst fuelling the disquieting tone of the story. We begin:

It was a warm day and they had behaved, as they had promised they could, so there must be ice-cream. (1)

Who is the subject and who is telling us about them? Point of view appears to hover above the action, action that is already past. Filmic, like a movie camera lens, following silently, the point of view circles the subject and makes it difficult to attribute the ‘who sees?’ to anyone or thing. What we do know, though, is that this narrator, the person who sees, sees much more than the reader and the next sentences confirm this: ‘Veronica took her sister’s hand. That afternoon, so near to winter, the sky was very blue; the sun felt soft as a cat’ (1) and introduces the first subject, Veronica. This in turn leads us to the fourth sentence which identifies this subject as one of a group, namely, ‘the children’, thus: ‘The children, on the footpath, paused to wave to their mother.’ (1) The final sentence, in this, the novel’s first paragraph, moves into psycho-narration, in so far as the narrator is now positioned inside the perspectives of the children, a narrative strategy that continues throughout and one that also hints at a degree of prescience. Thus: ‘For them, at their age, a trip to the milkbar could take on the dimensions of a voyage.’ (1) This complex articulation of the simple act of walking to the milkbar merges the observational with the poetic, a merger which alludes to the ‘journey’ the children will eventually take, whilst revealing details about both the narrator and the children. Of the children we learn that they are young, tentative (as befits their youth) and imaginative. Going to the milkbar is a ‘voyage’, an adventure. This description portends as much to danger as fun and it is in this segue from one world to another: the world of the children and the
world of the narrator who already knows the children’s fate, that information about
the psychological state of the children (i.e. that they set off on their ‘journey’ in a state
of apprehensive anticipation) and the role of the narrator are revealed.

The sun might be as ‘soft as a cat’ but the narrator is as agile as one. In only five
sentences the narrator allows the reader glimpses of what had come before this
moment (good behaviour and promises), who has made the promise (their mother),
the consequences of these actions (ice-cream), the gentleness of both the children and
the weather, their youth, where they were going and their idea of where they could be
going (on a voyage). The narrator knows much, sees much. And this knowledge
comes to us in a lyrical prose, punctuated by short sentences, the language we
associate with adults (e.g. ‘dimensions’) and the juxtaposition of the past with the
imperfect tense.

The narrator is arguably not a witness to these events, even though the reader could
be forgiven for believing the narrator was present, but a teller of the story, a teller
with privileged insight. The narrator can report on that world both through these
characters, using psycho-narration and narrated monologue, and by standing outside
of them, by recourse to both narratorial and, occasionally, authorial privilege. This is
a crucial distinction because it allows Hartnett’s narrator to be simultaneously inside
the action and outside of it, able to comment on it.

The schism that exists between reporting action and being ‘inside action’ enables
the narrator to create and control the novel’s disquiet, and this disquiet is introduced
on the first page and sustained until the last. The balance between what is disclosed
and what is withheld is controlled by the narrator and filtered through the perspective
of the child, Adrian, whose story both stands alone from and is integral to the opening
story in the preface. Hence on page one, the children on their trip to the milkbar are
already missing from the page, consigned as they are to the past, to ‘that afternoon,’ when ‘there must be ice-cream’, an unsettling use of imperative which is reworked in the final sentence of this section, as a statistic of the happenings in the year 1977: ‘Three children bought no ice-cream, did not return home.’ (5) This is the first disclosure. How this happened is uncertain. The remainder of Hartnett’s novel will examine many uncertainties flowing from this principal one of why the children did not return home and the consequences of this disappearance, and it is these that will subsequently lead the reader to the fates of Adrian and Nicole.

2.4 Foreground, Background and Articulation of the Sub-Verbal

From the beginning then, the action must be viewed through the prism of a disappearance and this provides the backdrop for the narrative in so far as it creates a doubling effect: akin to watching two images on one screen; a simultaneous foregrounding and backgrounding.

Accordingly, what happens in the foreground is always informed by what is happening in the background. This effect suggests foreboding and helps create a convergence between Adrian’s point of view and that of the narrator. These points of view or plural third-person consciousness, are informed by the juxtaposition of the oblique with the direct or of psycho-narration (oblique) with narrated monologue (more direct).74 And it is at the edges of this juxtaposition, where oblique meets direct, that interplay, of one point of view with another, is able to occur. This interplay is arrived at by paradoxically arresting one point of view to begin another, a

74 Cohn. *Transparent Minds*. 104-105. Cohn also includes the third mode, ‘quoted monologue’ when discussing the rendering of the ‘figural mind’ and the relationship between this, her modes and the consequences for representation. Cohn notes that when all three modes are in use, they subsequently impact on how oblique or otherwise one mode will or will not be depending upon the modes relationships to each other. That is where the mode appears in the text, impacts on its function.
technique that I have described as fracturing, which in turn produces a cohesive fragmentation.

Hartnett’s shifting consciousness thus changes the focus or locus of ‘who speaks?’ and ‘how?’ but these shifts or fractures change the foreground/background balance only. Initially, Adrian is backgrounded so that another character might speak but he remains a focal point in how the reader interprets what the other characters say and think:

To Adrian, Rory’s reluctance to do anything except wander round the house is less a mystery than a fact of life – the boy knows his uncle’s lifestyle is unusual. But it’s never offended him. Adrian wants a calm and rosy world, he is prepared to accept anything, if anything is what keeps the peace. He isn’t old enough to understand that not all lifestyles are deemed acceptable to live. Rory’s sister Marta knows better – she is a woman who unfailingly knows better. Marta believes that her brother is doing nothing more dignified than malingering. (34)

At the beginning of this passage the point of view is the narrator’s. The narrator tells us what Adrian thinks about the way his uncle Rory lives. At first glance this appears to be narrated monologue but the voice is not Adrian’s nor is it narrated or ‘focalized’ through him in the way Genette proposes. Rather the narrator speaks independently from Adrian and tells us what he thinks, what he wants and what he comprehends.

Cues such as: ‘To Adrian’, ‘the boy knows’ or ‘He isn’t old enough’ do not shift the point of view from the narrator to Adrian but the child or ‘the boy’ remains within the point of view locus.

The narrator’s knowledge of Adrian and the other characters has a momentum in these early pages, a momentum, propelled partly by a reflexive presence, which fractures the narrator’s point of view, by moving away from nine-year-old Adrian’s
linguistic and psychological capabilities to that of an adult voice. Hence in the sentence: ‘He isn’t old enough to understand that not all lifestyles are deemed acceptable to live’, the voice of the narrator, or the narrator’s point of view is collapsed to the voice or point of view of a slightly more distant and knowing narrator. Not one who is ‘focalized’ through Adrian but one linguistically and intellectually removed from him.

The narrator, of course, has the freedom to move around her characters at will. In the next sentence she (the gender neutral narrator to whom I have assigned a gender for clarity) will tell us what Rory’s sister thinks, what it is that she ‘knows’, ‘unfailingly’. And this segue from what Adrian thinks to what Marta thinks, is linked by this tiny glimpse of what the author knows. These glimpses into the hearts and minds of other characters are controlled through a complex rendering of the narrator’s point of view. This rendering both creates and controls the creation of the consciousness of Adrian because it emphasises his child subjectivity and this creates a tension between the child and adult worlds, or specifically in this novel, between what is known and what is unknown. The narrator provides a link between these two worlds while at the same time she shows us how separate they are. And it is perhaps the author’s desire to remind the reader of this separateness that leads to assertions such as that from Jan Mark in *The Guardian* that Hartnett’s novel contains ‘authorial intervention, almost didactic in tone’.\(^75\)

Hartnett uses psycho-narration to create ‘verbal independence from self-articulation’.\(^76\) Cohn indentifies this as the ‘narration of sub-verbal states’.\(^77\) This form of narration enables an articulation of more than a child may be capable of

\(^76\) Cohn. *Transparent Minds*. 46.
\(^77\) Ibid.
articulating and also extends the language available when a child does speak. Consequently Adrian can describe his fears thus: ‘He dreads the thought of sprouting purple hair himself, but he worries that he’ll never be a normal person, that his impossible hair is a symptom of some inescapable failing. (11)

Harnett’s rendering of the ‘sub-verbal’ slides her narration, from the childishness of ‘purple hair’ to the childlike worry of not being ‘a normal person’ to an adult articulation of these fears. In so doing, Adrian’s fears are pushed into the wider, infinitely more ominous sphere of, ‘inescapable failing’ and this in turn lends sophistication to the rendering of Adrian, a sophistication beyond that of a nine-year-old boy but one which is indelibly his all the same.

2.5 Logic, Perspective and Child Consciousness

Hartnett’s control of her point of view always remains true to the perspective or logic of child consciousness even when the point of view is not Adrian’s.

She crosses the lawn, dampness rising around each step. She had not meant to be so rough on him – she had meant to be relieved. But what she feels is sometimes hard for her to express – she was brought up to despise weakness. Much of what is best in her is warped on the voyage from within to without. Concern emerges disguised as cruel rage, and breeds a corrosive, truculent remorse. She will not ever say sorry. (53)

The ‘she’ of this passage is Adrian’s grandmother, Beattie, after she has hit Adrian ‘hard enough to know he’ll be hurt’, as punishment for playing in the park without permission. Her point of view is articulated similarly to Adrian’s. The action of ‘crossing the lawn’ leads to economical but evocative description in the damp, ‘rising around each step’. Psycho-narration follows: ‘she had not meant’, ‘she had meant’,

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78 Ibid.
'what she feels’ – but because it is ‘sometimes hard for her to express’ herself such narration is interrupted or usurped by the narrator, who takes over with narrated monologue to tell the reader, ‘she was brought up to despise weakness.’ What feels like a shift in point of view, is not really a shift at all but a step away from the intimacy of psycho-narration to a subtle, broader perspective, which in turn moves to an articulation of her state, using language which is not Beattie’s: ‘Concern emerges disguised as cruel rage, and breeds a corrosive, truculent remorse’.

Here, the point of view is pulled away from Beattie, and by association Adrian too, but remains within the realm of her consciousness (and thus vicariously, Adrian’s too, in so far as he remains within the orbit of articulation because Beattie’s ‘cruel rage’ is often directed at him and is in part born of the necessity of having to parent him) by evoking the powerfully expressed remorse. And this tiny drama within a drama ends with the childish: ‘She will not ever say sorry’ (a sentiment, which due to the inclusion of ‘ever’ is also expressed in a childlike way) and thus returns the paragraph or scene to an evocation of child logic or perspective.

The point of view of Rory, Adrian’s uncle, is handled in a similar way and frequently, as in the passage below, is writ with a tension between what is thought and what is said. This tension feeds directly into child logic or consciousness, by evoking the frustration of expression such as a nine-year-old child might experience:

Rory lingers. When he looks at Adrian, Rory sees the assailed and sensitive child he himself once was. He wants to tell his nephew that it’s stupid to be that way, so easily hurt: it’s better to be like a plank of wood, an emotional mule. It’s best not to feel, he wants to say; best to have the nerve-endings cauterised. He says, ‘Don’t forget the lamp.’ (134)
The verbs Hartnett uses to describe what Rory is doing; he ‘lingers’, he ‘sees’, he ‘says’, are direct and simple and lead the reader from the narrator’s discourse, ‘Rory sees the assailed and sensitive child he himself once was’, to the character’s discourse, or psycho-narration, ‘He wants to tell…’ to what he actually says, which in turn leads to the central character, ‘Adrian’s eyes dart to him and away, but he’s not going to cry now. ‘Good night,’ he says, drawing up the blankets. ‘Thank you for the sea-monster.’ (134)

This cyclical approach orients the narrative perspective by drawing the focus back to Adrian so that these forays into points of view of other characters, serve to redirect the point of view back to Adrian. Again, there are no strictly multiple points of view in Of A Boy but rather a series of point of view fragments, which are always in service to the whole.

This whole is Adrian’s story and the parallel, background narrative of the fate of the missing Metford children. The point of view that feeds the background story is derived directly from the narrator (now in weather forecast mode as below) and through continued references, both oblique and direct, to kidnappings and death.

Midnight means they have been missing for three weeks. In those three weeks, there’s been rain. The weather has been chill [Hartnett’s grammar]. The mornings have been misted by fog and diamonded with dew. Some afternoons there’s been a breeze that drills straight through to bone. Occasionally there’s been watery sunshine, cream-coloured, pasty, but mostly the days have been cold. It is sad to think of children being out in such weather, and there’s a stirring of strange grievance at the knowledge that they haven’t been given a warm place to lie. (134) [my square brackets]

This passage is one of the few that holds a point of view ‘outside’ the narrative proper. That is, the ‘who speaks?’ is not self-evident but the ‘what?’ of the paragraph
is. The subject is the Metford children – the ‘they’ of the first and last sentences. The narrating voice and point of view are distinct from but connected to the narrative whole. The narrator steps outside the narrative to draw the reader’s attention to the temporal, to the weather and to comment upon the effect of the disappearance on the wider community.

This paragraph completes the first two thirds of the novel and sets the scene for the remaining third. Its narrative perspective is unique but the narrative construct echoes the tone of the novel’s opening five pages and resonates with what has come before. The passage hints at or forecasts (forecasting or foretelling of the weather, perhaps, a narrative irony here) what will come to pass. Both the resonance and forecasting are created through fragments of information which are fleshed out by alliteration, repetition, detailed observation and recasting nouns as verbs (e.g. ‘misted by fog’ and ‘diamonded the dew’). These narrative elements not only serve to include the indiscernible, reporting narrator as integral to the narrative whole, they also serve to balance restraint with intensity, the poignant with the powerful and to underscore the foreboding in order to pull us, the readers, towards the denouement.

From this point onwards the ‘stirring of strange grievance’ will come from within Adrian’s family, rather than from the world beyond the family, as one by one his relatives bemoan their fates at having been saddled with the responsibility of caring for a child. From grandmother Beattie: ‘He needs cleaning, clothing, carting here and there. It’s hard work, rearing a child.’(150) and aunt Marta: ‘if you bought a dog and realised the breed didn’t suit you – that it needed more exercise than you could give it, or ate more than you could afford – then it would be right, wouldn’t it, to put it somewhere it got proper attention?’(151-152) and Adrian’s father: ‘I can’t take care of him, and that’s all there is to it. I need to be free.’(155)
These ‘grievances’ and their consequences (Adrian’s attempt to leave home\textsuperscript{79} and his ultimate demise\textsuperscript{80}) not only recall the sufferings of the Metford parents\textsuperscript{81} (an ironic recollection as they no longer have any children to be responsible for) but contract the narrative reach so that even when the point of view is not Adrian’s, it is he who is the narrative focus for the remainder of the novel.

2.6 From the Remote to the Proximate

Formally focusing narration around the child protagonist synchronises the narrative, in so far as the remote point of view and the proximate point of view, are both, and always, underpinned by each other and can be read as being embedded in each other. This technique allows the characters’ points of view to further the narrative whole, or foreground story, whilst simultaneously keeping the background story alive.

Closure of these parallel narratives is written in an unexpected first-person plural.

\begin{quote}
Where we are, morning wipes us clean.
We hear Mother speak our names.
We are here; here
Where we are, winter grass is growing.
Where we are, we feel the sun. (188)
\end{quote}

The introduction of a new point of view, at the novel’s epilogue is not only formally inventive but also skilful because it collapses the lost voices of Adrian and Nicole with those of the missing Metford children and thereby closes the parenthesis and ends the parallel narratives simultaneously.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{79} Hartnett. \textit{Of a Boy}. 171.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid. 183.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid. 55.
\end{flushright}
Thus the changing points of view, operating within changing narrative modes (that is to say not only who speaks, who sees, but how) are the scaffolding that supports this novel’s structure and allows the plot to be developed through a series of concealments that lead to moments of disclosure which in the final pages lead us back to concealment again.

At the novel’s end this concealment is both literal, as the children are lost or concealed in the water, and poetic, as voices from the watery grave speak to those still living.

Hartnett creates a shifting and indefinite time frame in her novel as the disappearance of the Metford children carries with it a resonance that continues beyond Hartnett’s narrative and theirs, into some endless future, consistent with and representative of the timelessness of disappearance, which is, by its very nature, a narrative without end. This endlessness is intensified when the protagonist is a child because the idea of childhood is sustained beyond its time into some indefinite future that renders both the disappearance, and the story of disappearance, unnatural.

It is no surprise then, that even on the final page, Hartnett’s deft control of point of view propels and completes her narrative trajectory.

This trajectory from the disappearance of the Metford children, to the appearance of Adrian in the lives of other characters and his subsequent, inevitable disappearance, is created by penning shifting points of view which are always in service to a specific consciousness: that of the child.
CONCLUSIONS

Of A Boy

Of A Boy is a formally inventive novel with a complex rendering of third-person point of view; one that appears to be as broad, in its treatment of point of view as my own manuscript is restricted. However, close examination reveals that Hartnett’s shifting point of view is always in service to one point of view only, that of the boy, Adrian.

To analyse Hartnett’s creation and control of third-person perspective and how this perspective helps shape and sustain a child’s consciousness, I relied on Dorrit Cohn and her theory of narrative modes for inspiration and instruction. To this end I examined the ways in which the dominant modes of narration effect point of view and control and compress perspective.

This analysis led me to conclude that Hartnett’s point of view shifts ultimately result in an exclusive focus on the child, Adrian. This is achieved through the creation of a prism of different points of view; perspectives which can be understood through an examination of Cohn’s modes of psycho-narration and narrated monologue, analysis that points to a fracture of point of view rather than a simple shift from one character’s view to another.

Thus the identification of Hartnett’s shifting point of view, as a series of point of view fractures, leads us to the paradox that informs the way Hartnett shapes her multiple points of view to the point of view of the child protagonist.

To elucidate the ways Hartnett creates her paradoxical narrative cohesion I scrutinised the ways in which these multiple, point of view fractures may affect the
relationship between the narrator and the narrated, with particular emphasis on the relationship between the narrator and the child.

In the course of my analysis, I discovered, somewhat surprisingly, that Hartnett’s consistent and systematic fracture of perspective from one character to another and from one character to the narrator produced a unified series of point of view fragments. These fractures, swift and often fleeting shifts in point of view, so balance and control the discourse, that ultimately they are best interpreted as fragments that contribute to and expand upon the point of view of the one character only: Adrian.

Cumulatively, these point of view fragments and their relationship to disclosure and concealment control the seemingly multiple points of view to create a continuous narrative focus. The complex rendering of this focus is shaped and sustained not only through changing modes of narration but it is these modes that animate the differences between, while establishing the transition from, one point of view to another. In so doing, they orient the narrator-character relationship in so far as they propose a connectedness between the narrator and the psyches of the narrated.

Hartnett uses her narrator to facilitate these point of view exchanges and to articulate what a child cannot, thereby endowing Adrian with a discourse more sophisticated than a nine-year-old has recourse to, thus enabling the articulation of what Cohn refers to as ‘sub-verbal states’. In so doing the expression of Adrian’s feelings, rendered through the narrator, interpreted by the reader through the prism of multiple and fleeting perspective fragments, produces a complex and sophisticated narrative discourse to create child consciousness while simultaneously emphasising the gulf that exists between a child’s subjective perspective and the external realities of the adult world.

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82 Cohn. **Transparent Minds**, 49.
Focusing all the narration around the child protagonist synchronises the narrative so that the remote points of view (or ‘external reality’){83} and the proximate points of view (or ‘subjective perception’){84}, are both, and always, underpinned by each other. This continuous juxtaposition of the remote with the proximate allows glimpses into the minds of other characters, into the world at large and into Adrian’s psyche. These glimpses enable Adrian, through control of changing points of view, to be understood as both the subject of a scene and frequently the scene’s primary witnessing character.

The change of focus then, from one character to another, is not only a transition from one mode to another but formally captures the novel’s imperative to identify what is knowable and unknowable. Both the characters and the reader are involved in this quest. To this end, the shifting modes of narration shape the shifting points of view and help sustain Hartnett’s control of discourse. A discourse built upon an incremental reverberation of events, where all forays into other points of view serve to redirect the point of view back to the narrative whole, which in Hartnett’s *Of A Boy*, is, ‘the boy’, and his fate.

**The Birthday Wish**

The technical and creative challenges in my novel *The Birthday Wish* sprang from one problem: how to create and sustain child consciousness using third-person point of view.

The answer to these challenges lay not only in an analysis of Genette’s study of narrative but in my attempt to harness his theory of ‘focalization’ and then extend upon it for my own creative and technical purposes.

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83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
As a starting point I experimented with Genette’s study of ‘fixed’ point of view, a point of view he asserted had as its essential quality or core, one of internal focalization. It was this, according to Genette, which enabled a narrator to maintain a constant, fixed perspective with what is narrated.

The idea of this restriction of focus spoke to me of possibilities for developing a controlling and symbiotic voice through which a narrator could narrate the story of a child, in a work of fiction for adults.

The first draft of my novel included multiple points of view, points of view that deliberately diminished the hegemony of the child’s point of view. Given that it was always my intention to write a story from a child’s perspective, it was perplexing and frustrating when I realised that it was this, the child’s point of view, I was fearful of writing. Consequently, the child’s perspective or voice was in my novel, as so often, in the world at large tempered by the voices of adults. Through the use of internal focalization I not only found the theory that could help create a narrating voice but also importantly, one that could be utilised to simultaneously create a child’s voice.

After excising the multiple points of view from my manuscript, I began a long and challenging journey through the complexities of point of view to try to create and sustain a child’s consciousness in a work of fiction for adults.

The concept of focalizing thoughts, feelings, dialogue and action through the consciousness of a child protagonist whilst at the same time having a narratological device (in terms of a narrator) who would be the narrating focalizer, solved, in theory, the problems I had in creating and controlling point of view. How to then solve these problems in practice became my next and more difficult challenge. This was a task that so engaged me that it became my major artistic challenge too.

85 Given that it is an adult who writes this story of a child, one could argue that this is still the case.
In this way *The Birthday Wish* is an experiment, not only in using Genette’s method for controlling point of view through focalization, but also an investigation into whether it is possible to shrink the divide between internal and external focalizations so that the primary character and the narrator can be read as simultaneously merged but separate.

In order to do this I made two critical narrative decisions. The first was that Margot, the child protagonist, must be involved in all action or be in close proximity to it. That is, the narrator could only narrate if Margot was on the page. The second was to write Margot’s parents, as both adults and parents. Hence they would be referred to throughout as both Catherine and Jim and Mummy and Daddy.

These decisions had an immediate impact on the narrator. They clarified the narrating position (that is the narrator could effectively remain in one place, with Margot), which in turn enabled the heterodiegetical perspective to ‘orient(s) the narrative perspective’, 86 an orientation always to Margot, in order to produce a symbiosis between the narrator and narrated.

This symbiosis between internal and external narration lead me to the realisation that the broad narrative (what the story was about) was not only Margot’s story, as I had first thought, but that of her parents too. Their story would now be narrated from without (via the narrator) but focalized from within (via Margot’s point of view) and this would control the Catherine/Jim narrative because the close relationship between the narrator and what may be narrated, meant that only a partial version of their story was now possible to discern.

The narrative freedoms this restricted point of view produced were unexpected. Disclosure became a major organising principle of the narrative. It determined not

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86 Genette. *Narrative Discourse*. 186.
only what could be told and how, but also controlled the tone of the discourse. This
tone, a mixture of menace and misunderstanding, impacted on the relationship
between the narrating perspective and Margot’s perspective. That is, I felt it necessary
to unite these perspectives in some way, in order that together they should have much
the same ability to interpret the unfolding events. To this end I attempted to merge the
‘who speaks’ with the ‘who sees’ to intensify focalization and identify the speaking
and seeing as integral to and yet always separate from each other. This I hoped would
not only privilege the perspective of the child protagonist, but also clarify the
partiality of the perspective and thus introduce an irony into the narrative – an irony
born of the gulf of understanding that exists between the child protagonist and the
adult reader.

I experimented with and decided to include a vernacular ‘you’, in order that it
might function as a disguised ‘I’. This narrative device is employed to produce
empathy for the child protagonist by allowing the reader to see as Margot sees. This is
because the disguised ‘I’ feels like immediate speech or first-person discourse even
while it provides clear instances of idiomatic free indirect discourse, or to quote
Genette, examples of where ‘the narrator takes on the speech of the character’.87 Thus
the disguised ‘I’ produces a form of surrogate first-person perspective and this creates
opportunities for the external narration and the internal perspective to converge.

I decided not to write Margot in first person. The ability of the narrator to
foreground or background what is narrated was one I found useful in controlling the
overall narrative arc. In first-person Margot would always be foregrounded and this
would not only impact on the way the narrative unfolded but also on her relative
youth. Telling a story from the perspective of one so young was always challenging

87 Ibid. 174.
(and frequently seemed impossible) and I don’t believe that this challenge would have been met without the use of third-person perspective.

Integrating children’s stories, rhymes and riddles into my manuscript not only helped sustain the logic of child consciousness, but such logic plays a vital part in sustaining the balance between the worlds of without and within or the internal and external perspectives.

Understanding, writing and controlling point of view in a work of fiction is complex and often fraught. In *The Birthday Wish* it was the articulation of point of view that presented the majority of technical and creative challenges. In order to meet these challenges and solve the problems inherent in them, I decided to treat the problems I encountered as opportunities to explore narrative possibilities. This led me not only to the works of Gérard Genette and Dorrit Cohn but also to many fine writers who have solved the problems of point of view very differently to me. Suffice to say that my solution was to ‘experiment’ with how close point of view between a narrator and the characters being narrated could be. I discovered many narrative opportunities along the way and hope that I have conveyed clearly some of these discoveries in my search for ‘who speaks?’ and ‘who sees?’. These are discoveries that hopefully can be tested and extended in order to continue the technical and creative challenges that the study of point of view affords.

Anthony Macris (writing in *The Writer’s Reader* edited by Brenda Walker) states that ‘point of view should be seen as a project in progress, because any final say on the matter would mean an end to one of fiction’s most exciting and rewarding challenges’. Indeed. To imagine that the articulation of defining and understanding the essential role point of view plays in a work of fiction, how this role is articulated

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88 Macris. ‘Point of View: An Introduction For Fiction Writers.’ 68.
and the effect this articulation has on the success or otherwise in creating and sustaining consciousness, should be at an end, leaves one with the feeling that if this were to be the case, then this would visit a similar ‘final say’ fate on the novel too.
APPENDIX ONE

The following is an example of third-person narration, told from Catherine’s point of view, excised from The Birthday Wish.

Catherine sat at the kitchen table polishing the sugar caster. Black newsprint protected the table-top and smudged her arms. The Silvo tarnished her fingernails. It was the quiet part of the day. The early afternoon when Margot and Lewis were still at school and kinder and Julie and Tommy were sleeping. She ought to have been sewing but there was something satisfying in rubbing a worn shiny surface over and over again. Rubbing until she could see herself in it. Until she could see all the tiny intricate patterns etched into its skin. She liked the smell too. Silvo smelled strong and clean and dangerously heady. Sitting there in the cool afternoon, buffing away at the small silver object with a torn pyjama pant leg, she allowed herself a smile and then another. What would they think if they saw her sitting there, polishing silver and smiling? People always complained about having to polish silver but one piece was easy to care for. Maybe it would be the same with one child.

Catherine shook her head at that thought. She had no idea where such thoughts came from. They were not the kinds of thoughts mothers were supposed to think. Not good mothers anyway. Good mothers were supposed to love all their children all the time – no matter what. Good mothers married good fathers. Catherine had seen enough pictures to know that. Her favourite good mother was June Alyson. June danced around her Hollywood kitchen effortlessly whipping up cakes and tall cool jugs of tall cool drinks to serve to her happy obedient children. Her blonde bob bobbed. Her pretty apron shimmied. Of course her husband was in love with her and shopkeepers, neighbours, friends, they all loved her too. She knew Jim wasn’t perfect. Right from the very beginning she knew that. The Lovelocks were well known. That was part of the thrill.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


