



The Moon Garden

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Abstract

The major work of the Ph.D. (Creative Writing) is a novel about the pressures contemporary women still face, despite the legacy of feminism, as they negotiate a complex, materialistic society that emphasises personal appearance (beauty) and acclaim.

In *The Moon Garden*, the main character, Elizabeth (Lizzy) Mathews grows up in suburbia, ignorant of changing social mores and the feminist movement. Her mother, entrenched in 1950s ideologies, dominates Lizzy's life, steering Lizzy toward the promised 'happy ever after' as a married woman with children. Lizzy spends her early life trying to live up to expectations, seeking approval and validation from those she loves. Music becomes an escape from the contradictions she's confronted with as she develops into a beautiful young woman. Her life takes a dramatic turn when she becomes a fashion model and wins a beauty competition. Instead of escaping the pressure to conform to ideals of beauty and the performance of femininity, Lizzy finds herself under the microscope as a celebrity. To her surprise, the expected 'happy ever after' never eventuates, not even as a married woman. Grappling with the truth of her life and her own darkness, she struggles to find her path to liberation, digs into the earth and recovers the music within her.

The exegesis, *The Genteel Performance*, explores the process of writing and research involved in *The Moon Garden*. The main focus of research is the relationship between music and fiction, with an emphasis on women's engagement with music as 'genteel performance'. Nineteenth century expectations of musical education for women are linked, in turn, to 'the beauty myth', a topic that has excited contemporary feminists, notably Naomi Wolf.

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Declaration

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

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Part One

Lizzy Mathews wanted to be beautiful. She prayed, *Dear God, please make me beautiful. Amen.*

When Lizzy looked in the mirror and saw the same freckled face looking back, she wondered whether God was listening.

Lizzy tried again. She knelt by the bed, clasped her hands and closed her eyes. *Dear God, I'll be a good girl for the rest of my life if you make me beautiful. Amen.*

Lizzy listed school and church and home and parents, scanning faces and recalling events to find the glitch in her gold star performance. Where could she improve? Had Aunt Victoria spoken to God? Aunt Victoria must have.

Aunt Victoria had a secret phone. At midnight she opened a box, placed the receiver against her ear, dialled G-O-D and waited. Angels sang *Ave Maria*. The deep voice of Our Father answered, 'ello? Aunt Victoria whispered special codes then reported the weekly news. God said, *Uhuh, Mmnn, Oh dear*, and made notes. Victoria the Informant slept straight in her bed that night and every night as one of God's chosen.

Aunt Victoria looked Lizzy's Sunday Best up and down before she said *Hello* and even then it was always with the *Hell* at a higher pitch to the *o*. *Hell* would have matched Aunt Victoria's expression. Aunt Victoria saw the spaghetti that was Lizzy's soul and knew there was nothing to be done about it.

We can only hope, Aunt Victoria said.

Lizzy's Sunday School teacher, Miss Tibble, said that The Almighty Father heard everyone's prayers and answered them. Miss Tibble had never met Victoria. Some people were more deserving of God's attention. They stood in front of Lizzy, four deep, twenty across. There was limited time, overwhelming demands, dire emergencies Lizzy could only guess.

God watches over everything, great and small, Miss Tibble said, shaking a fist full of lace at the listening children.

Seven year old Lizzy sat in Sunday School with her *Methodist Readers Bible* gripped in both hands. She traced the letters along its spine: *Revised Standard Edition*. It combined the Old Testament with the New Testament and Full Colour Maps of The Biblical World at the Time of the Patriarchs. The maps were the best part of the book. Pale pink, sea-green, mustard yellow. Lizzy fingered the pages. *How neat the world is*.

What about the fish in the sea? Does God forsake His friends with fins? Miss Tibble eyed the faces in front of her. Lizzy shook her head, fully believing God forsook the lot. Miss Tibble waggled an arthritic finger. *No. That's right, children. God sees all. That's why you must be good*.

Lizzy prayed that the beam of God's attention would find her doing her very best. The beam itself was a powerful spotlight: a tunnel of light stretching from Heaven to Earth: an encircling light that sapped colour from clothes and heated the top of the head. The very thought of that beam made Lizzy alert to what people said and the expressions on their faces. One mistake could undo months of work if the beam found her making a blunder.

The wind must have blown the wrong way the day Lizzy prayed and promised never to ask for another thing, ever again, if He made her beautiful. It was a northerly wind. God's hotline overheated.

When the northerly blew Lizzy took a lot of handkerchiefs to school in her blue bag. They were clean and pressed and stacked like sandwich bread. Black ink block letters told her they were hers and hers alone. By the end of the day those handkerchiefs were stuffed in pockets. Stuffed up sleeves. Stuffed under her desk. Her nose was pulpy, like a boxer's, forty rounds later.

Pills, potions and creams went into Lizzy's bag. The drugs made her tired. Her ankles disappeared and her stomach bloated. She couldn't focus or follow things. She walked like an underwater diver weighed down with lead suit and copper helmet.

Lizzy wheezed through science, sneezed through maths and scratched through spelling. She couldn't think or listen or learn. Hours passed in blurs. Sometimes she surfaced but mostly she drifted along the bottom of the ocean, not quite awake, not quite asleep.

When the northerly blew at night Lizzy made the old spring mattress gasp. An army of bugs marched through her dreams. She clawed at them as they drilled and tunnelled and jack-hammered. In the morning her wounds were raw, her fingers bloody from the eczema.

When the northerly blew at night Lizzy's muscles strained for air. When the sharp knives slid between her ribs and slowly turned, she counted the reasons for dying. *How easy it would be.*

Lizzy rang the silver handbell on her headboard when her breathing was short and sharp. The bell tinkled into a chasm of night silence. Its cold, metal hull warmed in her hand while she waited.

Someone shuffled, getting out of bed. Slippers scuffed lino. Her mother snapped on a light switch. She glowed in the light, reminding Lizzy of a stained glass window.

In the semi-darkness her mother tipped a bottle into Lizzy's palm. Lizzy placed a pill under her tongue and was careful not to swallow. Grit tickled her throat. Gradually, her lungs struggled less for air. Death slunk away like a ghost at dawn.

Her mother sat at the end of the bed, waiting for the tablet to work, listening to Lizzy's breathing. The symphonic wheeze modulated then moderated: an a cappella whistle, an intermittent phrase, a plaintive note punctuating each exhalation.

Her mother returned to bed. Lizzy dozed. The fleshy tip of a finger pressed the centre of her palm. She opened her eyes to an empty room. Her heart skipped. Had Jesus, in his white robes and halo, tapped out a Morse-Code message? She'd ask Miss Tibble if Jesus made house calls.

Only special people receive visitations, Elizabeth. The meek and the mild. Or poor souls in real need. Miss Tibble's eyes trailed down Lizzy's plump form to her brown shoes from *Olga Ashner's Shoemart* on New Beach Road. *To think Jesus would ... Be humble, Elizabeth, like a good Samaritan, or God will strike you down.*

Miss Tibble often bellowed, which made the children shrink. A pool of saliva gathered along her bottom lip, between crooked, yellow teeth. When Miss Tibble said *strike*, droplets scatter-gunned the air. Lizzy watched their frenzied flight, landing at her puffy feet, sure to turn black if God sent a lightning bolt.

Lizzy prayed and asked God to work faster. Couldn't He see she was doing her best? She smiled all the time, crossed her ankles, brushed her teeth, made her bed, did her school work, washed the dishes, didn't argue with her cousins, said her pleases and thank yous and loved her mother and father as God's Representatives. Didn't that count for something?

Her mother said, *If I was sick like you, I'd never stop complaining. You're the perfect patient.*

Lizzy had seen *General Hospital* and *Marcus Welby M.D.* on TV. Patients were always pleasant despite the pain, didn't complain, took their medicine, never buzzed for a nurse, ate the hospital food, rested back on their white pillows with white faces and waited for the white-coated doctors to save them. Of course it wasn't right that Lizzy was a patient. Perfect girls never got sick.

Dear God, When I'm better will you make me beautiful? Amen.

Her mother made Tuna Mornay and told whoever rang that she was busy being a nurse. She talked longest with Aunt Victoria, telling Victoria what the doctor had said, the symptoms, the signs of gradual improvement. When her mother asked about Jane or Dennis she said, *Oh, I see*, after a very short pause. Aunt Victoria was never one for conversation, not with mortals, at least.

Her mother sat next to Lizzy's bed and read stories from library books. Her voice was clear and correct and oddly gentle. She plucked at the skin under her chin where a beauty spot bobbed. Lizzy couldn't decide if her mother's beauty spot was beautiful or not. It was dark and flat and got bigger the longer Lizzy looked.

Girls at school laughed along with Cindy and pointed their fingers at Lizzy, chanting, *ug-ly! ug-ly! ug-ly!* Lizzy slumped on a hard wooden bench. Her breath came in short gasps, if it came at all. Under her seat, tiny pebbles fought the invasion of vigorous weeds.

After school, Lizzy sat in the Volksey and hung her head. Her face was hot, her double chin blotchy, her breathing philharmonic. Tears pattered her skirt, darker blobs on grey wool. Hair fell forward, hiding her eyes, tickling her nose.

Lizzy hiccupped. *Please don't make me g-go to ... school.*

The Volksy spluttered to life. *You mustn't take it to heart. Water off a duck's back. Don't show you're upset,* her mother said.

Back at school, Lizzy's bottom lip trembled. *Sticks and stones can break my bones* but words sandpapered her skin.

She waited for God's beam to find her.

Lizzy knew that only good things happened to good girls. She also knew that if she was really good, she could make her mother happy. And if she were good and beautiful, she'd be a princess, happy ever after.

Lizzy was to learn the piano because her mother said, *It tunes the mind. Seven is the perfect age to start. Look how long your fingers are.*

Lizzy looked but, compared to her mother's, they were short.

Her mother sat at the piano and played Für Elise. *I'm rusty but.*

Lizzy's father said it was the most beautiful piece. No one played it as well as Faye.

Her mother's back was ram-rod straight. Fingers curled. Wrists up. All the little lines left her face. Her shoulders slanted away from her chest as her fingers stroked the keys.

Something warm and unexpected ran through Lizzy to her mother. Lizzy's breathing deepened. Her belly forgot to be testy. She thought, *I wish I could play like that.*

When Für Elise finished, Lizzy wanted to fling her arms around her mother.

Her mother stood up. *Well then.* She brushed at her slacks. *Time to get dinner on.*

Her mother disappeared before Lizzy raised her arms.

Giggly Sandra leant into Lizzy's ear. *Come to the toilets with me.*

Feeling the fright of Sandra's fingers around her arm, Lizzy nodded.

Sandra led her to the toilet block, past the iron mesh of the gate and into a cubicle.

Sandra giggled as she locked the door with a flick of the wrist.

Turning to Lizzy, Sandra said, *I'm going to look under your skirt.*

Lizzy leant against the concrete wall. Cold seeped through her cardigan. Sandra dived under her skirt. Breath caressed Lizzy's thighs. A finger poked Lizzy's cottontail underpants. The cubicle was very dark.

Sandra's muffled voice asked, *Can I take your pants down now?*

Lizzy wheezed and wheezed and looked about. In a tiny voice she said *no* and uncovered Sandra's plaits. Lizzy lunged for the door and heard it crash behind her as she raced toward the light.

In the middle of the playground Lizzy stopped. She inhaled sweet air and felt the thud, thud, thud of her heart. As soon as it settled she headed for the classroom like a homing pigeon.

Oh, that was beautiful, Mrs Finch said when Lizzy played Silent Night.

Lizzy practised after school, hoping Mrs Finch would say it again.

When you're old enough to pluck your eyebrows, Elizabeth, don't pluck here. Mrs Finch placed a fingernail between her brows. *See?*

Lizzy nodded, eyes focused, bottom lip bitten by two buck teeth.

I plucked there twenty years ago. It's been puffy ever since.

Lizzy wished she was Mrs Finch or, at the very least, Mrs Finch's daughter. She'd paint her nails and her lips and teach the piano on an orange chair. Her husband would bring in a cup of coffee and slices of toast smeared with layers of butter and vegemite. She'd travel to Austria and return with a music box exactly the same as Mrs Finch's, with gold inlay and walnut finish and it, too, would chime The Blue Danube and hold within its crimson trim the flattened wrappers of Mozart chocolates, a concert program of Bullébard's Night by the Corpulent Waters and tickets to gala performances at Craverton Gardens. Her mother would introduce Lizzy to her friends as, *My daughter, the Music Teacher*. Lizzy would teach world-famous protégés and establish a school for the gifted.

We'll never be beauty queens, Elizabeth. Mrs Finch bit into her toast. *But we can cultivate our talent.*

Lizzy covered the rash on her arm. Mrs Finch was wise beyond words.

Faye always said the Reverend Alistair McTavish had been wise beyond words. *He made my heart flutter. His Sunday Sermons were legendary. Everyone wanted to marry him. His voice boomed ...*

She'd sigh. *I hung on every word. Every word. I knew the hymns by heart. The Bible was my guide.*

When Mrs Finch sidled up to Lizzy to demonstrate Song of the Volga Boat Men, Lizzy inched forward so as not to miss a note.

Lizzy dreamt of far away palaces where women wore gowns, gloves and crowns. They had trickling fountains and horse-drawn carriages. They had cats and dogs and rabbits. The women could do whatever they wanted. They ate a lot of ice cream.

Donna had her piano lesson at 4.30 p.m. Lizzy had hers at 5.00 p.m. Lizzy was always early, her mother made sure of that. Lizzy didn't mind.

Lizzy pulled the sliding door, tiptoed into the music room and sat on the velvet chair in the corner. She rested her satchel over her knees and folded her hands on top. She kept very still.

Twelve year old Donna had straight blonde hair. It shone like a mirror, especially around the crown of Donna's head.

Donna played a slow piece of music called the Moonlight. Lizzy imagined the moon and the stars and the deep, dark night sky. And she felt sort of sad but soothed as the sound washed over her. She forgot about Cindy and Sandra. She slipped out of her body and drifted with the music until the music was all there was and not even her breath was of any concern.

After the lesson, sitting in the Volksy, Lizzy said, *I want to play the Moonlight.*

I want! I want! Her mother mocked.

Lizzy shrank.

You must wait until you're good enough.

But that's so long away. Lizzy scratched her arm.

Her mother pressed her lips together. *Patience is a virtue.*

Lizzy looked out the window and searched the darkening sky for the moon. She turned away so her mother wouldn't notice how far her bottom lip protruded.

Lizzy looked forward to Donna's lesson, maybe more than her own. She memorised every note of the Moonlight. She anticipated Donna's graceful fingers, silently urging her on. Lizzy, eyes closed, gently rocked with the current of harmonies circling around the room. This feeling of unfamiliar calmness would stay with her forever.

Things changed when Lizzy's new teacher, Mrs Whitmore, demanded more scales, more practice and more exams. *Mrs Whitmore gets results,* her mother said. *Potential is nothing without practice and perseverance.*

Mrs Whitmore didn't polish her nails, didn't paint her lips, didn't pluck her brows. Her retired husband read Napoleonic History at the local library.

Mrs Whitmore kept her grey hair secured with bobby pins and a modest spray of Glossima 2000. She tapped a ruler or thumped her thigh or beat the piano as Lizzy played. She organised the plum in her mouth to say, *No, that's not right. Rhythm's all wrong ... needs work. Must be better next week.*

She wrote notes in Lizzy's diary with cursive stiff and crammed. *Toccata must improve. Stop playing like an elephant*, which would have been funny if Lizzy hadn't played the Toccata ten times to the whack of Mrs Whitmore's ruler.

You must get this right. Have you practised? Well?

The ruler hovered over Lizzy's hands.

Lizzy's eyes filled with tears. Crotchets and quavers swam about like drowning ants. Lizzy had seen *Fawlty Towers* on TV so she knew about the British and their stiff upper lips. It wouldn't do to cry.

Her mother said, *The lesson's just half an hour, Lizzy. Over and done with in a flash. Silly to get in a knot about it ...* but Mrs Whitmore was never going to put her finger between her brows and tell Lizzy not to pluck there. Lizzy wanted the smell of toast and the comfort of pale, apricot walls and clicking red fingernails on the piano keyboard.

Was God's beam ever going to find her?

Lizzy sat on the tram next to her mother. Her mother talked about her family. Her father had worked for Halligan's. He'd a passion for bricks and cement and construction and planned to become a partner in the company. He'd hit the booze every night.

Doctors are always right. He had to stop.

He'd drink in the pub, slaking his thirst after a hot day labouring, reminiscing with his mates about the war. His shoulders had been broad and strong. She'd felt very proud ... his sparkling eyes and harmless smile. He had a stroke, then a heart attack and died at forty-five.

Someone tapped Lizzy's shoulder. Lizzy swivelled around and found a paper bag thrust under her nose. Cross-eyed, she peered into it.

Want a sweet, dearie?

Lizzy returned the wrinkled smile and picked out a lolly. *Thank you*, she said.

Her mother snatched the lolly, scratching Lizzy's palm. *How many times have I told you?*

Her mother twisted in her seat. *My daughter mustn't accept things from strangers.*

They turned their backs and looked out the window. Lizzy examined her palm, sure she'd been bitten. She'd liked the old woman's crocheted shawl. Her own grandmother would have worn a shawl like that and claimed to have made it with arthritic knuckles and a frozen shoulder.

Lizzy found a chocolate freckle on the doctor's waiting room floor. She dipped her chin and slipped it into her mouth.

Her mother's face turned bright red. *What are you eating?*

A lolly.

Where did you get it?

Lizzy pointed at the floor, her chest a wheeze-box.

Instead of whispering as she always did in a doctor's waiting room, her mother raised her voice, *How could ... ? I've told you about germs. What if someone had seen you?*

Lizzy was more surprised than frightened. It wasn't lady-like to raise the voice in public.

When Lizzy walked down the road to get to school, the local cats and dogs followed her. Dogs wagged their tails and sniffed her heels. Cats rubbed against her shins, pulling down her knee-high socks.

Don't touch, Lizzy, her mother said. *They'll make you sick.*

Birds sang loud, clear songs from the rooftops. Lizzy didn't stop to listen. Her nose itched.

Teacher's Report – General Comments

Elizabeth is a polite, studious, quiet child in the classroom. She is always neat and punctual.

I'm sure her grades would be better if illness didn't keep her so frequently away from school.

Mrs Govan, Grade Four

Miss Tibble said, *Only the good die young.*

She looked at Lizzy and sniffed.

Some sinners, however, suffer this Mortal Coil until they die of old age.

Lizzy prayed for God to take her. She didn't care how. *That'll prove to everyone how good I am.*

Death could even impress Aunt Victoria.

Mrs Whitmore put coins on Lizzy's hands.

You mustn't lunge about, she said. It's so unladylike.

Lizzy practised her scales. Coins fell off. Tension climbed up her arms.

Lizzy went into her parents' bedroom when Faye put the washing on the line. In front of her mother's big mirror Lizzy looked small and wide and fleshy. *Puppy fat*, her mother called it.

Lizzy opened the pink circular lid of her mother's face powder and stuck her finger in. She dabbed the fine powder onto the tip of her nose and smelt the mother she kissed on the cheek. Every morning, her mother used a sponge to apply the powder with long, sweeping gestures, wiping her face away. *War paint*, her mother said.

On the dresser, next to the powder and Elizabeth Arden moisturiser, was her mother's jewellery box. It was chocolate brown with a Mother of Pearl medallion, the size of a twenty cent piece. Lizzy tipped the lid back and peered in. *I haven't the money for frivolous things*, she heard her mother say.

At the very back of the wooden box, under a small canoe-shaped shelf, was a pair of diamante earrings and a matching diamante necklace. Lizzy, mesmerised by the green, gold, blue sparkles, thought of palaces far, far away ...

In the furthest recesses of the jewellery box was a folded piece of paper. The recipe for *Prune Whip* was noted in small, neat handwriting. Lizzy read the list of pitted, chopped prunes, black-strap molasses, honey, lemon juice and egg whites. *Food for Beauty. To keep you young, fit and thin.*

The Duchess of Windsor said that you could never be too rich or too thin. Her mother patted her stomach. *Remember that, Lizzy.*

Lizzy picked up her mother's *Beauty Handbook* and read the front cover. *8th Big Printing. 50c Over 100 detailed illustrations ... 1955.*

At Page 20 Lizzy found diagrams that explained how to exercise the face. *Puff your cheeks out, open your lips and pretend you're blowing a feather placed at nose level.*

Lizzy looked in the mirror and puffed her cheeks. As soon as she opened her lips the air leapt out of her mouth and flattened her cheeks. She extended her bottom lip and blew at her nose. She was supposed to repeat the exercise twenty times. *So much for being beautiful.*

Sitting on the vinyl stool, in the middle of Aunt Victoria's kitchen, Lizzy watched the tap drip. Aunt Victoria used the tap to wet the comb that dampened Lizzy's fly-away hair. Cold water ran down her forehead, cheeks and jaw and splattered her chest.

Aunt Victoria forgot that Lizzy had ears. She dragged the metal comb over Lizzy's scalp and straight down. Lizzy clenched her teeth and kept as still as she could. Her ears twanged. Hair fell like black rain.

Aunt Victoria snipped with the rhythmic precision of a Military March. Scissors squeaked and creaked and pressed the back of Lizzy's neck. Her fringe was chopped high and straight. Aunt Victoria's hands never touched her skin.

There, all done. Aunt Victoria removed the towel from Lizzy's shoulders, held the scissors under the tap and swept the floor.

Damp and light-headed, Lizzy thanked Aunt Victoria for the haircut as her mother said she should.

At home, Lizzy looked in the mirror and burst into tears. She was ugly. She wanted long hair. She begged her mother for a wig.

Nonsense, her mother said. *Be grateful for what you've got.*

I want a Barbie Doll, Lizzy whined in the department store.

I'm tired of your whinging.

I want a Barbie Doll and a parka and a pair of jeans.

Girls at school wore fur-lined parkas and denim jeans. They huddled together at lunchtime and ate pasties and Kitchener Buns. Lizzy, sitting on the outer rim of the circle, eating from her lunch box, felt ashamed about the woollen jumper her grandmother had made.

I can't afford all three. You can have one.

Lizzy didn't stop to think. To have a chance of making friends, a girl had to have the essentials.

A Barbie Doll, she said, expecting her mother to scoff. But her mother didn't scoff and Lizzy got a Barbie Doll with bendable arms and legs.

At the very back of Faye's wardrobe was a stack of books with worn spines and wormy-smelling pages. Lizzy selected the top one, *The Magic of Marriage*, and sat on the floor with it resting on her legs. The cover said, *An Informative Guide to Sex and Marriage*.

Mr Maldram had said *sex* in class once. He'd said, *The Female Sex* when referring to a dolphin they were studying in *Marine World*. The class had sniggered.

Lizzy opened the book and started to read. *The clit-or-is is the main ex-ter-nal seat of the female's sexual feelings, and is very sen-si-tive both to physical and psychic er-o-tic stim-u-la –*

She turned the page.

The hy-men permits the passage of the tip of a finger or the in-tro-duc-tion of an exam-in-ing instrument.

Lizzy slid her index finger under every word.

Page 25 had *Male Genital Organs (Side View)*. She stared at the diagram. The dangling snout marked *Penis*, the acorn *Testis*, the walnut *Pubic Bone*, the millipede *Prostate*.

A little repulsed, Lizzy quickly closed the book. She placed the book where she'd found it and closed the wardrobe door.

When I was pregnant, a neighbour showed me how to change a nappy. Her mother sipped black coffee. She said having a baby wasn't a Sunday picnic.

Her mother squinted through the steam. That was it. Mum was never forthcoming. Your father had to wait outside.

Her mother's eyes darkened. I was terrified. Eighteen. Alone. I could have screamed lots of times.

She scratched under blue rollers. The midwife told me to lie back and let it happen. When it was over she said she was late for her tea break. She handled you a little roughly.

Her mother's eyes lost their focus.

We had you in one hand and Dr Spock in the other.

Teacher's Report – General Comments

Elizabeth is a shy but very mature student who sits at the back of the classroom. She is neat and conscientious and a very good reader. I would like to see her participate more in class activities. She tends to daydream.

Mr Maldram, Grade Five

Do as you're told. Don't be selfish, Lizzy.

Faye's voice sounded similar to Miss Tibble's but without the familiar tremble.

You've got to visit your Grandma and Grandpa.

Lizzy muttered, *It's so unfair*, as she climbed into the Volksy for the boring trip down Trapolin Road to Tumbridge Street. She sulked in the back seat. They went to her grandparents every Sunday for lunch. No one enjoyed the visit, least of all her mother, so why did they have to keep going?

Grandma Glenda always overcooked the Sunday Roast in her old gas oven. She made rubber instead of Port Wine Jelly. Her Cream Puffs, the size of tennis balls, were tuff not puff. Grandpa Joseph always talked about the war and how his horse had saved his life. Grandma Glenda always sat at the piano and sang, *Oh Breathe On Me, Breath of God*. Grandpa Joseph tapped in time to the music using an index finger that had half a nail missing since the war. He always fiddled with his remote control. He'd rigged it up using a slender cord and small wooden box. The wood was stained the same colour as his Jason Recliner rocker. Grandma Glenda always complained about tripping on the cord. Grandpa Joseph always waved away her complaints with a bony hand gripped around his pipe. Grandma Glenda unwrapped her crocheted doll's shoes, stiffened with sugared water.

Done to perfection, Grandma Glenda always said.

Lizzy always wondered how a doll could wear sole-less shoes with two-inch heels. Grandma Glenda packed them away in an old hat box before Lizzy could poke the stiffened fabric.

After lunch, while her mother helped Grandma with the dishes and her father watched the cricket with Grandpa, Lizzy went outside. She sat on the cement, by the oleander. She counted blades of buffalo grass then squashed six hundred and twenty-two ants with her shoe before it was time to go.

Her mother huffed at the invitation clenched in her fist. *Must we go?*

Her father shrugged his shoulders. *I guess so.*

Her mother threw her arms around. *What am I to wear?*

Her father turned his eyes toward the door and stood up to leave the table.

What about Lizzy? Her mother slapped the paper down.

Lines of regret pulled at her father's face. He went to regroup in the loo.

Grandpa Joseph baby-sat because Grandma Glenda couldn't drive. Grandpa didn't tuck Lizzy into bed. He stood in the doorway and said, *You sleep well. Don't be scared. Do you want the light left on?*

Lizzy said *yes*, scared now that Grandpa Joseph mentioned it. The house felt very, very empty. She stared at the light. Would Grandpa Joseph turn into a monster in the middle of the night and snatch her soul? Would the light save her? Should she worry about the half-fingernail and the hole in his bottom lip? She fell asleep mid-worry.

Her mother sat at the piano and played *Für Elise*. The speed of the piece was a lazy *Moderato* instead of a prim *Allegretto*.

Lizzy inched closer, hoping the air would part like the Red Sea.

Her mother stopped playing, sniffed and rested her fingers on the keys.

Mum?

Her mother's hands flew to her face. *Lizzy. You gave me a fright.* Her mother leant away. *What are you doing?*

Lizzy took a step back.

Her mother sniffed again, avoiding Lizzy's eye. *Hay fever. Wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.*

Her mother stood up. *Shouldn't you be outside with your father? Wasn't he helping with your science project?* Her mother's eyes were puffy.

We've finished.

Oh. Her mother pulled at her cheeks and stood up. She gestured toward the stool. *I've warmed it up for you.*

Lizzy sat on her mother's shadow.

Rain and wind rattled the windows.

Lizzy landed like a shuttle on the surface of the moon. She knelt. Pressed an ear to the silt. Listened. Waited. Melted. Sighed.

Lunar music, a lilting fantasy, tickled her inner ear.

Her father had a missing tooth. A hard, gum-coloured plate kept a false tooth in the gap so he could chew corned beef. At night he placed it in a plastic box on the headboard by his pillow.

Lizzy slotted the plate between her teeth and nearly broke it. The tooth made the roof of her mouth bleed.

Money can't buy happiness, Lizzy. Her mother used her commanding voice when she talked about money. *Money is the Root of All Evil.*

Lizzy imagined a plant with evil roots. It had to be a sick plant. Maybe she had evil roots, too, because she was always sick.

Miss Tibble said, *Look to your roots so that ye may rise above them. At the roots Evil must be vanquished.*

Was vanquishing like vanishing?

Every night her mother stood in front of the mirror and rubbed her face with vanishing cream. She said, *We must cleanse, tone and moisturise.*

Mrs Whitmore played the piano. Snatches here and there. One hand at a time.

She told Lizzy what to play.

Lizzy looked at the page. Lines and dots, letters and numbers.

Mechanical fingers obeyed.

When I was single, I'd buy beautiful dresses.

Her mother sipped her coffee. Lizzy had a Milo.

And seamless stockings. She looked down at her legs and traced the spidery veins with her eyes.

Must shave tomorrow. Her mother rubbed her shin with a chafed hand.

I was fifteen when Dame Rose crowned me Miss Heely-On-Tourquet, you know, after the French river? Everyone thought I was twenty-one. I was swamped by photographers. Front page news.

Her mother laughed and cast her eyes around the kitchen, the scrim curtains, gas oven, pantry cupboard with its new wooden handles and special brass hinges.

Front page news, she repeated as her eyes came to rest on the sink. The tap dripped.

Her mother sighed, took another sip of coffee. *I fell in love with a photographer once. I was modelling for Jay Jeeves, the department store. Malcolm took photos ... Always had his camera with him.*

Her mother stared at nothing, lips slightly parted, coffee at an angle. Lizzy examined her mother's face as if through a lens. Thin nose, high cheekbones, narrow forehead. If the photographer had married her mother would he have taken photos of Lizzy?

But he travelled around a lot.

Her mother put her cup down with a *clank* and stood up. *Time to get the dinner on. Your father will be home soon.*

Every day her mother said, *Practice makes perfect, Lizzy.*

She sat next to Lizzy, clapping out rhythms, clicking her tongue, humming the tune. Or she listened from the kitchen, boiling potatoes, grilling meat. When Lizzy stopped playing her mother called, *Play that again.*

Lizzy pulled out another book from the pile at the back of her mother's wardrobe. *A Christian Union* the black letters said.

Page 8, *Man Head of the Home.*

Woman was created to be the helpmate of man. So woman is helper and man is head. Women are naturally designed to be this way. Man wants to marry a homemaker, a comforter, an encourager.

Women in the workforce are contributing to the increase in divorce. Working women throw homes into chaos and usurp the God-given roles of man and woman.

Her mother worked part-time, cleaning Mrs Kammerl's home. Mrs Kammerl had a gammy hip that clicked when she walked. Mrs Harris had three children and needed someone to keep on top of things. Mrs Shalley's eyesight was too poor for ironing and polishing. God couldn't be too upset with her mother, could He?

I earn enough to buy the weekly groceries, her mother said. Your father doesn't mind.

Being a mother is doing one's duty for God, her mother always said. We'd be extinct in a blink if men gave birth.

Grandma Florrie always laughed at that. They shuffled words around, talking about the weather or cooking or the Queen.

Lizzy sat at the kitchen table, listening to the spat of roasting potatoes.

I'd have liked another child, her mother always said. Two's a good number. Look at you and Victoria.

Victoria's the lucky one what with Dennis and Jane, her mother said.

Grandma Florrie always tapped her nails. *Boys are different to girls.*

I wouldn't have minded a boy ... her mother flipped the potatoes. God, in His wisdom, didn't grant us another.

Tut-tut. Grandma Florrie shook her head.

Grandma Florrie's arched eyebrows gave her a look of permanent surprise. One brow extended a little higher than the other, wrinkling her forehead that bit deeper. At any moment Grandma Florrie's brows might collapse with exhaustion.

For all her Scottish stoutness, Grandma Florrie was in perpetual decline. Every week she clenched her hands to emphasise the bulbous swellings around each knuckle. *My knuckles are worse. What do you think?*

Her mother eyed Grandma Florrie's knuckles from a distance, swilling lumpy juices into gravy with a spoon. She said *Oh dear, uh-huh, my goodness.*

Grandma Florrie traced the web of veins on her stockinged legs with the tip of a filed nail. *My legs were beautiful, before ... Can't keep 'em still in bed.*

You spend all day on them, mum. Her mother carved up the roast with her sharpened knife. *No wonder your legs don't like it.*

But they look so ugly. The veins, you know.

Her mother eased the sliced meat back into the gravy, leaning away from the steam.

The doctor's increased my blood pressure pills. Grandma Florrie pinched her crepe-paper skin. It's hard to prune the roses with this.

I can help you, mum.

No, no, got to keep busy.

Grandma Florrie picked up her beer and gulped at froth.

My mouth's been bad. The plates, you know. I'll have no gums soon enough.

Grandma Florrie's healthy teeth had been extracted at the age of seventeen; too small to be fashionable.

Grandma Florrie watched her weight and everybody else's weight as well. *Don't give me too much to eat, dear. I'm on a diet.* A hand rested on her flat stomach. *Shouldn't you be on a diet, Elizabeth? You're heavier around the hips, dear.*

Weight and the Japanese were equally dangerous.

Living alone, Grandma Florrie lay in her double bed, lipstick still applied, rollers cornered under a night cap, cream patted over cheeks and forehead, cross-your-heart bra beneath a terrilene nightie. A thermal spencer kept her warm. If a fire threatened the apartment, she'd grab the framed photo of her husband and the box he'd brought back from The Islands. That empty box, with the tusked, trumpeting elephant on the lid, was *irreplaceable*.

Grandma Florrie liked Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1. *Play Tchaikovsky and I'll know you're good*, she said to Lizzy.

On TV, one Sunday afternoon, a pianist played Tchaikovsky. Hands clutching, stroking, blurring, reaching, tumbling. Hair flying. Forehead scrunched and pleated and beaded with moisture. A wild look in the eye. Lizzy wanted to be that pianist as much as she wanted to be beautiful. But would she ever be good enough?

Faye sat on Lizzy's bed, thumbing through the little pink book with its fake lock.

Lizzy hadn't known what to write in the diary. When Aunt Victoria had given it to Lizzy for Christmas, Lizzy had looked as blank as the pages.

It's to write your thoughts in, Victoria had said.

Lizzy put the diary at the back of a drawer and forgot about it.

Her mother's expensive tablecloth covered the kitchen table when Ron and Victoria visited for tea. The polished silver gleamed under the globe Peter screwed into the light fitting. Her mother's Mr Sheen made Lizzy sneeze. She took a pill.

Her mother consulted *The Complete Book of Etiquette*. Under the heading it read in grey, *For day-to-day living the correct way.*

Things are not worth doing unless they're correct. Her mother said as she flicked through the book.

Ah, here we are. It says, spaghetti and other long, thin pasta requires a fork and large spoon. I hope our spoons are large enough.

We must hold the spoon in our left hand, upright against the plate. Her mother paused. *The fork in our right hand is used to wind a few strands of spaghetti around it by twirling our fork against the spoon. Right.*

Her mother cooked spaghetti in a big, steamy pot. Flies pinged against the screen door. Onion, garlic, bacon and pepper, popped and crackled.

Arms bumped and rubbed around the kitchen table. The overhead fan did nothing to temper the forty degree heat nor the steaming plates of spaghetti.

On the bench, Jane and Dennis slumped over their pasta and loaded up their forks. Lizzy, awkwardly sitting with her left shoulder out of the circle and her right shoulder in, mopped her saucy lips with garlic bread. Mid-swipe, Aunt Victoria asked about school. Forks stopped travelling from plate to mouth.

G-good, thank you, Lizzy said, and a speck of parsley shot from her lips. It landed, huge and green, on her mother's favourite tablecloth. Eyes tracked the flight path.

Dennis giggled.

Lizzy lay on the bed, flat on her back. She stood Barbie on her chest and made the doll walk left then right. Barbie wore red hot pants and a red scarf and red flip flops. High heels, of course. Lizzy fingered the mane of blonde hair. *One day you'll marry Ken and live happy ever after.*

At Aunt Victoria's, Lizzy didn't ask for a pill, or a fan to cool her down, or a glass of water to help her breathe. Lizzy sat on Aunt Victoria's lounge, near the curtained, scrimmed and Venetianed window. The woodcut of a pink-nippled lady, standing on a slatted box, caught the

hazy light. It was dark in that box. At night, a serpent uncoiled and climbed the lady's unclad leg.

The Christian Union was a slender book with uncomplicated words. Lizzy sat on the floor, leant against the side of her mother's double bed and opened it randomly.

Christian marriage is far superior to ordinary marriage.

Rules for a successful Christian Union:

1. *Maintain your Personal Attractiveness: Be pretty or as pretty as you can!*
2. *Eliminate Needless Irritations and Sources of Antagonism: Slovenly habits will drive a wedge between a married couple.*
3. *Do not Harbour Feelings of Resentment. Sensitivity is selfishness and therefore a handicap in relationships.*
4. *Be Loyal. Much help can come in the form of prayer. Ask God for guidance.*
5. *Be Courteous. A husband needs to be reminded that he is loved. When he stretches out for a daytime nap, a little cover over him as he sleeps will sweeten his dreams.*

When Lizzy turned ten, her mother opened *The Beauty Handbook*. Lizzy, *it's time you went on a diet. It says here ...*

Her mother skimmed the page with her left hand. *Five foot four, right. You should be no heavier than one hundred and ... if you're big-boned. You're not big-boned, so you must weigh around ... Oh.*

Her mother looked Lizzy up and down. Lizzy's skin crawled.

You need to lose a stone at least.

Her mother flipped over a few pages. *Calorie list. Here we go. Breakfast. Tomato juice, boiled egg, one slice of whole wheat toast, glass of skim milk and black coffee – not that you can ...*

At school, Lizzy stood by the canteen, smelling pies and pasties and chips.

Lizzy was a rubber dinghy tethered by a thread to her mother's ocean liner. Lizzy navigated the turbulent wake as best she could. If set adrift, she'd surely die.

Her father disappeared into the shed and tinkered with the wiry bellies of radios and TVs and old gramophones. He smoked cigarettes in the kitchen and read science fiction on the loo. He worked as a manager in a stationery shop. He left at 7.30 a.m. and returned home at 6.30 p.m.

Her father had sat in church to hear his daughter sing. Six year old Lizzy had scanned the faces, forgetting to look at Miss Tibble, forgetting the words because her father was there.

I think he does believe in God, deep in his heart, her mother had said, after her father had left for work.

Her mother started sewing. There was money to save. She purchased a second-hand Singer which hummed at a satisfying pitch. She made cotton dresses for Lizzy with shirring and frills and puffed sleeves. She sat on the floor to determine the accuracy of her hems. Lizzy stood for hours it seemed, moving ever so slowly this way and that to please her mother. Her mother's mouth was full of pins.

Her mother stood back to admire her skill. Her eyes brushed Lizzy's skin but didn't look in.

Not many mothers can make clothes.

Pins pricked under Lizzy's arm. Her legs ached. She felt incredibly tired.

Turn around again. Good – there – what do you think?

Lizzy gazed into her mother's big mirror and saw that she was still very wide.

Her mother said, *The best of British luck* as Lizzy left the Volksey.

Lizzy wiped her feet, rang the doorbell and entered Mrs Whitmore's house.

The metronome beat. The piano muttered.

Lizzy sat on the vinyl chair, waiting for her lesson, shivering.

Her mother's front garden had one Australian Native no one knew the name of. Slender leaves dropped in summer. Her father mowed around it, towelling hat pulled low.

The backyard had Jade in concrete pots, branching like an octopus. An apricot tree grew at odd angles and broke limbs in an effort to bear fruit.

Lizzy sat on the cold step near the walkway that led to the Hills Hoist. When a southerly blew she heard the Moonlight whistling with the wind. She made sure no one was watching. She closed her eyes and gently swayed.

Peter wanted to learn the piano when he was a boy but lessons were only for girls. He taught himself Blue Moon. He played it to Faye on their first date. *It was so romantic*, Faye said. *So clever.*

Peter never described himself as clever. At school his hands were whacked by the priests. *Dumb Master Mathews.*

He left as soon as he could.

Peter's mother was only affectionate in front of visitors. *She was two-faced*, was all he said of her.

His father didn't know what to do with present time, or a son. *Mother cleaned the house while Father auctioned sheep at the stockyards.*

Peter was left alone. *I played in the wheat fields three miles south of Murtrie's Ridge.* He found a lizard and bashed it to death with a rock. *I always regret that.*

He left home at seventeen to live in the Big Smoke with his unmarried aunt. His father gave him one piece of advice. *Don't go out with fallen women. You'll get a disease.*

When her mother walked past a mirror she looked over her shoulder to catch herself. She adjusted her hair, pinched her cheeks, lifted her chin, straightened her shoulders, ran a hand along her hips.

Her mother sang, *Your tiny hand is frozen and Let me blossom in your heart* as she scrubbed the bath. Lizzy liked her mother's voice. She imagined her mother on a stage. She'd asked her mother once why she hadn't sung to an audience.

I was never encouraged, her mother had said.

Faye and Peter went to Peter's Christmas Party.

Faye wore the lavender dress with a georgette jacket buttoned at the neck. She had nothing to say to the people Peter worked with. She checked the cutlery for streaks and the wine glasses for lipstick. She kept her legs crossed because one never knew the state of the toilets.

Practice makes perfect.

Mrs Whitmore patted books by Hanon and Czerny.

Don't neglect these. They're good for you.

Lizzy sat in church and thought about God. God on His throne, leaning on a wooden staff, asleep? awake? who could tell? absently scratching His beard, picking His nose, patting His pot belly?

She thought about the Voice of God, The Call, The Summons to The Cloth. He shook The Firmament, said The Word, gave The Nod, stamped The Grand Plan with approval and Bang, Kazam, Kaboom - Earth.

A lot of Pregnant Virgins ran around in the early days.

God decided to secure His dictatorship with Moses on the Mountain, listing off His Shalt Nots. Women were obedient to the decrees, knowing their place in the home, pleasing others, pleasing God; cleaning Parish Halls for Fellowship meetings; passing around bibles and collection plates; making scones and doilies to raise funds for new gutters; pruning the ubiquitous rose garden and placing chipped vases filled with gladiolas and rusty water by the statues of Mary.

I know so much, Lizzy thought. Her heart bumped and bounced as she contemplated God.

If only the statue of Jesus would move. A sign. Something. Something real. Something special.

When she blinked, Jesus blinked too.

Lizzy runs down the road. Not looking behind her. Not looking for her mother.

Lizzy veers into a neighbour's yard. The front door is open. Lizzy ducks in, searching for a place to hide.

In the wardrobe she forces herself to breathe slower. She listens. Waits. Dares to think she's escaped.

The door suddenly opens. There you are.

Her mother grabs Lizzy's wrist. Naughty girl.

Her mother drags Lizzy home, blocking her ears to Lizzy's tears and protests.

Every night her mother brushed Lizzy's hair. *One hundred strokes to make you a princess.*

Lizzy dreamt of palaces ...

I wish I lived in a cave, her mother said one night, startling Lizzy out of her dream.

Lizzy wondered about that for days. Her mother in a cave. Alone. Lizzy shuddered. If her mother left, what would Lizzy do?

After six months of Mrs Whitmore's piano lessons, her mother asked, *What's wrong with you, Lizzy? You're playing like an elephant.*

Lizzy, leaning over the piano keyboard, swung her legs and scratched her arm.

Don't even think about giving up. You'll regret it. Years of work and years of fees down the drain.

Lizzy picked at a sore and watched the blood trickle down her arm.

Your father would have given his eye-teeth to learn when he was your age. Keep it up - come on - get your practise done before dinner.

Lizzy spent the next twenty minutes thumping through Für Elise at a breakneck *prestissimo*.

A baby blackbird looked up at her; yellow beak opening, downy wings drooping, little chest panting. Lizzy put down her school case and library bag. She turned around to see if her mother was watching but her mother had gone inside. The day was already hot.

Are you lost? Can you fly little birdie?

Carefully, she held the bird. Feathers fluttered against her palm. Tiny claws clutched a finger.

Lizzy walked over to the shade and released the bird. She nodded and said, *Goodbye*. The bird scuttled and blended with the shadows.

Lizzy wiped her hand on a strip of grass to keep her mother happy.

... one and-a two and a-three ... No, no, NO ... try again now, get it right ... Ready? Okay, concentrate ...one and-a two and a-three ... STOP. Can't you see that dotted crotchet? Try harder ... It's six-eight time remember? Three beats to a dotted crotchet ... Count with me ... Come along ...

Mrs Whitmore's bust of Beethoven scowled down at Lizzy. Lizzy willed herself not to cry.

Lizzy was put on a bed and wheeled away. In a room full of machines, wires, tubes, lights and instruments, a doctor slid a needle into her arm. He said, *You're very brave, Elizabeth.*

Nurses transferred Lizzy's limp body to a metal table on the count of three. The table was cold and hard. Her hospital gown flapped open. Someone pulled it down. Lizzy had to hold still while a box loomed and zoomed overhead.

Lizzy slid between the tight, white sheets of a hospital bed. She was offered a paper cup of tropical cordial. Lizzy sighed and fell asleep.

Her mother sat beside Lizzy's bed. Faye told someone that Lizzy hadn't slept for days. Why had Lizzy stopped vomiting?

A deep voice, like the Voice of God, said, *Vomiting is a sign of over-prescribing. We'll look at the recommended dosage.*

When Lizzy woke the next day, she saw God's angel.

The angel was wearing pink and had a halo. Shiny hair swirled in a bun at the back of the angel's head. Lizzy felt warmed right through when the angel smiled into Lizzy's eyes.

You're God's angel, Lizzy said.

How sweet. The angel stroked Lizzy's bare arm with a warm sponge. Only angels touched people that way.

You're not supposed to tell?

It'll be our little secret. The angel winked at Lizzy.

Lizzy didn't see the angel again but felt better when she thought of her.

I want to be a nurse when I grow up, Lizzy said to her mother as they drove from the hospital.

Don't be silly, Lizzy, her mother replied. *Cleaning up vomit and bedpans and blood ... you wouldn't last a day.*

At home, walking into the bathroom, Lizzy collapsed on the cold tiles.

The hospital recommended a specialist who was pioneering the treatment of asthma. Dr A. Paull was experimenting with some sort of spray.

On the new medication, gravity lost its pull. Puffiness deflated. Lizzy dropped the pounds.

Bickies returned to the barrel.

In the shoe box, under other shoe boxes, Lizzy kept her treasures. A beaded necklace from Jane. A flattened carton of strawberry milk. A shell, perfectly fanned and purple-pink. A small stalactite from Kangaroo Island that she wasn't supposed to have taken. A black and white feather. A plastic yellow earring. An autumn leaf dried flat at the very bottom by a tatty novel with a horse on the front cover. An empty jar of vanishing cream. Fantale lolly wrappers. A movie pass to *Wind in the Willows*.

The last treasure was Lizzy's Barbie Doll. She lay it on top. Blonde hair and red hot pants and long legs covered with a handkerchief. Barbie was waiting for Ken.

Lizzy was a concert pianist playing Tchaikovsky. She flung her head and her arms and her fingers over the keys. She hit notes and chords at random. Sound grew, mad and discordant. Cameras captured her perspiring brow, wild grin, determined frown. The audience sat on the edge of their seats. Breathless. Enraptured.

Lizzy! Her mother yelled. *Lizzy! Stop that noise.*

Time for a commercial break.

Teacher's Report – General Comments

Elizabeth is quite an introverted student. She doesn't say much in the classroom. However, I believe her to be perceptive and bright. Her best subject is English but I hear she is quite talented at the piano. These creative pursuits should be encouraged.

Mr Sexton, Grade Seven

Lizzy sat at Aunt Victoria's piano. Jane had insisted.

I want you to play. Come on. You never play to me.

Why don't you play? Lizzy asked. *You have lessons, too.*

I'll play after you play.

Jane sifted through a pile of music books on top of the piano and pulled out a Grade Three album. *I've just started a Minuet by Bach. My teacher reckons I'm getting good.* Jane hugged the book to her chest.

Lizzy's fingers locked together in her lap. Furniture polish, recently applied, made her head hurt. The white teeth of the piano dared her to upset their alignment.

Come on, Lizzy, Jane whined. *Don't be a scaredy-cat.*

All right, Lizzy said, releasing her fingers and flinging them at the piano. Jane stepped back. The Moonlight rolled across the worn carpet and bounced about the walls. Lizzy warmed to the task, plying the keys with graceful confidence. An invisible stream, soft and tingling, flowed along her arms. She tilted her head and leaned into the keyboard. Her face had a far-away look, listening, as she was, to every note blending with the next and the next until she was the sound and only the sound.

The Moonlight finished on a quiet chord. Lizzy released the keys as the music drifted and died. Jane's book fluttered to the floor. She stared at the keys where Lizzy's hands had been.

Are you okay? Lizzy slid off the stool.

Jane jerked her head up and down, bending to retrieve her music. She slapped the book on top of the piano.

Aren't you playing now?

No. Jane turned away. *I'm starved. Let's eat.*

After tea the phone rang. Her mother answered. She said, *Oh dear ... Oh no ... That's terrible ... I'm very sorry. How upsetting. I'll speak to her ...* and hung up.

Something bad had happened. Her mother's eyelid pulsed. Lizzy shrank.

You silly girl. Her mother's lips were white.

Lizzy lowered her head.

Jane's upset. She's been howling all night. How could you brag like that?

Brag like what? Lizzy whispered.

Don't act innocent with me ... Showing off ...

Lizzy's stomach hit the floor.

Jane never wants to play the piano again. See what you've done?

Lizzy's mouth went dry.

Don't ever, ever, ever ... Her mother wagged her finger at Lizzy. *Go to your room and have a big think about yourself.*

Lizzy couldn't move.

Go on ... I'm sick of the sight of you.

Lizzy's bones collapsed like falling cards.

You don't want to be taller than a man, Lizzy. Her mother wore the blue housecoat she cleaned in. *You'll never get married.*

Her mother took Lizzy to another specialist. *If he's like Dr Paull, he'll be able to help you.*

Lizzy had heard about a girl who'd had her legs shortened. How did she hide the scars? She'd have to wear trousers for the rest of her life.

Lizzy sat next to her mother in an office that overlooked the city. Behind a wide desk, a white-coated man with a receding hairline and double chin examined some papers in front of him.

How old is your daughter, Mrs Mathews?

Twelve.

Has she started menstruating?

No, not yet.

Hmm, a late developer. He pushed his spectacles up a thin nose and rubbed a bushy eyebrow. Lizzy was a fly on the wall.

The therapy I recommend is not usually prescribed pre-menstruation. We'll do some tests and see.

The Specialist asked Lizzy to undress, wear a green cotton gown and lie on a couch. Would he measure her legs? Did she have any say about how much to cut?

With rubber gloves on, the Specialist parted the skin between her legs and looked down his nose at something there. Lizzy flinched. She saw her body as she hovered above it. She floated past her mother, sitting in the corner. She sailed out the window and disappeared.

Lizzy was given a prescription for some sort of pill. Overseas, poor girls like Lizzy were popping them too.

It's an epidemic, the Specialist said.

Her mother tut-tutted.

Lizzy had to watch her weight. The pills made it easy to gain unwanted pounds.

Expect a period soon. The Specialist nodded at Lizzy.

Lizzy wheezed and nodded back.

Lizzy stood on the bathroom scales morning and night. Her mother stopped putting gravy on the Sunday Roast. The bickie barrel was emptied again. *We don't need the pounds now, do we, Lizzy?*

Lizzy refused to eat the cup cakes the class made in Home Economics. She cried in her bedroom for no reason at all. Her mother called her *moody* over and over again. *The curse of being a woman. I can't wait 'til menopause,* her mother said.

Lizzy's hair fell out in great clumps under the shower. Her mother altered Lizzy's skirts as Lizzy's hips grew wider and her legs grew longer and longer ...

At first a pane of glass went up. Then a box of glass. Then a block of glass. Sound-proof, shatter-proof, even bullet-proof.

Mrs Whitmore beat her ruler but Lizzy didn't flinch.

Lizzy heard whispered conversations in the loos where the booby girls smoked. She stood by the door needing to pee but, fearing a teacher would catch her, she waited for the girls to leave. Her mother would surely have a fit if Lizzy were reported smoking, guilty by association. Her mother had frequent rages that were never referred to. They were like scrub fires in gusty wind. Doors would be slammed or nearly wrenched off their hinges. Pans would clatter. Her mother's voice would crescendo and then wail in despair. Drawers would be pulled and the contents flung on the lino tiles. Lizzy wasn't sure what sparked a fire. She hid in her bedroom and cried. However, on the issues of smoking and sex before marriage, her mother was very clear about the sinfulness of both.

In the loos, Top News was always who was petting who. *He unhooked my bra with one hand. I couldn't stop him from - you know ... (giggle, giggle).*

Having a boyfriend made them beautiful and, if their boyfriend was captain of the footy team, everyone knew they were the most beautiful.

Lizzy wasn't included in the club of booby girls. She stood outside the circle, crossing her arms over a chest that no boy would want to fondle.

The booby girls spread rumours.

Sandra's such a slut. She's gone all the way with Jeffrey. That's after breaking it off with Wayne. She'd go to bed with any guy that said he loved her.

Rebecca shook her blonde head and handed the cigarette to Julie. *But if Dreamy Dave said he loved me, well ... but Dave's going out with Pru. Maybe she's not as sweet and innocent as we think.*

Did you hear about Nola getting knocked up? Julie passed the cigarette to Belinda. She was slack with that creep Kevin in his red Kombie. God knows what's under his nails after the meatworks. She's leaving school next term.

Booby girls brushed their hair in the toilet block mirrors, hoisted their uniforms over waistbands for maximum leg exposure and blew kisses at each other before class. Lizzy, left behind, tried to capture the lucky air on her cheek before running to the loo.

Aunt Victoria stared at Lizzy's chest. *You're finally developing, aren't you, Lizzy?*

Her mother said, *Better put darts in the bodice of your new dress. To make room.*

Lizzy wanted to wear a tent for the next fifty years.

Languishing in a wheelchair, Lizzy recuperated from a near-fatal fever. Luscious curls cascaded over her shoulders. Her handsome hero pushed her around the garden, occasionally stroking the long tresses of her hair with tender fingers. In the middle of the garden, brimming with blossom and roses, he knelt upon his knee and declared that he couldn't live without her. His life would be worthless if he lost her. He clutched her hand and kissed it. *Marry me.*

She held up her arms and fell forward into his with a *yes* and a deep kiss. Happy ever after.

Overnight, Lizzy went red and blank and stuttery.

For goodness sake, Lizzy, say what you mean, string your words together, open your mouth, her mother said.

Lizzy didn't know which was worse: being naked in front of her mother or being naked in front of a stranger.

Hmm, the assistant said, squinting at the numbers on the tape measure, *she might be ready for a trainer bra. You're a big girl in other respects.*

When the assistant left, her mother said, *You know bras are important things, Lizzy. They stop you flopping about. You won't sag when you're older.*

If bras were so important, why were women burning them in London? Faye and Florrie had discussed it, shaking their heads about moral decay.

Things were better in the Fifties, her mother said. *We knew what was what back then.*

Her mother kept her voice low. *When a man's waterworks go into a woman's private parts a baby is made. Love is very important. Marriage is even more important. Sex before marriage is a sin in the eyes of God.*

A man wants to be a father, her mother said. *And it fulfils a woman's biological destiny.*

Lizzy would be a Bride of Christ. Christ, of course, didn't have waterworks, except when it rained, but that never made anyone pregnant, well, not that she knew, maybe it did.

Lizzy wrapped a towel around her head as her handsome hero, on hands and knees, begged her not to flee to the nunnery.

A tube of pimple cream rolled around Lizzy's lunch box. Pimples turned quickly into acne, her mother said, and acne scarred the face for life. Lizzy couldn't afford to be lax about pimples, not when God was ignoring her.

No one likes a selfish person, Lizzy. Think of your Great Aunt Gwen. No children. A husband she hardly deserves. Never cooks a square meal. Can't see the marriage lasting. What will happen then? Who would want her?

Great Aunt Gwen, blue rinse fading, stared at bare walls in a cold room. Lizzy shivered and thought, *How terrible.*

Childless women are selfish women. Her mother's lips tightened. *Self-absorbed. Missing out.*

Do what people ask you to do and you'll get on, her mother said. *People don't like troublemakers.*

Lizzy kept out of trouble. She saw it coming. A dust storm on the horizon; taller than Cindy, colder than Aunt Victoria, smellier than Grandma Glenda's mothballs. Lizzy kept her head down, her arms locked to her sides, her voice soft. If she stood not far from the mob but not too close, all trouble could be avoided.

We can't have Eileen coaching netball, Miss Tibble said. Such a bad example. Living in sin.

A needle pierced Lizzy's heart. Netball was the only sport Lizzy played, given her health. As Goal Keeper, with one third of the court to call her own, she towered over the opposition as they shot for goals. Lizzy was the best Goal Keeper Eileen said she'd ever coached.

When Lizzy had an asthma attack, Eileen said, *There, there. Have a rest now, Lizzy. We'll need you next quarter.*

Lizzy's team won two Grand Finals. The 1973 and 1974 trophies gathered dust in the Parish Hall. Pennants and trophies dated back to the '50s. Nothing had been won in the '60s.

Lizzy didn't understand what living in sin meant.

It means she's having sex before marriage. Jane was wiser for being two years older than Lizzy.

Lizzy turned white. How could someone as good and caring and kind as Eileen be a sinner?

Lizzy never saw Eileen again, except in her dreams. Eileen, bound in ribbons, drifted along the bottom of the sea wearing a netball tunic.

Mrs Whitmore said, *Keep your eyes straight ahead. Never look down at the keyboard.*

Poor Miss Bray needed a lift to Sunday sermons but no one wanted to help. Something had happened to her voice. It rattled and stuttered and made her mouth spasm. She smelt of mouldy hay and mothballs.

Mrs Mathews, would you drive Miss Bray to church? Miss Tibble asked. *The poor dear battles on the bus and her hearing's not the best.*

Faye smiled her best Christian smile and said she would. At home, she complained. *Why do I have to? At least six other women are more conveniently situated.*

One Sunday, Miss Bray got out of Faye's Volksy and stumbled on the curb. Miss Bray fell back and used the car to steady herself just as Faye shut the door. The door landed squarely on Miss Bray's thumb. Miss Bray gave a strangled cry. Faye shrieked and took forever to get to the door handle. Released, Miss Bray sobbed like a baby bird hungry for worms. She cradled her bulbous thumb to her chest and rocked on her heels. Faye patted Miss Bray's shoulder. Miss Bray keened harder and stepped away.

Miss Bray wore a bandage for weeks. Her bones so slow to heal.

Faye and Lizzy stopped going to church. *God is in our hearts and that's all that matters,* Faye said.

Faye never stepped outside the house Sunday mornings. *What will the neighbours think?*

Lizzy went into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. She leaned in to whisper,
Mirror, mirror on the wall, am I the fairest of them all?

Yes you are, dear Lizzy, the mirror purred.

Lizzy grinned. Someone was talking to her at last.

During the exam, Lizzy's hands shook, her knees knocked, her head thud, thud, thudded in time with the music. She mashed the Minuet and the Clementi. She ploughed through scales and arpeggios and chromatics and splashed her books on the floor.

I never. Want. To do. Another. Exam, she sobbed outside the room.

Shhh, shh, stop your blubbering, the Examiner will hear. Her mother pulled Lizzy by the arm, away from the door. *Such melodrama.*

Her mother's left eyelid pulsed. *It's never as bad as you think.*

Mrs Whitmore pursed her lips.

Let's go home, Lizzy. Mrs Whitmore has other students to attend to.

Lizzy headed out the door.

Thank you, Mrs Whitmore, her mother said, following Lizzy.

In the car, her mother yanked the ignition and jerked the gear stick as the rhythm in Lizzy's head thudded on. *Such a silly performance,* her mother said. *What on earth is wrong?*

Six weeks later Lizzy received her exam result. Typed on a certificate were the letters A+. The examiner had written *Extraordinary Talent* and *Keep up the good work* in spidery handwriting.

Lizzy was stunned. There had to be a mistake, a mix up.

Mrs Whitmore must think I've raised a prima donna. Her mother held the certificate.

Thank your lucky stars you're good at something.

Elizabeth's feet abut a void.

To fall is to know. To fall is to know.

She aches for the fall.

Falling yet flying.

She opens her arms, closes her eyes and takes a breath.

She leaps into the air and plummets but wakes before she hits the ground.

Lizzy stopped taking lessons with Mrs Whitmore in her third year at High School. Her mother said she'd heard of a really good teacher at Lizzy's new school. *Miss Nugent will develop your talent.*

Mrs Whitmore's parting words were, *Trust in the Lord. He will keep you safe.*

Mrs Whitmore sent Lizzy Christmas cards of the Three Wise Men. Mrs Whitmore phoned Faye to ask how Lizzy was going. During the conversation Faye's face stiffened. She said, *Very good, thank you.* What more was there to say?

One year Mrs Whitmore told Faye that her daughter had committed suicide. Mrs Whitmore's daughter left behind a husband and two children. Faye said she was sorry, over and over.

I didn't know what to say. What a terrible, terrible thing. Faye rested her head in her hands. *No parent should bury a child.*

Lizzy felt very sorry for Mrs Whitmore. Mrs Whitmore's daughter hadn't trusted in the Lord.

Lizzy played the piano more than she'd ever done while learning with Mrs Whitmore. Lizzy played the Moonlight over and over again.

Not the Moonlight again, her mother called from the kitchen. *Shouldn't you be doing your homework?*

It was always the Moonlight. Lizzy lost herself to the rapture.

Lizzy sealed her shoebox full of treasures with sticky tape. She used a whole roll. It looked like an Egyptian Mummy when she finished.

She placed the box at the back of the wardrobe. Barbie lay waiting. Only Ken had the muscle to get through the tape.

The new school was supposed to promote Lizzy's musical ability. She'd sing Requiems in the choir, perform on the piano at lunchtime, accompany Violet on her double bass, study Shostakovich, Stravinsky and Prokofiev and learn composition with pocked Mr Mugg who wore bow ties from Burbridges.

Lizzy followed tall Mr Krysler into the classroom. He stooped in front of the class and introduced Lizzy. Lizzy did her best to smile. *First impressions count*, her mother had said.

Lizzy sat next to Prefect Violet. Her mother had said, *You'll make friends soon enough*.

Mr Krysler sidled up to Lizzy and placed his hand on her shoulder. *See you in Maths*.

Lizzy shivered and pulled away. She'd seen *The Addams Family* on TV and Mr Krysler reminded her of Lurch.

Lizzy regretted fighting with her mother for an above-the-knee uniform. Violet's devotees had below-the-knee uniforms.

Teachers said that Violet had potential to be Prime Minister, or run for Presidency, that is, when Violet turned Australia into a Republic. Lizzy would vote for Violet at the Ballot Box and wave banners sewn with peace signs. Violet was a pacifist. She refused to kill ants or flies or millipedes. *They can't help being pests. Why kill things just 'cos they inconvenience us?*

She held court with her stories of animal abuse. *In the abattoirs they electrocute pigs and cows and sheep ... you can taste their fear in the meat*, she said. *Never eat meat. Never.*

Pigs are intelligent, sensitive ... and on she went. One day she said, *Cattle trucks look like the railway carriages the Nazi's used to transport Jews to concentration camps.*

All the devotees gasped in horror. Violet smiled. She loved being radical.

Lizzy forgot about diets, hip-width and hairstyles. She forgot about boys and boobs. She went to school eager to sit with Violet, to wonder how Violet could be Violet when no boy could possibly like her. Violet was the first to put her hand up in class. She flapped her wrists around when she talked. She never apologised for offending someone. She relished a heated debate. In front of school assembly she articulated each memorised word of her speech without hesitation. Lizzy sat in the audience waiting for the big mistake that would unplug Violet's confidence. None came. Violet's performance was always perfect.

Faye thought the new school was a success. Violet was *a good influence*. But Faye didn't know what Lizzy knew. Violet was more dangerous than any booby girl Lizzy had ever met.

Violet declared her love in Year 11. She wanted Brian. Coke-drinking, Monty Python-addicted Brian. All eyes followed Brian. If Brian was watching anything it was TV. Skinny, weedy Brian ... black hair falling, covering his eyes ... the brightest boy in school. Violet called it a Meeting of Minds but, around Brian, Violet was vapid.

Lizzy withdrew her vote from the Ballot Box.

Miss Nugent lived with her mother in a cream brick bungalow near the beach. Lizzy tried to imagine Miss Nugent in bathers and had to give up. Miss Nugent wore stockings and trousers and buckled shoes, gloves and skivvies and scarves.

Miss Nugent made Lizzy stand in a corner, facing the wall.

Close your eyes. Breathe. Imagine hot chocolate poured over your head, all the way down to your toes. Allow your body to melt.

Tension cuts off the sound, reduces the tone. Minimises beauty.

Miss Nugent tapped Lizzy's shoulder. *You have to play from your stomach, not from your shoulders.*

Sometimes Lizzy played.

Stop, Miss Nugent commanded. *You play with too much effort. Trust the keys.*

Lizzy tried again.

No, no, no. Miss Nugent sighed. *Less effort.*

Miss Nugent sat at the piano and played. *See? Music can't move through you unless you're relaxed.*

Most importantly ... music must move the performer so that it can move the listener.

Miss Nugent pointed at the wall. *Back you go.*

Jane turned seventeen and dated Nick, a Sales Rep for a soft drink company. He drove a dark grey Statesman, had shoulder-length hair and sported a snake tattoo on his right forearm.

According to Faye, Nick was short on prospects, short on height and short on planks.

In short, he was a no-hoper.

Victoria and Jane shouted behind the closed door of Jane's purple bedroom almost every night. *She's only seventeen.*

Faye huffed. *One thing leads to another, what with Nick owning a car.*

The harder I push, the more determined she is to keep him, Victoria said, picking at Faye's lace table cloth with short, shaped nails. *What can I do?*

No tattooed boy, Statesman aside, was worth a war with Victoria.

Jane stretched the romance over one, tortured year. When she broke it off Nick rebelled. He'd rev the car's throaty engine outside her house at 8.00 p.m. Three times he'd roar past, screeching the brakes at each end of the street.

Uncle Ron said, *Tomorrow night I'm calling the police.*

Nick never showed up again.

Lying in bed, Lizzy thought about sex. Could Jane have done it with no-hoper Nick? Lizzy squirmed. She'd get married one day and learn all the secrets. She'd deliver her babies in a hospital with her legs strapped open. Doctors would peer between them and avoid her eyes. Lizzy dreamt about birthing a worm.

Music is not about repeating what is written, memorising by rote, Miss Nugent explained. *Music is written to express something. It is our duty as pianists to find that meaning and convey it to the audience.*

Lizzy nodded, thinking of the Moonlight.

At the school formal, Jim sat on the edge of the dance floor, bent forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped in front of him. His blue eyes watched Lizzy's hips gyrate to the beat. He forgot to blink.

The intensity of Jim's gaze turned Lizzy into a smouldering mallee root.

Don't have a holiday on the rests. Stay attentive. Miss Nugent demonstrated. *Be a lightning conductor for the mood. Use the thread of your intention and the audience will follow.*

Miss Nugent's hands had an electrical aura.

Silence is as important as sound. Miss Nugent pointed at the wall.

Lizzy stood in the corner.

Listen to the silence, Miss Nugent said.

Lizzy's asthma vanished. It was never supposed to happen. The doctors said that some lucky children grew out of asthma as their lungs matured, but Lizzy had the type of chronic problem that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Even Lizzy's skin cleared up.

Her mother took hold of Lizzy's arm and said, *I've never seen your skin look so – so -*
She rolled Lizzy's arm this way and that. *Normal.*

Her mother turned away. *That's one for the books, after all those years ...*

Miss Nugent made Lizzy learn Liszt's Concert Study in D Flat Major and Brahms's Rhapsody No. 2 and Debussy's Engulfed Cathedral.

You must learn to play all three movements of the Moonlight Sonata, Miss Nugent said. *The first movement is fine for Grade Three but no good for Grade Eight.*

But I'm Grade Seven, Lizzy blurted.

Miss Nugent frowned. *I'm going to extend you well and truly beyond, my dear.*

Miss Nugent sat at the piano to demonstrate. The second movement of the Moonlight Sonata, the Allegretto, was bright and sweet and lilting. *A piece of cake,* Lizzy thought. Then Miss Nugent turned the page. Lizzy saw a collision of notes. Miss Nugent's fingers blurred. Semiquavers flooded Lizzy's brain. Miss Nugent's piano bowed under the weight of the chords. Miss Nugent heaved and crouched and sprang about the keyboard, caught on fire.

Her mother leant over Lizzy's shoulder to take a look at Lizzy's music. *I told you persistence pays. Look what you can play now.*

Lizzy saw a mass of black notes blurring on the page.

Jim was six foot four. Lizzy was five foot nine. If she hadn't taken the pills Lizzy would have been six foot one.

You're too ... Miss Nugent squinted. *Rhythmic.*

Lizzy scratched her head.

It's as if you've been beaten by a stick.

Miss Nugent wasn't one to flail a ruler.

Call upon your innate rhythm. Miss Nugent tapped her chest. *Your heart is not mechanical. It's ... magical.*

Miss Nugent pointed at the wall:

Listen to your heart, she said sotto voce.

Use the pads of your fingers for Debussy. Mute the tone for an impressionistic style. Cling to the keys.

Lizzy flattened her fingers. Dropped her wrists.

Good, Miss Nugent said. Listen to the tonal colour. Feel the vibrations. Sensitise your fingers.

Lizzy listened through the skin of her fingers. Coaxing the sound to comply with the music. Blending her intention with the composer's instructions.

Her arms were the branches of a tree responding to the breeze.

Primary school children from all over the State were coming together to sing Christmas Carols. High school students would break the monotony of songs by playing their musical instruments. The audience would be two thousand strong. Auditions were held to select who would play at the Festival Theatre. Miss Nugent said, *Audition you must, Elizabeth.*

Lizzy auditioned thinking of Rodney and Yasmina and Jacqueline who were all much better than her. She hadn't a hope. Her fingers shook. The piano was no friend to the Presto Agitato of the Moonlight. It vibrated and shrieked and thundered. The pedals squeaked. Lizzy laboured over the keys, ploughing on as best she could. It was nothing short of a complete disaster.

Rodney won. He'd played Chopin's Valse Brillante at the audition with breath-taking flair. It'd dazzled the judges. Lizzy was both crushed and relieved. Hugely relieved. Slightly crushed. Far better that Rodney faced two thousand people. Rodney would recite Chopin with such flaying of arms and blurring of fingers that he'd be the highlight of the night. Other musicians, playing the cello and violin and trumpet, would have none of Rodney's sparkle.

The big event was less than a week away when Rodney came to school with his arm in plaster. He'd broken it during a game of hockey, his great love. The music school was shocked, dismayed. Mr Mugg had to ring up the School Board and break the news about their star.

Rodney, pale yet defiant, said, *I'm not fussed*. More opportunities were expected in future.

Later that day, Mr Mugg stopped Lizzy in the passageway of the music school by calling her name and raising his right forefinger skyward. *You're on*, he said, smelling something unpleasant.

Lizzy stared.

You're replacing Rodney.

Lizzy pushed her fingers into her chest. *Me?*

Mr Mugg straightened his bow tie from Burbridges and scowled. *Yes, you, my dear. You were runner-up.*

Lizzy could have collapsed. Cold dread rolled over her. Before she thought to ask another question, Mr Mugg had gone.

Immersed in gut-gurgling fear, Lizzy hardly slept. On an endless loop, the Presto agitato thundered through nightmares of finding herself gagged and bound to railway tracks. At any moment, the train would rattle round the bend and kill her.

Performance is about the here and now, Miss Nugent said. *A feeling of oneness with the instrument is the ultimate requirement.*

Lizzy frowned.

In other words, Miss Nugent said. It's a tricky business.

The Stage Manager signalled. *You're next. Ready?*

Lizzy fixed her eyes on the exit sign.

He held the curtain aside and said, *Break a leg.*

Lizzy's feet were blocks of ice. Every step took an eternity. Spotlights sapped her of colour. The top of her head grew hot. *God's beam.*

The piano erupted under her fingers and it was hard to tell whether the sound was coming out of the piano or coming out of Lizzy.

Afterwards, Miss Nugent gave Lizzy one of her rare, vague smiles.

Remember ... You don't need more willpower, more discipline, more stamina, Miss Nugent said. All you need is more awareness.

In other words, Miss Nugent tapped her jaw. Listen.

Lizzy passed her matriculation. She auditioned at the Conservatorium because Miss Nugent said she should.

Her mother didn't object. *I always wanted a musician in the family.*

Her mother rummaged through her dressmaking patterns. Lizzy's heart sank as she thought about the hours of standing and pivoting to come in front of her mother's big mirror.

I'll make you a dress, her mother said, expecting Lizzy to smile. *It's good to look the part.*

Lizzy played Liszt's Concert Study in D flat Major to three people sitting in the middle of a big hall. She had difficulty warming to the piano, the hall, the people, the yellow dress that flared iridescent and blinded her. Her shoulders tensed. Her belly knotted. She pressured the keys to perform, not able to shake the cold.

When Lizzy finished, a dusty, bored-looking man in a brown corduroy suit said, *That will be all, thank you.*

Lizzy left the stage slightly hollowed out. Mushy in the head. She couldn't remember playing a note.

Seven weeks later an envelope arrived addressed to Lizzy. Lizzy opened it in the kitchen. Before Lizzy had a chance to comprehend what the letter said, her mother clapped her hands.

You've done it.

I've done it?

Your future's decided, her mother said.

Lizzy looked at the letter and tried to feel as certain.

Knew you could do it, her father said, confident after the fact.

Miss Nugent's parting words were, *Don't try to please. Just be.*

Lizzy tilted her head in the effort to understand.

In other words, Miss Nugent said. *Become the music.*

Jim studied at university to be a doctor. He wanted to help people. Work with people. Have his own practice.

His sights were set on a career in medicine. Medicine and Lizzy. That's what he wanted.

No one wore makeup at the Conservatorium. No one had smiles or suntans or fashion-sense. Students wore buttoned up shirts and Roman sandals. Lizzy tried to fit in. She was shy enough and conservative enough. Her sandals glided along the lino corridors. She kept her brows drawn together to respect the fact that life at the Conservatorium was serious.

Mr Longland was Lizzy's teacher. His grey moustache twitched when Lizzy said *hello*. He wore grey suits and grey ties and grey scarves. He played Chopin's Ballade No.3 from a grey Urtext and never missed a note.

Impeccable technique, someone said at his annual recital.

Lizzy shivered.

In the Conservatorium's Common Room Lizzy overheard how a student went to a doctor to overcome nerves. *The doctor fixed her up. No worries.*

Better than going to a shrink. The violinist smirked. *If you can't handle the heat ...*

Lizzy consulted the local doctor and told him about her nerves.

Performance anxiety, he said, noting it down in his file. *This will help.*

He pulled out a drawer in his desk and Lizzy caught a glimpse of a chaotic assortment of packets. His slender hand dived into the mess. *Ah, here they are. Beta-blockers. The Rep gave me sample freebies. They're on the house.*

He placed the box in front of Lizzy. Were his fingers trembling? *I use them myself, giving speeches, you know.*

Lizzy nodded, not able to catch the doctor's eye.

Despite the pills, nerves continued to ransack her confidence. But after the concert, Lizzy didn't mull over what she could have, should have done. She felt unusually pleased with herself. The euphoria lasted twenty-four hours and made sleep impossible.

Jim and Lizzy weren't exactly high school sweethearts because they'd never been sweethearts exactly. *Friends* was a better word. They talked a lot. Lizzy was shy and Jim wasn't that much braver.

Jim sat in the audience when Lizzy performed on the piano. It helped her nerves to know he was there.

After the recital they'd go out for lunch. Lizzy, too tightly knotted to eat, watched Jim eat. She was careful about the cocoa sprinkled on her cappuccino.

Jim talked about dissecting a cadaver and how two students had fainted in the last practical exam. *Dopes*, he said and then laughed. *Once you get used to the smell there's nothing to it.*

Lizzy shuddered.

Jim bit into his donut.

During the lesson Mr Longland sat at a desk behind Lizzy. He tapped a pencil, reminding Lizzy of Mrs Whitmore's ruler. His swivel chair squeaked like a mouse caught between the claws of a cat.

Uncle Ron told Lizzy about a part-time job in the music store. Uncle Ron went there to buy fiddle folk songs. Lizzy had never heard him play the fiddle but there was a lot she didn't know about Uncle Ron. He was quiet. Faye called him gentle. *Gentle as in gentle man. The strong, quiet type.*

Lizzy went to the music store by herself. *Do something off your own bat*, her mother had muttered over the sewing machine, jammed with padding and binding. Her mother had done a home furnishing course and was making curtains. Then she'd move onto covering stools and try her hand at piped cushions.

Lizzy found the music store's front counter, cleared her throat and asked to speak to the manager.

The manager's not in, the shop assistant sniffed, *but if you're here to work, consider yourself employed.*

Oh. Lizzy bit her lip.

Yep. I'm the son and I basically run the joint. You fit the bill. He ran his eyes over her brown dress. *Can you start tomorrow?*

Lizzy blushed and then nodded.

Her new job entailed replacing broken strings, dusting shelves, tidying stock, assisting customers, taking money and making receipts. She kept out of the way of the Manager's son.

On Fridays Fran was in the office, doing the bookwork. Fran called it *cooking the books*. She'd wink and say *nudge, nudge, get my drift?* Lizzy had never heard of a cooked book but copied Fran's conspiratorial smile.

Fran thumped the keys of an exhausted typewriter and frowned over the calculator. She muttered *darn, blast and bloody hell*. Fran said, *How this shop survives, I'll never know*.

Midmorning, Fran invited Lizzy into the upstairs loo for a smoke.

If the boss catches us, we're dead, Fran said, but they both knew the boss was never around.

Fran offered Lizzy a cigarette. Lizzy hesitated.

Well? Fran waved the packet around and frowned.

Sure. Lizzy took a cigarette as if she knew what to do with it. Fran expected her to know what to do with it.

Fran flicked her lighter under Lizzy's cigarette. Smoke skirted Lizzy's mouth and caught in her throat. She spluttered.

Well, well. Fran wasn't fooled. A novice, I see.

Lizzy blushed.

Stick with me, kiddo. You're in for a little education.

Fran was twenty-seven and had a live-in boyfriend. She had her own flat, her own car and was always wearing something new.

You've got to loosen up. Fran waved her cigarette at Lizzy. *Honestly, you worry me. You're too ironed into place. Stop brushing your hair or something.*

Live a bit, Fran advised. *Bet you're still a virgin.*

Lizzy rolled her eyes.

Why? You're not frigid? Fran sucked on her cigarette. Smoke oozed through her teeth.

You've got to get out more, Fran insisted. *Bet you haven't been to a disco.*

Lizzy shook her head.

Shame. Fran ran her fingers through her hair and smacked her lips. *You're missing out on all the fun.*

Lizzy copied the way Fran flicked ash into the toilet bowl and missed.

God, Lizzy. Fran tossed her black curls and laughed.

Once, after a recital, Jim stopped in the middle of Rundle Mall to buy Lizzy flowers.

If you're ever in trouble. Fran leaned in close to look Lizzy in the eye. *You know ... knocked up. I know someone.*

Lizzy frowned.

Fran winked. *Don't worry.*

Eat what you like and throw up after. Fran patted her stomach. *It works for me.*

Lizzy thought to try it. She ate a sponge kiss and went to the loo. She lifted the lid, tried to feel sick, but the cake stayed put.

Lizzy lowered the lid, flushed, and wished for gastro-enteritis.

Walking down the Conservatorium corridor, Lizzy turned to look behind her. A long line of judges followed. Disapproving, smug, critical, leering, arrogant, tortured, pained, weary, self-righteous, jeering judges.

You should ... You won't ever ... Give up ... Loser ... Failure ...

They kept her company. Kept her busy. Kept things under control.

Fran peered at Lizzy through a cloud of smoke. *Shall I tell you what sex is like?*

Lizzy shook her head.

You're curious, aren't you?

No.

Don't be embarrassed. You're such a prude.

Lizzy traced the tiles with her finger. *Isn't sex before marriage a sin?*

Fran hooted. *That's Christian bullshit.*

Lizzy gasped, not believing her ears.

Girls have gotta have fun, Fran said. *You know what I'm saying?*

Lizzy, to her great shame, had no idea.

Lizzy had to plan her next recital. What would she play? Mr Longland said a Beethoven Sonata was mandatory. Lizzy instantly thought of the Moonlight. Mr Longland sucked at his teeth when she mentioned it.

It's very ... populist, he said. *Quite passé, really. I wouldn't recommend it. Not at all.*

Mr Longland demonstrated his favourites. Les Adieux, Appassionata and if she really must, Waldstein. Even the D minor Tempest. *Anything but the Moonlight. It's nothing more than romantic mood music.*

Lizzy left the lesson deeply troubled. The Moonlight, her Moonlight, was considered common; too trite, too pedestrian, too passé for the Conservatorium. But if she couldn't play the Moonlight then she wouldn't play at all.

Sonata, quasi una fantasia: The fantasy is from beginning to end one pure whole, rising out of the deepest emotions of the soul, carved from a solid block of marble. There cannot be a single person in any way sensitive to music who can fail to be seized by the first Adagio, led up and up and finally, deeply moved, sublimely uplifted in the Presto Agitato.

Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung (1802)

Lizzy sighed and closed the book. Her mind was made up.

Lizzy slumped at the keyboard, too scared to look around.

I'm playing the Moonlight at the next recital, Lizzy said, her back to Mr Longland.

A trumpet blared in the adjoining room. Someone shouted outside the window. Mr Longland's chair squeaked.

Don't say I didn't warn you, Mr Longland said in a flat, faded voice.

Fran thrust a piece of paper into Lizzy's hand. *Tell me you'll do it.*

Lizzy looked at the wrinkled ad. *What is it?*

It's a course, you know, grooming and deportment.

Lizzy squirmed.

Well? Fran placed her hands on her hips, cigarette squeezed between yellowing fingers.

Backed into a corner, Lizzy said, *I can't, I mean, what will I tell my mother?*

Your mother doesn't run your life, Lizzy. God. Fran looked skyward. Haven't you been listening? You could be really beautiful.

Do you think?

Yes, yes, yes! Fran waved her cigarette around. Jesus and Mary. What does it take to get through?

I'm sorry, Lizzy whispered.

Well don't be. Fran inhaled a cloud of smoke. Just do it and all will be forgiven.

One morning Lizzy thought, *I'll do it.*

She'd tell her mother later.

Much later.

You must slink like a feline in heat, Claudine said, bursting out of her gold tights and v-neck sweater. Strutting down the catwalk in stilettos to demonstrate.

Lizzy giggled along with the rest of the class.

Her mother was unexpectedly quiet about Lizzy doing the department course. *If you really think you must. I don't know. I suppose ...* she said above the roar of the sewing machine. She'd done a course in appliqué. *You're nearly eighteen. I can't stop you.*

A few days later, her mother said, *Men like women with style. This course is a good idea.*

At the end of a class Claudine asked Lizzy to stay behind. Lizzy wondered what she'd done wrong. She clasped her hands and waited.

Lizzy glanced at Claudine's cleavage as Claudine strutted towards her. Lizzy thought that if Claudine kept her car keys down there she'd never find them.

I've been thinking. Claudine's red lips pouted. *And watching. And I think you have potential.*

Potential?

Here at Petuna's we keep an eye out. Fresh faces are always, how should I put it?

Claudine ran red nails through her hair. *Popular, let's say.*

Popular? Lizzy had never been popular.

Petuna likes girls with personality.

Personality? Lizzy had personality?

Claudine stopped frisking her hair. *With work you could be quite ... a beauty.*

Ah, beauty.

In classier clothes you'd instantly improve.

Lizzy tugged at the shirt her mother had made.

All this baggy stuff emphasises nothing. Honestly, darling, you'd do better in a potato sack.

Lizzy felt pangs of guilt for silently agreeing with Claudine.

And your hair. Hang on.

Claudine fished about in her handbag. From a wad of papers she extracted a business card. *Genaro's number in the city. Tell him I sent you. Let him do what he likes.*

We'll turn you into a princess, my dear. Just you wait and see.

What do you think about me becoming a model? Lizzy asked Jim.

You mean, a fashion model? Jim frowned.

Lizzy sipped her cappuccino.

In a magazine?

Lizzy blushed. *Maybe.*

Do you want to?

Lizzy put her cup down. *Fran thinks it's a good idea.*

Jim rubbed his eyes, tired after a five-hour stint studying in the library. *What does it mean to become a model?*

Lizzy took another sip of coffee. *I have to get my hair done. Get some photos taken, that sort of thing. Claudine thinks I've got potential.*

Well then ... Jim circled her face with his eyes. *Why not give it a go?*

Fran said a girl should have all sorts of fun.

Lizzy's turn had come.

Victoria will be so upset. Faye's voice sounded very small. She's always cut your hair.

Lizzy tugged at the strap cutting into her shoulder. Faye had made the bras with underwire and lace.

And now this. Faye pointed at the business card. What's going to happen to your hair?

Just days before the recital, Mr Longland cracked his code of silence.

Any mistake you make will be obvious to the examiners and the audience. It's a fine recipe for disaster, playing something so ... mainstream.

Mr Longland turned away. No sharp nods of *good luck*.

Lizzy was on her own.

Gosh, sweet, who cut your hair before? It's got no shape.

My aunt, Lizzy muttered, face red, eyes down.

Wow. Genaro raised his brows. No offence but ... she should have stuck with the army.

'Moonlight' Sonata, name given (though not by the composer) to Beethoven's Sonata quasi una fantasia in C sharp minor for piano, op 27, no 2 (1801). Its origin seems to be due to H.F.L. Rellstab (1799-1860), who thought that the first movement suggested moonlight on Lake Lucerne.

Collins Encyclopaedia of Music

Lizzy leaned into the grand piano to begin the opening arpeggios, giving herself over to the surging sounds of the Moonlight. She drew the audience closer, closer ... luring them into a musical twilight by slipping into the bloodstream, beating with the heart, teasing membranes and tissues ... until there wasn't a gap between the audience and the music. Lizzy knew how to play the Adagio: slow and dreamy, simply effortlessly; dark, murky, nocturnal. In the distance, a lamenting spirit sang a poignant song of love renounced, while the bass added to the gravity and the accompaniment mourned what was lost.

A pause. Silence.

A complete change of mood. The artifice of the Allegretto, the sorbet that tempered and mocked and delighted. Listeners, relieved, sat back in their seats. Their minds wandered, maybe to a garden, or the neighbour's halitosis, or the golden light filling the auditorium.

A tiny pause. A big breath. Then the dive into the calamitous pit of the third movement, into the foreboding doom of night. The sun went behind a cloud, plunging the hall into gloom. Syncopated chords and surging arpeggios depicted the storm; thunder, rage, wild lament of the one who refused to succumb to suffering and would somewhere, somehow rise again, strengthened enough to look at fate, one last time.

When the journey was over, Lizzy was spent.

She left the stage only to return to find the auditorium aglow and the audience, on their feet, applauding. Lizzy, too, was bathed in gold. She took a final bow.

As she left the stage, Mr Longland went out the door.

Charlie snapped and zoomed, snapped and zoomed. Lizzy found it hard to breathe. Charlie and the camera merged into one leering eye ...

You've got the right cheekbones, luv. Lean forward. Chin up.

Lizzy leaned forward. Charlie had to know what he was doing. Claudine had said he was the best in the business.

Now, have you got something sexy?

Lizzy shook her head.

No? Charlie rubbed his nose and sniffed. We'll have to improvise. Hop on the couch, take your top off and cover yourself with the blanket. We need collarbones and cleavages. All the top models show their stuff.

Lizzy didn't move. The edges of the studio were black and the blackness crept closer.

I've just realised what the time is and I'm late for a – a – birthday party with my boyfriend. It sounded lame. She was shaking. She was wrong to pull away.

Charlie laughed and pawed his pot belly.

You can't be a prude in this business. Charlie leant over her. *I could pull a few strings for you if you – er – scratch my back.*

I have to go. Lizzy stepped out of the spotlight.

Charlie shrugged. *Have it your way, pet. You've just missed something big.*

I've blown my chance, she said to Jim in the coffee shop.

Jim took her hands in his and squeezed them tight. *It'll work out, you'll see.*

Lizzy showed the photographs to Claudine.

Oh, Lizzy, look at you. You're a natural.

Lizzy blushed. *Are you sure?*

Would I lie to you darling?

The photos were splayed like cards in Claudine's hands.

Lizzy didn't recognise herself.

The Examiner's report came through.

The rendition of the Moonlight was unoriginal and quite mundane. Apart from the student's promising technique, it was a poor selection of piece. Grade: C

Carole Dubois

A risky choice of piece, although a great understanding of the Romantic style was evident throughout the performance. For what it was, the Moonlight was well executed.

Grade: B-

Ernest McMannis

Lizzy said goodbye to Fran.

Remember what I said. Loosen up, girl. Live a bit.

Fran put her arm around Lizzy and loaded red lipstick onto Lizzy's cheek. *I'm proud of ya.*

Lizzy stood, stiff and awkward. Smoke and rose oil twanged in her nose.

Fran let go. *Here, take this.*

Something papery was pushed into Lizzy's palm. Lizzy held a dented cigarette. When she left the store she threw it in the bin.

Lizzy ate two slices of toast for breakfast, no butter. A cup of black tea. An apricot bar and an iced coffee for lunch. As little as possible for dinner. Hunger made her more beautiful.

Her hands felt for the bones. It was all about bones. The more bones, the more beautiful. Cheekbones and collarbones and hip bones and knee bones and ankle bones. Flesh was abandoned. She could live off air if she wanted to, if she had to.

Clothes are an art form, Claudine said.

And yes, Lizzy adored them. How she'd envied girls who wore labels like Target and Kmart and John Martins. If she'd wanted anything other than beauty and music, she'd wanted clothes with labels.

Lizzy had Suzy to thank for her first modelling job. Willowy Suzy had, mid-pivot, caught her right big toe in her left stiletto heel, tilted to the point of almost snapping, yelped and fallen off the catwalk right in the middle of a parade. For all her poise, she'd hit the floor with a graceless thud, twisting an ankle and breaking a collarbone.

Lizzy had to save the day.

29th July, 1981.

Lady Diana Spencer walked down the aisle to marry Prince Charles in a spectacular ceremony at St Paul's Cathedral. The wedding was watched by millions around the world. The Archbishop of Canterbury said, 'This is the stuff of which fairy tales are made.'

7.00 a.m. Lizzy practised the piano, moisturised but makeup-less. Fingers danced over the keys, doing what they had to do three hours a day.

10.00 a.m. Showering, shaving: plucking and powdering and applying makeup.

12.00 noon. Posing in front of a camera wearing designer clothes.

1.15 p.m. Wiping off her lipstick and brushing out the hairspray for a piano lesson with Mr Longland.

2.45 p.m. Back in front of the mirror replacing her lipstick and hairspray to catch up with Jim for a coffee at Possums.

4.15 p.m. Stifling yawns at a music history lecture. Dr Rosenthal, with his eyes recessed and skyward, would reminisce about Siena and the local boys' choir.

5.30 p.m. Powdering her nose and piling on the makeup again.

6.00 p.m. On the catwalk with her hips thrust forward, as cocktail guests sipped champagne.

Hairspray hung in the stifled air. Brushes were flung from corner to corner. Models double knotted halter tops. Worried over skimpy bikinis. Cursed the number of buttons and zips and buckles.

Lipstick and jewellery were whisked about. Kneeling assistants endlessly pulled and smoothed and gathered and folded and were socked in the eye or kicked in the ankle or cursed at for fumbling in the muggy heat of a madhouse.

On the catwalk Lizzy lost the pull of gravity. She cruised above the clouds. She basked in the heat of the sun.

Top Model Juliet made comments when the mood took her. Ears were tuned to the fragile frequency of Juliet's voice. Juliet would feel as smooth as glossy paper to touch.

Juliet, wearing a bikini, stood in front of the mirror.

I think my knees need toning. She flicked at the flesh with her nails. Pale skin reddened. *Look at those lardy lumps. Where's my fake tan?*

And off she'd float in search ...

The gossip reached fever-pitch in the change room when Patricia was dismissed from a parade. *Have you heard? Patricia was a centrefold in Playboy. Legs open. All boobs. Black lace. Soft focus lens. The store doesn't want her in their parade.*

There had to be a mistake, a misunderstanding. Patricia had thick auburn hair, unblemished skin, high cheekbones, green-grey eyes, straight white teeth ... second-best to Juliet, but same height, build and colouring. Patricia had to be a happy ever after girl with looks like that.

Every model knew the fate of a *Playboy* bunny. A bunny was condemned for life, thrown scraps, abused, exploited. Forever roaming the limbo land of singledom. Poor Patricia. No decent man would marry her now.

Before Patricia left, she turned to Lizzy and whispered, *I needed the money. My boyfriend left me with bills to pay. I wish I was you.*

Lizzy didn't know what to say. Patricia had to be really desperate to want to be Lizzy.

Patricia leaned closer. *Watch out for Charlie.*

An odd heat radiated from Patricia's skin. Her eyes had a feverish flash to them.

Lizzy looked away and tried to think. By the time she thought to say *goodbye and good luck*, Patricia had left.

Tina fired girls for the tiniest error: wrong coloured stockings, messy hair, a sloppy walk. No one knew what Tina preferred.

Sometimes it's upbeat and kinda jerky, the next it's smooth and sloshy.

As for the sort of hair required, models just scratched their heads.

Tina fires girls for having a pimple.

Models called her *Tiny Tina*. Behind Tina's back, eyes turned skyward. *Fus-sy*, they mouthed at each other.

When Tina was around, Lizzy hunched her shoulders. Blacklisting hovered as heavy as a killer whale.

Claudine scrambled around her metallic bag. *Tina is on our case about weight. She doesn't want girls with flesh. Here ... these will help.*

Lizzy took the bottle of pills.

Claudine fiddled with her shoulder pads and noticed Lizzy's expression. *They're laxatives, dear.*

All the models took laxatives. Fran had made a daily meal of them.

Lizzy couldn't afford to get comfortable in the beauty chain. With Patricia gone, she'd keep her head down amid the reshuffle. A strawberry-blonde soon eclipsed the race. Even

Juliet seemed fazed, peering sideways at her new partner when she thought no one was watching.

Lizzy took to the hills to exorcise the evil fat from her hips. She hired a bike, a rower and a vibrating belt. She swallowed the black pills and bee-lined for the loo.

Tummy bug, she told her mother.

Juliet read *Vogue*. She studied the photos. She tilted the pages this way and that. Her fingers brushed and pressed and tapped. The tip of her tongue flicked across her bottom teeth as she leant into each page.

Lizzy bought *Cosmopolitan* and *Cleo* and read them on the train to town. She hid them between her music books. She did the quizzes: *Are you and your boyfriend compatible?* There were things that were in and things that were out. A-list celebrities and Z-List forgettables. Make up dos and make up don'ts. Clothes to adore and clothes to throw out.

Lizzy fingered the glossy pages. *How neat the world is.*

Lizzy's first pay cheque was for one hundred dollars with fifty dollars taken out for Petuna's commission. Commission? The fifty dollars must have gone straight into Claudine's pocket. Lizzy felt – well – numb.

If Lizzy talked with anyone it was Meredith. Meredith was an *older model* who modelled clothes for the more mature woman. Lizzy matched Meredith in height and colouring so they were often teamed together. Lizzy had to wear safari suits and mother-of-the-bride outfits and twin sets to correspond with Meredith's range.

Let's go for coffee together in the break, Meredith suggested one day.

Lizzy agreed. It was her chance to ask Meredith about Claudine's commission.

Lizzy had never had coffee in a café with anyone other than Jim. She felt stiff and uncoordinated and more tongue-tied than usual. Luckily Meredith was talkative.

My husband's away again. Interstate, you know, on business.

Lizzy nodded.

It's lonely at home. An empty house. Meredith picked up a spoon with her left hand and stirred her cappuccino. Huge diamonds glittered. *We've just had the bathroom renovated. Big spa, too many mirrors. I can't get used to seeing my body from all angles.*

Lizzy's cheeks reddened as naked Meredith clambered into her spa.

You'd be okay. Meredith was saying. *Young body like yours.*

Lizzy hid behind her coffee cup.

Come over and check it out. It'd be fun. We could pop a bottle of champagne.

The conversation, the closeness, stuck to Lizzy's skin like leukoplast.

I've got this special bubble bath that makes you really ... Meredith's tongue curled inside her mouth ... *soft.*

The word *soft* was an air-blown kiss floating across the table.

Her mother sipped black coffee, sitting on the edge of Lizzy's bed. *You need a good square meal. People will think I'm not feeding you properly.*

Lizzy applied her makeup in the mirror. *I'm either too fat or too thin.*

Being too thin is hardly attractive. Modelling is turning you into a tart, Lizzy. All that makeup.

Lizzy's jaw tightened.

Why don't you give up modelling? It must be such a bitchy job.

The girls are nice.

Oh sure. Pull the other leg.

The work's frantic. I say hello and goodbye and that's about it.

Her mother didn't blink.

I like the girls. They're professional.

Her mother blinked. *Shouldn't you practise the piano more? What does Mr Longland say?*

Lizzy gritted her teeth. *I'm doing all right.*

You've got to keep your head above water.

I'm keeping my head ...

It's so odd. Piano and modelling. The music store was more compatible.

It was boring.

Boring? Standing in front of a pile of mattresses isn't boring?

It pays.

Pittance probably.

It's better than the music store.

Her mother took another sip of coffee.

Modelling's fun and music's not. Lizzy powdered her face. It's a good balance.

Juliet had used the word *balance* once. She'd said it was important to balance all aspects of life. Lizzy had imagined an old-fashioned set of scales. She sat Lizzy The Fashion Model on one scale and Lizzy The Concert Pianist on the other and saw that they weighed the same. Juliet would have approved if Juliet had known.

If you say so, her mother said, looking doubtful.

Lizzy swung her modelling bag over her shoulder and left.

Mr Longland was on the verge of retiring. Relief fire-crackered through Lizzy's chest when she heard the news. Their relationship had definitely deteriorated since the Moonlight.

Miss Holbrook took Lizzy on.

Miss Holbrook taught in a cream room with cream lino and cream scrim curtains that, under the fluoros, needed Faye's White King. Miss Holbrook stood at the window a lot. One day Miss Holbrook would hoist her skirt, clamber out and fly the coop.

Miss Holbrook's cream complexion had never weathered hardship.

More Beethoven next week, she said.

Lizzy nodded and left. She didn't want to be a piano teacher any more.

Jane found a brown-eyed, brown-haired policeman to marry. Grant was clean-shaven, polite and tattoo-less. Faye said, *Such a nice boy.*

Victoria talked a lot about Grant the policeman. *They look so good together.*

Jane twirled a tiny diamond around her finger. *I'm on clouds, Lizzy, on clouds. It's the best thing. To become Grant's wife.*

Jane's dreams were coming true. *I've found my prince. I'll have my own fridge and washing machine. A nice minister will marry us at Grant's church. Marriage is a sacred thing, Lizzy.*

Lizzy didn't see much of Jane before the wedding. Jane rushed to dress rehearsals and organised flowers, invitations, catering. She went to travel agents and house inspections and kept up a fervent conversation about *Grant this* and *Grant that*.

Jane's glory box, made in India, was full of sheets and towels and cotton nighties.

I'll never forget my wedding day, Lizzy. Jane's cheeks bloomed red the night before. *I'm so happy. So nervous. I want it to be perfect.*

On her wedding day, Jane radiated happiness in satin-strapped stilettos, a satin-strapped gown and a satin-strapped headpiece with a trailing veil of antique lace. Lizzy feared a strap might break.

Everyone watched Jane right up until the second she sped away in Grant's Celica. People rubbed their eyes, coughed and sighed. *Wasn't she beautiful? What a perfect day. What a happy couple.*

A sudden gust of wind tore across Lizzy's bridesmaid's dress as she farewelled the newlyweds. Her hair whisked into rattails. She stared at the bricks of the reception hall and

wondered what came next. *The babies, of course.* How could she forget? Jane was happy ever after.

Lizzy walked onto the stage and bowed to the audience. Three examiners sat in the middle of the hall, wedged behind teak tables.

Lizzy sat at the grand piano, carefully arranging the black skirt her mother had made for the performance. Accompanist Phillipa sat at her grand piano, right next to Lizzy's. Phillipa was to pretend she was the orchestra. Lizzy was the soloist tackling Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto.

Lizzy adjusted the stool, rubbed her hands and focused on the keys in front of her. Surprise rocked her back. The ivories were yellow. The black keys were rounded and worn. The lid was dull and scratched. *Oh no,* Lizzy whispered.

What? Phillipa pivoted on her seat.

Lizzy leant toward Phillipa. *It's the old piano.*

Oh my God.

Someone's made a mistake. What shall I do?

Phillipa paled. *You can't do anything. You'll have to cope.*

But I can't. You know I can't.

The audience grew restless and examiners eyed their watches. Lizzy was losing marks. Her big moment soured.

Lizzy had made a point of rehearsing on the new grand piano, despite the rules that prohibited undergraduates from playing it. Not until the concerto. The day of the concerto.

Lizzy had managed to rehearse on the new grand late at night when the janitor was tired and accommodating. The rumours had been right. The new grand was a temperamental, unforgiving instrument. The action was tight, light and quick. Full of infinite possibilities. More balanced than most, making it easy to overstate Beethoven's weighty bass. After four late-night rehearsals, she'd breathed a little easier, glad not to be labouring over the sloppy but serviceable keys of the old grand piano.

Lizzy stood up, turned to the audience, took a big breath. *Would someone please help move the pianos? They've been set up the wrong way.* Her voice ricocheted off the back wall.

Three men jumped to their feet and rearranged the pianos. Lizzy sat down and played her heart out.

Such unprofessional behaviour, was written across the examiner's sheet. *The student should have played on regardless.*

The mark was just a pass.

Doris Thrupp sat on the edge of the Sanderson lounge with her shoulders slightly rounded and her legs crossed at the ankle. Doris Thrupp hadn't stopped talking since she walked through the front door smelling of *Australis*.

Without a gap in the chatter, Faye missed the opportunity to offer Doris a cup of tea and open a window to clear her head and the room and revive Lizzy who looked quite green. Faye sat back, resigning herself to a headache.

Thanks so very, very much for seeing me today, it's so awfully nice of you - (sniff) - Elizabeth. You're a perfect candidate; lovely and bright and - (sniff) - Petuna's was so right to - you know? The Miss Model Australia Contest is looking for girls just like you.

Doris sniffed, wheezed and breathed through sentence after sentence. Her eyebrows contorted: hooked, straight, curled, mid-mast, high-tide. Watching Doris's brows, Lizzy forgot to say *Uhuh*, but Doris didn't notice.

Doris's smile was sutured to her gums. Stiff lips navigated the vertical surf of her teeth. Lizzy pouted in sympathy. Her chest cramped with each tight word. Her head throbbed in sync with Faye's as dumper after dumper of *Australis* knocked them senseless.

Keeping up with Doris was difficult. So many words tipped out. Lizzy's mind wandered, exhausted by the pace and the push-pull of her body. What did Miss Model Australia actually do? Did she meet the Queen? Lizzy curtsied to the Queen and the Queen gave Lizzy a proper royal smile in return. The Queen asked, *Are you enjoying your role as Miss Model Australia?* Lizzy said, *Oh, yes, Ma'am, very much, thank you.* Or should she have said *Your Highness* instead of *Ma'am*? Whoops. *Your very, very Highness, Ma'am.* The Queen teetered on stilts strapped to gold slippers. Lizzy nearly laughed right in the middle of Doris's rubbery-wheezy-sniffy sentences.

You'll raise money for the Disabled Children's Fund, which is tremendously easy - (sniff) - with me to guide you ... Girls find it so very enjoy - (sniff) - making so - friends - doing something really, really worthwhile for the communi -

Doris slid some paper in Lizzy's direction and handed Lizzy a Parker pen, sticky in Lizzy's fingers. Lizzy squinted at the doubled up words on the page. What was this about again?

Think of that, Lizzy. Her mother came into focus. Excited. Exposing all her teeth. Patting Lizzy's arm, once, twice, three times. *You could be the next Miss Model Australia.*

Part Two

Miss Model Australia. Of course. That's why Doris was filling the room with too many words and smiling a torturer's grin. That's why Elizabeth was sitting on the Sanderson lounge watching her mother dream.

Elizabeth eyed the contract. Black letters slid across the page.

What was the harm?

She wanted to help disadvantaged children.

She was a good person, right?

She tightened her grip on the pen. It was no big deal. Plenty of girls entered quests. Wasn't it nice to be picked instead of picked on?

She pushed the pen across the paper. The pen ran out in the middle of her signature.

There, all done. Doris smoothed her knees.

But ... Elizabeth tapped the incomplete surname half-hoping it'd render her signature useless.

Doris grabbed the contract. *That's fine. Terrific. See you soon. I'll be off.*

Elizabeth was an entrant. She floated around the house, sat on her bed and stared out the window at a rusty stain on the neighbours' roof. *Entrant* sounded like *elegant*. *Entrant* was an elegant cloak, reminding Elizabeth of the linen cloak she wore in the

nativity play as the Virgin Mary and the velvet cloak she wore as a witch in the school musical and the cloak Red Riding Hood wore. Strange she should think of that. Then she thought about the crown and the feel of it on top of her head. *Miss Model Australia Elizabeth Mathews*. Would her cloak sparkle? Would she look beautiful? Could she *be* beautiful? She was already a *Miss* and a *Model*. She needed one more word ...

Faye's sewing machine hemmed and gathered.

It'll help your confidence. Faye raised her voice over the roar, pushing gabardine under a famished needle.

At Petuna's Claudine said, *Doris phones us wanting names. This will keep her happy for a while*.

Elizabeth stood in the middle of the mall like a trophy no one had won. Cold slithered into her shoes and up her legs and probably further, but she never thought about that.

People hurried past. She was supposed to step forward and say something but her feet were glued to the floor. Her throat was dry, the kind of dry that needed a brandy to satisfy, at the pub, leaning against the bar, feeling the fire slide down the throat and into the belly, she thought, she'd try it one day like they did in the movies, if she knew which way to go.

Don't take it personally, Doris had said, handing over the raffle books. *It's not a rejection of you*.

Elizabeth tried catching someone's eye, maybe to smile or wave or nod but she was a ghost in the wrong sort of town.

When she prayed for help Miss Tibble interrupted, *God helps those who help themselves.*

Elizabeth swore. *Darn. Blast ... Christ Almighty.*

Fran would be proud.

Elizabeth took a step forward and another and another and, like a puppet pulled by tangled strings, headed for the nearest shopper.

Would you like to buy a raffle ticket? she asked the woman who clutched a jacket close to her throat.

The woman stopped and looked at Elizabeth. *Arrr, mmnn.* She frowned. *I'm in a hurry.*

Elizabeth's eyes tightened.

Okay, honey. How much? The woman released her jacket.

Elizabeth managed a smile.

The woman paid a dollar and tore off a ticket.

Elizabeth's knees loosened. Her body sloshed. Christ Almighty, she'd done it.

Elizabeth sat at the piano and stared out the window. She played then stared. Played. Stared. Music clogged the room; wads of cotton in her ears. Her fingers moved like pistons. The woman in the overcoat handed over her money.

Elizabeth watched Jim walk towards her. How tall he was. Tall and lanky and broad shouldered and square-chinned and downright handsome. Not palpitation handsome, but take-him-home-to-mother handsome.

Jim found her and grinned. Perhaps he was palpitation handsome. She felt a palpitation or two.

You look great.

Oh. Her mother had fiddled with silk and taffeta for seven consecutive nights. Elizabeth pulled at the blouse. Earlier that day she'd been modelling ball gowns in a fashion parade and wishing she could have bought one.

Jim's hands were large. He held her close as they danced. He was a space station and she a docked ship, reloading fuel, topping up the oxygen tanks.

Elizabeth pretended to eat. She watched Jim eat.

Jim offered his arm to Elizabeth when it was her turn to meet Miss Model Australia. Elizabeth was a princess and Jim, her prince.

After the ball, Jim took her face in his hands and kissed her.

Jim's lips were soft and succulent.

Hers were tense, uncertain.

What did she look like? Faye asked Elizabeth afterwards.

Who?

Miss Model Australia.

Oh. Umm, blonde, pretty. She said it was lovely to meet me. She wished me luck.

That's nice. What was she wearing?

Elizabeth touched her lips. Something blue, I think.

Elizabeth's voice was hoarse.

Thank you for coming to this fundraising event.

Elizabeth stepped back. The audience leaned forward.

Thank you to everyone who helped.

She took another step back. *Doris, and my mother, Jim, for providing the sound system ...*

She took another step back and back and back until she was out the door, dashing to the loo.

Everyone must have laughed. *Elizabeth, Miss Model Australia? You're kidding?*

Elizabeth heard her name being called. She was one of three hundred and fifty girls, then one of one hundred and twenty girls, then one of seventy girls, then one of twenty girls.

There were instructions to follow: *get into your evening dress now, time for lunch, this is the order of interviews ... there's a rehearsal tonight at six for the finalists, photographers are coming any minute now, girls, get ready (clap, clap), smiles all-round, line up here, finalists on the steps, tallest at the back ...*

Elizabeth did what she was told. She did her best. She answered the judges' questions, saying whatever came into her head. As soon as the words were out she forgot the question and forgot her answer. The world tipped sideways. Everything blurred. She remembered to smile. She remembered a contract. She remembered Jim's kiss.

Elizabeth sipped flat, tart champagne and choked on pleasantries. People took photos, slipped their arms around her waist and chatted about other Miss Model Australias and what they liked best and whether she, Elizabeth, might be next.

Overnight she'd become a delight. A success. A somebody.

One man pulled her close and whispered, *You're a star.*

Elizabeth Finds Time to Meet Our Hookes

Elizabeth Mathews, a student at the Conservatorium of Music at Adelaide University, is now a finalist in the Miss Model Australia Contest. The talented brunette will be flying to

Sydney to meet the other finalists and appear on the *Mike Walsh Show*. She's tipped to play the piano on the show. She said, 'I just loved being an entrant in the Contest and now it's even more exciting. I'm looking forward to the final very much.' The tone in her voice left no doubt about it. 'It would be a great honour to be Miss Model Australia.'

Yesterday, Elizabeth met up with SA captain and Test batsman David Hookes to congratulate him for winning the ANZ Bank trophy for man of the match. Hookes had plenty to smile about, shoulder to shoulder with the beautiful Elizabeth.

Elizabeth had a week to prepare for the Finals. She'd go to Sydney, Melbourne and then to Hobart to participate in all sorts of fun things: TV appearances, promotions, lunches, dinners, launches, rehearsals, tours, even a cruise. She'd meet six other finalists. She'd have a ball.

Pressure mounted. Life fast-forwarded. Elizabeth flew the coop.

Elizabeth watched Miss Model Australia 1982. Moira looked into people's eyes and smiled. Tilted her head to laugh. Ate little morsels of food. Folded her hands in front of her. Patted her hair when no one was looking. Had the perfect words to say at the perfect time.

Elizabeth was tinsel. Moira, titanium.

Elizabeth hadn't travelled. She hadn't lived beyond her bedroom. She hadn't deep or meaningful thoughts or said a word of note or broadened her horizons.

She'd endured, followed instructions, got through. Smiled.

She was just the girl next door.

Seven judges sat in a row. On a table, covered white, they tidied piles of paper, waved their ballpoint pens, fondled glasses of water and plates of peppermints.

Elizabeth entered the room and turned like a ballerina in a jewellery box, showing the judges her blue suit, the best her mother could make.

Elizabeth sat on a chair, trying not to think of interrogations or firing lines. The judges were interviewers and this was a job interview. Not that she knew about job interviews, but it sounded as if she should.

The chandelier beamed down hot crystal rays directly above her head.

The judges turned their ears towards her. One had a hearing aid, two women wore gold earrings. The man at the end of the row looked out the window. *He must be the lawyer.* She'd never met a lawyer before.

They asked her, *Who was the Prime Minister? As a tour guide, where would she take a group of sightseers? Why was she proud to be an Australian? How did she feel about, maybe, becoming Miss Model Australia?*

Elizabeth said, yes, of course, it would be, amazing, an honour, to be Miss Model Australia. She was there to, you know, aspire. To uphold something. She nodded her head not fully believing she'd become Miss Model Australia. She could dream, of course, but the dream might not come true. The other six hopefuls were better Miss Model material. Serena was dark and exotic. Sandy, gifted with the gab. Bella, funnier. Leonie, pencil-thin. Anna, photogenic. Pauline, all sparkle with her diamond earrings, designer dresses and debonair fiancé who made his millions as a property developer. What hope did Elizabeth have?

The judges deliberated.

In her pink organza evening dress, Elizabeth paraded for the judges. She thought of them as she was told to think of them. A selection panel.

If you could have dinner with anyone in the world (past or present), who would it be?

Elizabeth lowered her eyes. She wasn't expecting a question like this. *Hmmm.* Jim wouldn't make the judges happy. It was a test of her imagination and she, being a musician, should be loaded. *Well ...* She bit her lip. The harder she thought about it, the bigger the world got and the more people, ghost people, famous people, sped through her head.

Maybe a musician? The lawyer shuffled his papers.

Yes. The sound of an opening cash register. Her eyes widened. She had the sixty-five million dollar answer. *Beethoven*, she said, disloyal to Jim.

The lawyer lifted his eyebrows.

Elizabeth walks onto the stage and looks for the piano. She turns full-circle. She squints into the audience and shields her eyes. She sees the row of judges and realises she's not there to play but to pose and pirouette. She runs off the stage. Her university jeans won't do.

Backstage, she wrestles with her clothes. Buttons disappear. Zips stick. Cotton clings to denim. Perspiration runs down her forehead. Time is running out.

Elizabeth stumbled out of the elevator and threw her arms around her mother. Faye weathered the hug with a wide, rigid smile as if she, too, knew the judges were watching.

You're a dark horse, Anna said.

A what?

Dark horse.

Oh?

You know. My mother always says to watch for the quiet ones.

Oh. Elizabeth sat on the bed and brushed her hair.

Do you want to win?

I – don't know – really.

It's scary to think of winning. Anna slipped into her dressing gown. I think you'll win.

Me? Why?

I just think you will. Anna smelt like a rose garden. You'll win.

The lawyer passed her in the hotel corridor. He stood in front of her, like Mr Mugg had done, and pointed.

You're it, he said and winked.

Elizabeth blushed, thought about dining with Beethoven and, next thing she knew, the lawyer had gone.

Still wrestling with her clothes, she risks disqualification. The judges wait. The stage is empty. Her moment of glory slips away ...

She looks down and oh God. She's struggling with her very own skin.

Outside, Elizabeth relished the air for a moment. The sun shone. Bells chimed.

Another rehearsal was due to start but, with any luck, it'd be delayed because of a technical problem. Hobart's Theatre Royal, built in 1837 by the British Empire, was fit for a queen. Any minute, she'd be called inside, back to the spotlights, the cues and cards. She'd have to step left then right then left. And smile.

A figure appeared at the end of the alley.

Jim, Elizabeth cried and ran.

[5-4-3-2-Lights-Camera-Action]

Compere: *It is now my great pleasure, on this very special night of nights, to introduce another contestant. Please welcome to the stage Miss Elizabeth Mathews.*

[Applause]

[She appears from behind a curtain, a brunette vision in sparkling organza. Her eyes swing from side to side, up and down. Her pink dress turns crimson.]

Compere: *My, you're a tall girl. I need a box, anyone got a box?*

[The compere looks down at his feet and waves his arms around as if to conjure a box.

Audience laughs. Contestant blushes.]

Compere: *You look beautiful. How are you feeling?*

Contestant: *A little nervous.*

Compere: *No need to be nervous. I don't bite.* [He grins into the camera.] *So you're a fashion model?*

Contestant: *Yes.*

Compere: *Have you got a boyfriend?*

Contestant: *Yes.*

Compere: *Oh, darn. Can't I be your boyfriend?*

[Contestant giggles. Compere licks his lips and leans forward.]

Compere: *Well, he's a very lucky fellow. Are your parents here tonight in Tassie?*

Contestant: *Yes.*

Compere: *Do you want to wave to them?*

[She holds up a hand and waves toward the glare. Compere's eyes slide down contestant's dress.]

Compere: *I hear you love music.*

Contestant: *Yes.*

Compere: *You tinkle the ivories?*

Contestant: *Yes.*

[Compere's fingers curl around his prompt-sheet.]

Compere: *Who's your favourite composer?*

Contestant: *Liszt, I think ...*

Compere: *Ah, yes, 'ole Franz is on my list!*

[Contestant's smile falters. Audience laughs.]

Compere: *Well, it's been fabulous to meet you. All the best with the rest of the evening.*

Isn't she lovely, audience? Please put your hands together for Miss Elizabeth Mathews.

[Applause. Compere shakes contestant's hand; limp and damp and hairy in hers. She smiles, nods to the audience and walks back the way she came.]

[Cut to commercial]

Lights dim. Knives and forks clatter on dinner plates. Chairs are dragged across the floor, napkins scatter and necks crane as eyes turn towards the dazzling stage.

Cameras locate the compere glittering with perspiration. On cue, he announces, *It is now my great pleasure to call upon the President ...*

Drum rolls accompany the delivery of an envelope. The compere's meaty fingers break the wax seal, a smudge of red on white.

He looks into the camera and smiles. *Miss Model Australia for 1983 is ...*

Elizabeth's snared in spotlights. She freezes, arms flung wide. She steps back. She's pushed forward. Applause washes over the stage. Hundreds of people rise from their seats, riding the crest of the breaker.

Elizabeth stumbles, takes in water and turns blue. Arms reach for her again and the water subsides.

Moira grasps Elizabeth's elbow and gives her an airy kiss. *Good luck.*

Moira looks away and never looks back.

Elizabeth sits on a throne made of cardboard and padded spandex. It wobbles. *Why isn't it real? Is this another rehearsal?* It's her turn to pretend, to smile, to aspire, but she feels like expiring. *When will she see Jim?*

The satin robe, clasped at the neck, is fire blanket thick. The pearl-encrusted crown wobbles when she blinks. A sceptre warms in her hands while she waits under the spotlights that steam and press. Music blares. Cameras close in. She's under the microscope. It's hard to breathe. Viewers study her. Is she beautiful? Is she perfect? *Who is she?*

The compere takes her arm. She rises from the throne, staggers, stops. Someone makes a speech. *Please welcome to the microphone our very beautiful, very accomplished, Miss Model Australia 1983.*

The microphone looms large. She turns toward the sea of faces, white specks bobbing in dark waters. Her scalp feels fried. She squints into the auditorium and coughs. The microphone squeals. Words spill out. She's babbling. She stops mid-sentence and the silence is profound. The audience applauds. Words come to mind, too late. She should have said this, or that, or anything other than the stupid things she said, or thought she said. What did she actually say?

In the seconds that follow she is struck with the desire to throw off the robe and crown and run, run, run without ever looking back.

Faye had heard Elizabeth's name and gasped. She rose to her feet with the rest of the audience.

Peter had leant over and squeezed her hand. *That's our daughter*, he'd said in her ear.

Faye had nodded, tears in her eyes. She clutched at the bodice of her lavender dress to stop her heart from bursting.

Elizabeth goes backstage as instructed. She can make it to the end if she does what she's told. What will she be told to do?

Elizabeth sits on a deck chair. Her robe and crown are straightened. She fights the desire to slump. She hasn't slept for weeks. She wants to go home to bed. She'll drink a swimming pool dry, sleep for a month and wake from a bad dream.

Elizabeth answers questions she doesn't know how to answer. Something has happened to her tongue and her brain. She tries to tell the hovering journalists what they want to hear.

Did you feel like crying when your name was announced?

Elizabeth says she did because she knows she should have. A real Miss Model Australia would have. Yes, she fought back tears. As if to verify her words, the world blurs. If only she can figure out the right words to say, the perfect feelings to feel and not blink for the cameras.

She leaves the interview shredded.

There's a party now, she remembers that. She keeps her shoulders square, her smile broad, her words polite. Her voice has dropped an octave. Cheek muscles ache. She can't keep track of words. She searches for Jim.

Everyone wants to meet her. They see her coming and turn to greet her, arms outstretched. Elizabeth hesitates. Inside the circle she's stiff, shy, shrinking.

You must be sooooo happy, they croon and cluck. I bet your parents are proud. You'll make a wonderful Miss Model Australia. Before tonight, Elizabeth knows, they wouldn't have given her a second glance. No matter. If she can keep everyone happy, she might be happy too.

At 1.00 a.m. Elizabeth is free to go. Tomorrow there's a 7.00 a.m. breakfast with three hundred guests. She can expect a 5.30 wake-up call.

A folder full of densely-typed pages tells her that she will tour Australia and go overseas three times. The pages outline what a day will consist of: meetings, interviews, photographic sessions, department store appearances, bank openings, product launchings, luncheons, afternoon teas, civic receptions, cocktail parties and dinners. There are flights to catch, dignitaries to meet and speeches to make. She nods. It's all about keeping to the schedule. An alarm clock will be her best friend.

Elizabeth says goodnight to Jim. *Thank you for being here.*

Jim takes her in his arms. She dissolves. Her oxygen tanks are empty.

How am I going to get through it? she whispers, face buried in his lapel.

With flying colours. Jim squeezes her tighter.

Elizabeth fights the urge to cry.

I suppose this is goodbye. You've bigger fish to fry.

She breaks away. *Don't say that.*

Jim waits for an explanation. Words turn brittle and break in her mouth like planks from a shipwrecked boat. *He's better off without me.*

I never thought – I mean – I had a fantasy ... She throws up her arms.

When Jim frowns she sees how hopeless it is. Where to start, where to end? Jim's boat sails into the sunset without her.

She turns her back and runs.

Jim stands in the lobby after Elizabeth has gone. For a while he can still smell her, so he breathes her in, wanting to follow the scent, stop her, take her, keep her ... but he shouldn't, couldn't. It was too late.

His fists uncurl as he turns away and heads for his room, alone.

By 3.00 a.m. Elizabeth is in bed, in the dark. Ears buzzing, palms wet, eyes gritty. Flashlights pinging behind eyelids. Forehead throbbing where the crown made a dent. She wants to cry now that the party is over, but Miss Model Australia doesn't cry, can't cry, has no reason to cry except with delicate tears of joy. She's a star and that's got to be good.

The low hum of the hotel's air conditioning is cooling the darkness. The smell of laundromat is on the sheets. Her body can't feel the cotton or the mattress. She's a permapine pole.

Beyond the closed curtains are her loves and her life and, if she doesn't think about those things, she'll not feel the urge to pack up and leave for home in the middle of the night.

She replays the evening, caught on a merry-go-round. She might cope if she can get some sleep, but the telephone rings.

A voice tells her it's 5.30 a.m.

Elizabeth stands outside the hotel, on the curb. Faye kisses her cheek and says she's proud. Peter kisses her other cheek and mutters something that's lost in the roar of a passing truck. Jim pecks at her lips, hoping her parents aren't watching. *See you some time*, he says. Elizabeth nods and resists the urge to cling to his neck and beg to be taken home.

They get into the waiting taxi and drive away.

Elizabeth raises her arm as they turn the corner. Her vision blurs. Her arm collapses to her side like a wilted flower.

On the way back to her hotel room she realises she's forgotten her key.

Elizabeth's feet abut a void.

To fall is to know. To fall is to know.

She aches for the fall.

Falling yet flying.

She opens her arms, closes her eyes and takes a breath.

She leaps into the air and plummets.

But wakes before she hits the ground.

Exec Gay took over where Doris left off.

There're things we need to discuss. Exec Gay had three don't-mess-with-me lines running vertically between her brows. They couldn't be crossed, not without consequences. Elizabeth hoped to learn how to curtsy.

Hand shakes, for starters. Exec Gay held out her hand. There were gold rings on every finger. *Take it.*

Elizabeth took Gay's hand. Gay's skin felt cool and dry.

Now squeeze. No limp fish.

Elizabeth squeezed.

Okay. Try again. Gay extended her hand.

Elizabeth gritted her teeth.

Much better. Exec Gay let go. *Now you try. Hold out your hand.*

Elizabeth held out her hand. Gay took it, really took it and squeezed.

There. That's what you do. No good squeezing people's fingers. It must be palm to palm. For women and men. You see?

Elizabeth nodded. She had to touch strangers, oh God.

Right. Introductions. You must tell people you're Miss Model Australia. Let's try it. Gay cleared her throat. *Hello, I'm Miss Model Australia, Elizabeth Mathews. See?*

Elizabeth blanched. Gay had to be kidding, right? She couldn't call herself ...
What would people think?

Okay, your turn.

Elizabeth's face reddened. *Hi - I'm - Elizabeth Mathews ...*

No, no. Gay threw up her hands. *You can do better.*

Elizabeth's shoulders ached.

Try again. Louder. Look straight ahead.

Elizabeth focussed on Gay's knees. *Hi - I'm - Miss Model Aus ... Elizabeth Mathews.*

Gay sighed. *That needs work. Now time's short. Here are your cards. Hand them out at store appearances and pop them in your thank you letters.*

Elizabeth was photographed in full regalia, or was her face just cut and pasted?

She thumbed the paper. Was that her face?

These are like your calling cards. You'll need to sign them, of course.

Of course. That was something she could do.

And here's your notepaper and matching envelopes. You'll need it. Gay gurgled.

It was the closest she came to laughing. *Any questions?*

Questions gathered around Elizabeth's lips like Hundreds and Thousands.

Righto. Exec Gay clapped her hands. *Time to move on.*

On a conveyor belt, machinery clunks and clangs. Pistons move up and down. A mechanical limb stamps her forehead. Red lights flash. Her shoulders slump. Steam shoots across her feet. Fumes burn her throat.

Up ahead is a steamroller. It's going to press her flat, squeeze the life out of her. She screams but her mouth is sealed with tape. Her feet are super-glued to the belt. Her arms are tied.

Ghosts clap and jeer and hoot and whistle and point their fingers and hurl rotten tomatoes as the steamroller nears ...

Elizabeth was given another contract with very small print and a lot more pages. The paper was watermarked. Exec Gay's silver pen waited.

It's just precautions, in case, you know, you ... Not that you will. Goodness. Only a klutz would. This chance won't come again.

Elizabeth eyed the wad of paper stapled together. The ball point pen didn't glide as it should. She struggled to write her name. When it was done she paled. For a moment she thought she'd written *Queen Elizabeth*.

As a child she believed she was Snow White. She curled up in bed and hoped a prince would find her, and feared he might not. She hoped a prince would come, and feared he would. She hoped she was Snow White, and feared she might not be. She feared she was Snow White.

Snow White didn't get divorced or depressed like ordinary people, did she? She was beautiful and good and above all the bruising things in life. Well, there was the bad queen and the poisoned apple, but that only put Snow White to sleep, it didn't kill her. It actually proved quite beneficial because a handsome prince found her and kissed her and married her and they lived happy ever after.

Darren Whitelock asked her to tell everyone where she'd been travelling and where she was heading.

Elizabeth went the sort of blank that's uncomfortable to watch. The camera zoomed in closer and closer and it reminded her of Charlie. Her insides felt like her outsides.

She said she'd whirled around Australia twice in the space of three weeks. Her next destination was home. The audience laughed. It gave her a shock. There were real people in the studio.

Well, that's not the most glamorous destination, Darren said with a smirk, making the audience titter.

Elizabeth ached to get home.

Darren leaned forward and took her hand. Elizabeth didn't resist. She rose to her feet with Darren, surfacing from somewhere dark.

I hear you're a concert pianist. I'm sure our audience would love you to play.

Lost at sea, the sight of a piano was as good as seeing land.

Darren steered, his arm a rudder. The band members crowded around with guitars and saxophones. The piano seat was slightly padded, warm and familiar. She drank in the sight of the ivory keys. She bent her head and fell into playing as the rapid arpeggios of Liszt's *Un Sospiro* came to mind. The piano shape-shifted and breathed. Sound resonated around the studio. The musicians leaned in. The camera latched onto her hands, tumbling over and under each other. Harmony sank into her skin and washed away the tension. For a moment she could have been anyone. She could have been ugly. She forgot she was there. Her breath was of no concern.

She played the final chords and made it to the moon.

Miss Model Australia stood on the dais. Audiences looked up at her with interested eyes. What did they want? Didn't they know she was just some seaweedy thing from the south? A girl who had done nothing notable at all.

She had a job to do, Exec Gay had made it clear. *Tell a story and make it good.*

Exec Gay added ... *Think Helena Rubenstein*, she told Elizabeth. *Now there's a beauty queen who knew how to embellish.*

Gay was fond of Rubenstein. *Repeat a story often enough and it becomes fact.*

Gay had one last pearl. *Glamour and gilding never hurts.*

So Elizabeth told the audience what it was like before. How she'd been shy, poor and average. How she'd been a lonely, downcast, back row girl. Then, miracle of miracles, she'd been saved by an invitation, crisp and sweet as an apple. She bit into that apple and became a popular front row girl. Her horizons broadened. Her confidence tripled. A crown had led to a new life, a better life, a whirlwind life of travel and people and heady highlights. She climbed Ayers Rock, escalated to the top of the World Trade Centre, flew over the Grand Canyon, ate snails at the Savoy and mushroom pie in Toronto, made thousands of speeches, met the rich and the famous. Happy ever after.

The audience smiled and clapped and cried *Bravo!* The cameras clicked and flashed. Purses opened. New sponsors stepped forward. Someone in the audience joined the Contest.

Elizabeth blinked. Stepped away.

The air was spiced with affirmation, as difficult to inhale as pepper.

Dear Elizabeth,

Enclosed is \$5- towards the Miss Model Australia Contest.

Wishing you all the best. I will follow your progress with interest.

Yours, in haste,

Mrs A. Whitmore

Jeanne Little laughed the sort of laugh Elizabeth had never heard before. It came from the belly, ricocheted off walls and walloped Elizabeth's ears like claps of thunder. Jeanie Little moved without strings. Her mouth was wide and red. Her large lashed eyes took in motes of dust and Elizabeth's freckles. Around Jeanie the air sizzled. When Jeanie stood next to Elizabeth and smiled at the camera, Elizabeth stiffened and shrank and disappeared. An inkblot in Jeanie's shadow.

Brisbane - Toowoomba - Dalby - Chinchilla - Miles - Roma - Mitchell ...

Park Motel, Toowoomba

8.3.83

Dearest Elizabeth,

I'm writing to complain. This is my eighth letter to you and I've only received ONE from you. I can't wait for the mail to come tomorrow ... better be at least three letters in that mailbox!

Rang your mum tonight. She was up and down. UP because I called and DOWN because she was missing you, UP because she no longer had to worry too much about day to day stuff, and DOWN because she wishes she was worrying because that would mean you were home again ... and so it went on.

Love, Jim x

Chaperone Patty opened the hotel door between their rooms and said, *Come in any time you need company. Have breakfast with me.*

Elizabeth had wanted company a few weeks back when Chaperone Kelly had closed the adjoining doors to have a nap, she'd said. Elizabeth had unpacked her suitcase and gone over the itinerary and thought of something to ask Kelly. An hour had passed. Surely Kelly was up and about.

Elizabeth had knocked on the adjoining door, opened it and gone through a second door. *Kelly*, she'd called very softly.

Oh, Elizabeth had heard, only to find Kelly and a man in bed with the sheets up around their ears.

Elizabeth had gasped and exited.

Kelly gave Elizabeth a crystal swan to commemorate her trip to Perth.

Maroochydore - Coolum - Nambour - Gympie - Hervey Bay ...

Miss Model Australia Visits Redcliffe

Beautiful Miss Model Australia 1983, Elizabeth Mathews, enchanted those who attended the Redcliffe Community Centre.

Elizabeth and John Cleese had time to catch up at the Coast last week. Cleese turned up at *The Chateau* to have a look around. Elizabeth and John had an impromptu lunch with the manager, Denis Barter.

They did? Elizabeth thought she'd met John and Denis in the hotel lobby, said *hello*, shook hands, smiled for the camera and then driven out to a fundraising lunch with five hundred and fifty guests.

Exec Gay told her about disabled children. One of the biggest problems was that parents didn't put seatbelts around their kids. When they had the car accident they never thought they'd have, children flew through windscreens and ended up with major problems. Problems also occurred during birth when babies didn't get enough air. This brief incident meant that brain damaged children needed special care for the rest of their lives. They had to have carefully designed wheelchairs that cost a fortune.

Elizabeth met disabled children. Some couldn't talk or keep still or look at her squarely. They handed her drawings and poems and damp toys that had to be returned with a smile. They dribbled down the front of woollen jumpers. Some wore bibs. Some needed a brace to keep their heads up.

Did her role as Miss Model Australia really make a difference? Exec Gay said it did. *You raise public awareness giving speeches, doing media interviews. You're a walking, talking billboard*, she said and gurgled.

Parents squeezed Elizabeth's hand and thanked her for all the hard work of promoting the cause. Elizabeth's smile was strained. Her lungs laboured like fish gills caught on a line and flung in a bucket. Her childhood asthma had been nothing compared to this. No pill could save the day.

Elizabeth said it was an *enormous privilege* to represent such special children.

In her darkest moments, she feared having a disabled child. She'd lack the courage to cope. She'd hug her child so tightly that the stale smell of saliva would never wash from her clothes.

Mackay - Townsville - Cairns - Mt Isa - Rockhampton ...

Crest International Hotel, Brisbane

16.3.83

Dearest Elizabeth,

I was just watching TV and you came on!! You were signing autographs, swamped by kids. It made me miss you more than ever. I miss you all the time.

Received two letters from you today (both with newspaper clippings of your beautiful smiling face). What a comedian you are. I laughed my head off. Guess you're wondering what was so funny. You know, the part about the body-ache and the Llama and the story about your sex-pot chaperone. Ah yes, most entertaining. Missing you very much. J. x

Teenage girls screamed when they saw blond, blue-eyed, singer-songwriter Ryan Sallinger. They hung over barricades to touch his arm, threw roses at his feet, flung kisses into the air, waited for hours in front of hotels to get a glimpse of his debonair jaw, dimpled cheeks, dreamy eyes. They stuck posters over their beds to wish him goodnight and god bless and sweet dreams.

Ryan Sallinger's vocal chords were honey-coated. He poured himself over the keyboard and into the microphone. Every woman wanted to be that piano, that microphone.

Elizabeth met Ryan because his tour collided with her tour and Exec Gay had her eye on the publicity. Ryan's manager had his eye on something else.

Ryan had white, straight teeth and a wide, generous mouth. His baby blue eyes sparkled when he looked at Elizabeth. Elizabeth's blue eyes sparkled when she looked at Ryan. The newspaper sparkled, too, with the caption, *Magic's in the air when musicians meet ...*

Elizabeth blinked and the world came to life as Ryan held her hands in his and smiled. The cameras clicked but Elizabeth, feeling the warmth of Ryan's hands spread up her arms and neck and face, became oblivious to everything.

Come to my concert, Ryan said. *In fact, come to the rehearsal and play something.*

Exec Gay gave the nod.

The cameras followed Elizabeth as she knelt before the children. Wheelchairs encircled her. The children dribbled. Heads flopped. They smiled open, wide, toothy grins. Elizabeth took a wet hand in hers and smiled back.

That night the TV ran the segment. Miss Model Australia. There she was in her designer suit, styled hair, high-heeled shoes. Not once did the camera capture a child except incidentally, irreverently, ironically.

It's hard to find genuineness in this business, the small-town newspaperman said. He bared his teeth at Elizabeth and scribbled something down.

You're different, but.

Elizabeth cocked her head.

I've met 'em, you know? They come here every year. But you're the real article.

They finally got it right when they picked you.

Elizabeth had been cornered at a fundraising dinner by a buxom busy-body who had extolled the virtues of Miss Model Australia 1982. *You won't see the likes of her again.*

Elizabeth had shut herself in a toilet cubicle and pressed her forehead to the wall. Her pulse had steadied. Everyone had favourites ... Miss Model Australia 1976 and Miss Model Australia 1969 and Miss Model Australia 1962. Ex-Miss Model Australias had loomed over Elizabeth like Manhattan skyscrapers.

Elizabeth thought of the children and worked her cheek muscles to give the newspaperman her best genuine smile.

Elizabeth went through the motions of meeting and greeting and pretending to eat her way through the morning. The newspaper article about her and Ryan was in her handbag, burning a hole. She felt breathless and light and fluttery. *Ryan Sallinger, Ryan Sallinger, Ryan Sallinger* ran through her head like a mantra.

By the time Elizabeth arrived at the rehearsal, she was shaking. Ryan kissed her cheek. Elizabeth saw gold and green and blue and let the kiss dry where it landed.

Ryan took her hand and led her to the grand piano shrouded by a black cloth.

Play for me, he said, and Elizabeth felt light-headed enough to faint, but didn't because the piano seat was pressing into her coccyx, reminding her of home and Jim and Faye and Ryan was running a finger along the lid of the piano as if to unzip it. The cloth felt like the silky slip she wore under her shirt.

Elizabeth looked at the black and white keys and made her hands travel there, allowing her fingers to stretch and gather strength. Never before had she wanted to play so much.

She executed Liszt sweetly, rapidly, fluidly. The piano was uncomplicated, accommodating, all for the show. Perfect for Liszt. She leaned back to allow her arms to travel up and down with languid ease.

When she finished the silence around her was complete, as if a fridge door had closed and she was left inside. Cool air swirled around her ankles. She looked up, expecting everyone to have gone. Ryan stood very still, to her left.

Wow, he said, and the word was warm. He raised his arms and clapped. Others joined in. Elizabeth breathed and melted and smiled.

Now I'll play to you, Ryan said and took Elizabeth's place at the piano. *You stand there.*

Ryan pointed to the curve in the piano. Lizzy stood with her hands resting on the lid, facing Ryan. Ryan positioned the microphone and said, *Check, check*. His voice boomed and vibrated. Elizabeth swooned.

Ryan crooned, *This song is for you, Elizabeth.*

The music began. Ryan sang. He poured himself into Elizabeth. It was all she could do not to fall. The cameras clicked. Ryan's manager rubbed his hands together.

At the concert, Ryan Sallinger sang for her. Not that he said. Elizabeth just knew in an intuitive way.

Unable to relax back into her V.I.P. seat, Elizabeth didn't blink. The stage, the piano and Ryan who, she knew, had her in his sights, was feeling more inspired than usual.

Backstage, Ryan promised to meet up with Elizabeth again. Their tours could collide in a month.

Elizabeth didn't know how to survive a whole month. Was the farewell kiss enough moisture to last through the drought-days to come?

In the car, driving home with Exec Gay, Elizabeth was certain it was true love. Ryan was her soul mate. Did Ryan feel it too? How would she break the news to Jim? A letter? A phone call? A telegram from America saying, *Sorry?*

She'd pack her bags and tell Exec Gay to stuff it.

When Elizabeth looked out the window she saw a sliver of moon hanging low in the sky.

The Horns of God, Exec Gay said.

Elizabeth stared at it.

Pity about Ryan. Exec Gay sighed. *Such a waste*.

Elizabeth frowned. *What do you mean?*

Well. You know. Exec Gay flopped her wrist at Elizabeth. Elizabeth stared at it, hanging there in mid-air like Miss Muffet's spider. *Being ... you know*.

Elizabeth suddenly felt tired, bone tired, dirt tired, lower-than-low tired.

Exec Gay glanced at Elizabeth. *Don't tell me you didn't ...*

Elizabeth hadn't the energy to move.

Oh dear. Exec Gay shook her head and gurgled. *Hope you haven't fallen for his charms*.

Arrive London 28.3.83

Sightseeing:

Thames Buckingham Palace Piccadilly Circus/Square Harrods The Strand Offices of Parliament Downing St. Cheyne – Chelsea Big Ben Westminster St Pauls London Tower Oxford/Bond/Regent St.

29.3.83

Leave Mayfair Hotel to meet Mr R. (SA Agent-General) and Aust. High Commissioner, Sir V. Garland. Visit Seaview Centre in Chelsea. Luncheon with Centre Staff.

Dinner at the Riverside Savoy hosted by Mr R.

30.3.83

Arrive Manchester. Interview on Radio Piccadilly. Check-in Britannia Hotel. Visit Lily Stockdale Disabled Children's Centre, Sale. Lunch with Press. Visit to Daresbury Hall Centre and School. Visit Coronation St. Studio, Granada, TV. Dinner with the Lord Mayor of Manchester.

31.3.83

8.30 a.m. Greet the first inaugural flight from Adelaide to Manchester.

1.00 p.m. Back to hotel to change.

3.00 p.m. Manchester Airport Cocktail Party with the Mayor and Mayoress of Manchester.

1.4.83

Depart for Australia

The flight to London gave Elizabeth time to think. The days after the revelation about Ryan were a blur. She couldn't unstick Ryan's face from her eyelids. She was such a fool. A complete fool. A hopeless, infatuated fool.

She gulped down the complimentary champagne, hoped Exec Gay wouldn't chatter too much, sank back into her first class seat and prayed that the plane would fly forever. She never wanted to return. Gravity would crush her.

Elizabeth didn't like Gay very much, not any more, not after Gay had called her *a twit* for wanting to go home on a free weekend. She'd never been called *a twit* before.

She wasn't asking for much. Plenty of Miss Model Australias went home in the middle of a tour if they could, if they were lucky enough to have two consecutive days free. Well, that's what Chaperone Patty had told her. Patty had wondered why Elizabeth wasn't going home on those two consecutive free days in the middle of her tour of New South Wales. *Go home? You mean, I could go home?* She'd felt the flash flood of excitement. So why was she *a twit* for asking? She hadn't asked for anything before and Patty had said there was no harm in it.

In the office of a General Manager, with the General Manager still in it, Elizabeth had cried. She never thought she'd find herself crying in front of a General Manager. Miss Model Australia shouldn't have anything to cry about. Elizabeth had hung up on Exec Gay and burst into tears. Chaperone Patty had comforted her with flat-handed taps

on the back. The General Manager had said kind things about understanding the pressure. Elizabeth tried to smile but the word, *twit*, had pinched her heart.

The conveyor belt takes her through a dark tunnel. Cold, jelly things touch her skin. Skeletons dance to circus music. Yellow eyes and fangs and hairy spiders appear and fade around her. With a crack of a whip the sideshow clowns turn right to left ... mouths held open with sewing pins.

People entered her dreams and said great long streams of things that were never completely coherent. When the 5.30 a.m. alarm snapped her wide awake, the dream-people vanished like vampires.

LAND-HO, HERE'S OUR LIZZY

Reigning Miss Model Australia, Elizabeth Mathews, won't be needing a life belt for her next port of call.

The charismatic 19 year old brunette has just returned from a trip to London. She will now take a tour of Victorian country areas.

In the very middle of it all Elizabeth woke and discovered it wasn't okay. It was the middle of winter, in the middle of another hotel room, in the middle of another city. She woke in the middle of the truth that, in the middle of the real world of itineraries, contracts and no sick leave, expectations had to be met. The fairest of them all couldn't escape.

Melbourne - Geelong - Ballarat - Ararat - Stawell - Horsham - Dimboola - Nhill - Bordertown ...

Elizabeth hadn't paraded in bikinis to win nor competed overseas in some international contest. She'd raised money for charity and represented children less fortunate. People looked disappointed. Everyone remembered the Miss Model Australia who had become Miss Ultima World. Why didn't Elizabeth compete in her cozzie overseas? What was wrong with her?

As soon as Elizabeth walked off the stage with the crown on her head, the demonstrations started. In Melbourne, feminists waved banners. In Perth, disabled people barricaded parliament. In Sydney, microphones were thrust under Elizabeth's nose: *What do you think about the Women's Libbers calling beauty parades two steps removed from*

pornography? *Feminists are saying the Miss Model Australia Contest is a meat-market, what do you think? Are disabled people correct when they declare that an able-bodied woman shouldn't represent them?*

Elizabeth didn't know what to say into the microphones slammed against her chin. She was caught in the middle of a media debacle, a fundraising circus, a feminist backlash, a disabled identity crisis that someone more beautiful could have mitigated or at least mediated.

Elizabeth's feet sank in sand.

Hello Dear,

What is wrong with these women? Are they jealous? You know, I always wondered if Victoria was jealous of you. Of course I shouldn't say such things.

Really, dear, just ignore these silly claims. How could you be exploited? Doris says it's the Tall Poppy Syndrome. Women against women. A glorified catfight.

Pay no attention. They'll get their comeuppance, you'll see. Keep your chin up, dear.

Love, Mum xx

Traralgon - Sale - Bairnsdale - Mount Beauty - Wodonga - Rutherglen ...

Jim met her at the airport and drove her home.

She sat in the car. Apple air freshener swung from the rear view mirror. David Bowie sang *Under Pressure*. She tasted a cottage cheese kind of familiarity. Hands resting on her lap. Shoulders down and slightly hunched. Tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She wished the car would never stop. *Jim, keep driving.*

Are you okay? You look tired. Jim touched her arm. *And skinny.*

She turned her head to the window, watching strips of white blip past.

You know ... her voice sounded very small ... a soul can shrivel in the shrine of fame.

Jim frowned. He tapped the wheel. *What do you mean?*

She sighed and pitched her shoulders lower. *Nothing.*

Warrnambool - Port Fairy - Portland - Heywood - Mount Gambier - Casterton - Coleraine - Hamilton ...

To Dear Elizabeth Mathews,

I am fine. How are you.

I have got a black cat called Sheeba. Belindas cats name is Snowball. Nicoles dogs name is Barny. Tantias horses name is Minty. Dad has got a dog called Tazan and Mum has got a dog called Winston and the familys pet is Cricket and he is very small and tiny they are all well except Tazan for he is going blind and we dont want to put him down.

Yesterday I had tonsolitis. Can you send me a foto of you dressed up like Miss Australia. Im going to send you a foto of me when I was little. You looked very nice actually. Beautiful the day you came to my school.

Write back when you have time (soon as possible)

I love you.

Lots of love and care.

From Judy-LeeAnn Whistler oooooxxxxx

Elizabeth sloughed off her shoes and rubbed her feet. She unpacked her black satin gown, hung it in the bathroom because Chaperone Patty said that steam was the best treatment for black satin creases.

In the shower she kept her head clear of the water. Her hair had a can of spray gluing it into a bun for the ball. She'd spend the entire evening fighting the desire to rip at the pins and combs and bury all ten fingernails into her scalp. Back in her hotel room she'd wrestle with knots and stickiness, wielding a wire brush around like a chimney

sweeper gone berserk. At 1.00 a.m. she'd be under the shower again, hot water melting her helmet of hair. She'd wash off the smoke and sweat and the feel of so many hands tugging on her arms, squeezing her hips, patting her own hands that needed, apparently, congratulation rather than consolation. She'd angle the jet of water to soften the tight knot between her shoulder blades. With any luck she'd liquidise herself down the drain.

She thought about the night ahead. How was she going to get through it? Six hundred and fifty people to meet. She must think of the children. Think of the children. She'd only just survived the Civic Reception that afternoon. She'd drunk too much white wine, eaten the finger food ... the worst kind of finger food - chicken wings - and the worst kind of time to eat - before dinner - and the worst possible dress for sauce and wings and fingers - cream silk. She'd avoided Chaperone Patty's eyes, grabbed a wing, dipped it in soy sauce and whispered *be damned*. Patty would have frowned if Elizabeth had given her a chance. Elizabeth had eaten and drunk and sat down on a seat for two minutes. Afterwards, in the car, Patty had given her the Bad Etiquette Lecture, but the chicken wing had made her brave. She'd left the civic reception without lingering as she should have, expressing gratitude and regret. She'd bee-lined out the door to get to the car and not looked back to wave and call out some last word of thanks. Patty wouldn't have wanted her in there waving a meat axe. It might have livened things up though.

She dressed in her creaseless black gown, touched up her makeup and clipped on her diamante earrings. They were sure to kill her earlobes but in the spotlight they'd look dazzling. The digital clock by the bed gave her two minutes to rehearse her speech. Gone were the days of writing a new speech every time she needed one. She'd wised up, thanks to Patty. Elizabeth created one set speech, a template for all speeches. She could add and

subtract, rearrange and embellish as the occasion warranted. It avoided the work she didn't have time for. Not that Patty actually saved Elizabeth from work. All the dinners and lunches and receptions were a chance for Chaperone Patty to catch up with friends and slosh down an inordinate amount of champagne. Elizabeth wanted to grab Patty's neat, grey bun and drag her away, but Patty kept saying, *Ten more minutes and then we'll go*. Ten more minutes turned into twenty more and then thirty. The midnight departure Elizabeth longed for became 1.00 a.m. and beyond. She simply couldn't break the cardinal rule of leaving her chaperone behind at a function, all meat axes aside. The truth was, neat grey buns disguised rampant party animals. Elizabeth wasn't going to be fooled by appearances ever again, nor highfaluting English accents, nor anyone wearing frosty pink nail polish, matching pink lipstick and purple eye shadow. Getting to know Chaperone Patty was a complete eye-opener.

Think of the children ...

Chaperone Patty knocked on Elizabeth's hotel door. Time to go.

Whyalla - Port Augusta - Port Pirie - Crystal Brook - Wallaroo - Kadina - Moonta ...

Doris chaperoned Elizabeth in South Australia. Elizabeth toured each town one day at a time, one breath at a time. Jim was only hours away. She wanted to jump from the moving Commodore and run.

Waikerie - Berri - Loxton - Renmark - Wentworth - Mildura - Swan Hill ...

She ground her teeth in the car, travelling with Doris. Doris's continual stream of wheezy, sniffy sentences sucked the air out of Elizabeth. If Elizabeth didn't switch off she'd bang her head and break the window.

Broken Hill - Cockburn - Olary - Peterborough - Burra - Clare ...

Jim's last letter, written in his untidy student-doctor's hand, made worse for being drunk, had told her about the twenty-first birthday parties for his mates. He missed her most at parties. He drank too much and suffered. The last party had been a blur. He'd passed out in someone's bed. He'd woken up with a girl called Clarissa lying next to him, not remembering a thing. Apparently he'd ... never mind. He'd tell Elizabeth face to face. He'd written sorry, over and over, filling the page. He shouldn't post it. He'd not meant to worry her. He'd been a fool and Elizabeth didn't deserve him. The letter had petered out with a promise to phone.

She'd rung but he was out.

What had happened?

She'd lost him.

The conveyor belt descends toward a deeper darkness. The silence is more disturbing than the circus music. The impenetrable darkness is scarier than the bizarre array of bones and eyes and snakes. Steamrolled as she is, her heart still pounds against paper-thin ribs.

Perth - Rockingham - Mandurah - Waroona - Bunbury - Busselton - Pemberton - Northcliffe ...

Sheraton Hotel, Perth

25.6.83

Hello Dear,

How are you? By now the horse races and Viennese Ball are over. How did the ball gown travel? You should put it into the cleaners to be pressed only. That red hat you wore at the races strikes the right note! Not too sure about that paisley dress you keep wearing, though. Could it be a bit drab?

I like the sound of your new non-crushable blouse, is it like the one you lost?

Have you had the nail hit into your boot? A boot-maker could fix it. How's your letter writing going? Doris said you have to keep on top of it.

Love, Mum xxx

Albany - Mount Barker - Cranbrook - Katanning - Wagin - Lake Grace ...

Elizabeth couldn't help it. She thought about Ryan. What was he doing? Who was he singing to? Did he ever think of her? Did she mean anything to him? Hadn't they shared something? A moment?

She should have been thinking of Jim but thoughts of Jim didn't do what thoughts of Ryan did.

1.7.83

Hello Dear,

Got your second letter and the lovely picture taken at the Viennese Ball. Are you putting on too much blush? Hope you're not rubbing your eyes in the morning, it'll make you red-rimmed for the rest of the day. Keep your hair curly, it's much better in photos.

Doris said you've been asked to play the piano on July 4th for the Consul General. Is that true? What are you going to play? I hope it's not the Moonlight. What about something more cheerful? Will you have a chance to practise the piano?

Love, Mum x

Mr Stephen H. Holsworth Vice President -

Sheraton's Hotel in the Pacific General Manager -

Sheraton-Perth Hotel

invites

Elizabeth Mathews

to join Mr S.M. Electon, Consul General of the

United States of America

at a luncheon to celebrate the

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

The Golden Ballroom, Sheraton-Perth Hotel

They'd tuned the baby grand for Elizabeth's performance. She had ten minutes to rehearse. It wasn't long enough, not now, after months of seeing pianos in bars and hotel lobbies and church halls, not close enough to touch ... or to touch and pretend to play for the sake of a photograph and an interview that would report her eyes were green or grey, olive or violet.

The lid felt smooth, cool, slippery under her fingertips. Ivory keys were worn and uneven. The piano smelt of smoke and beer. She rubbed her hands. Rolled her shoulders. Adjusted the stool.

She played a stiff C major scale. Her right hand trilled the treble as her left sunk into a sinister minor chord. The keyboard was weighted to the bass. She'd have to work hard to make the melody sing. Her playing would be lost in small talk, cutlery, crockery, wine glasses and waiters.

She caressed the keys and resuscitated the first movement of the Moonlight. She slipped into the silvery stream.

The frantic, last-minute preparations stopped. Hands poised mid-air, ears strained to listen. Music seeped into the carpet, the cornices, the chandeliers, the colours. Calm blanketed the room, uncreased brows, slackened jaws. *She's really good*, someone whispered near the stage.

The last chord, then silence, applause, and the chaos resumed.

After the luncheon at the Golden Ballroom, Exec Gay took hold of Elizabeth's arm at the elbow and leant into Elizabeth's ear.

Next time you perform on the piano, Gay whispered, make sure you look up, smile ... you know, look happy.

Elizabeth imagined herself as Liberace.

She turned toward Gay. *You mean, while I'm playing?*

Gay nodded as she steered Elizabeth into the Ladies' Restroom.

Itinerary For Miss Model Australia 1983

Saturday 6th August:

11.00 a.m. Arrive by RAAF aircraft. To be met by committee and entrants.

Check in at Gap Hotel.

12.00 noon Visit to Sunrise Children's Centre, 11 Mills Street.

1.00 p.m. Lunch with Alice Springs entrants at Barry Handy's Home (18 Conray St.)

5.00 to 6.30 p.m. Civic Reception - Council Chambers.

7.00 p.m. onwards Fundraising BBQ at Alice Springs Bowling Club

The road, the grey, the grassy verge, the sky, the streaky clouds, the driver, the radio, the smoke, all floated away, away, away. Where did she go? She? Not even she ... In limbo, space was simply a comma without purpose. A bodiless breath. A blank sign. A permanent check out ...

And in a blink she found herself again, staring out the window, a hundred miles and two hours later and still so very tired.

Darwin - Emerald Springs - Katherine Gorge - Tennant Creek - Alice Springs ...

Elizabeth's a Beauty Picture

Miss Model Australia, Elizabeth Mathews, arrived in Darwin yesterday all rugged up in a black and white cardigan, against the chilly wind.

Elizabeth will be in NT for the next few weeks to support the Miss Model Australia Contest which raises money each year for the Disabled Children's Fund.

The hotel clock read 5.02 a.m. The electronic-red numbers flickered as blood flowed out of her. Precious, early morning minutes clicked by. 5.05.

She measured the three paces she had taken to the bathroom before pain had made her fall on the bed. 5.07. She measured the distance to the phone. 5.08. She measured the day ahead and weighed up the possibility of making it to the end. How could she make it to the end when she couldn't get started? 5.10.

She was embarrassed to find herself this way. So weak of her.

Give it another minute, just one more minute and then, pain or no pain, she'd uncurl, get off the bed and shower. She would.

5.16. 5.17. She rolled off the bed and stumbled, crouched, crawled to the bathroom. The water helped. She found the strength to turn off the taps and dry herself and iron and dress and apply makeup to the ghost in the mirror. She packed her bags. Stopped. Pain pulled her chest to her knees again. 5.52. 5.53.

She skipped breakfast to compensate for lost time. Not that she felt like eating. Her stomach seethed.

6.00 a.m. A knock on the door.

She said nothing to Chaperone Annie.

The Gap Motel, Alice Springs

31.7.83

Dear Elizabeth,

I've thought about you all day. I've wished that you were with me - frustrated that you're so far away. I'm almost ready to say I've had enough ... 99 sleeps to go ... 2380 hours before you're home again for a little while ... Things are better. No more parties. I'm sorry to have worried you. All my love, Jim x

Elizabeth flattened the letter to her chest and sucked in air. *Thank God, thank God.* She had another chance.

Cape Van Diemen - Radford Point - Smoky Point - Point Jahled - Vashon Point - Croker Island ...

Thank yous:

Officer Commanding Group Captain Robinson

RAAF Base Darwin 5789

Mr. D. McInfern, Ford Motors, Morley

His Worship The Mayor of T.C., Mr A.E. Chorrick

Mayor Lester Ollanfield, Civic Centre A.S. 5750

Mr and Mrs Wallbridge, Nhulunbuy

Mayor of Katherine, Mrs P. Daniels, Civic Centre

Mr G. Nifter (Manager) TAA Darwin

Mr C. Bladner, Mayor of Darwin, P.O. Box 88, Darwin 5794

The Admin. Commodore Jackson, A.M., O.B.E., C.S.T.J., R.A.N.E.M.

P.O.Box 445, D. 5794

Mr Hamstead (ANZ) Smith St Mall, Darwin

His Worship the Mayor, Mr. A.S. Chanerery, OAM

and Aldermen of the Tennant Creek Town Council

cordially invite

MISS MODEL AUSTRALIA MISS ELIZABETH MATHEWS

to attend the first stage of the

TENNANT CREEK CIVIC CENTRE

to be held at the CIVIC CENTRE

AUGUST 5th, 1983 at 4.00 p.m.

Her skin was cardboard. It could be cut away from her skeleton and held out in front of her. There were handles to hold and circles where her eyes fitted.

Mindil Beach Hotel, Darwin

16.8.83

Hello Dear,

Jim rang and said your luggage went astray. Why does that keep happening? Don't they look at your ticket properly? It would pay to watch them put the tickets on your bag and actually tell them your destination. Doris says your luggage should go Priority, you travelling First Class, etc. Can't your chaperone do something?

Lovely photo of you in the N.T. News. It looks windy, though, because your hair is teased a bit too much. The Hotel looks great - what a pity the walls are so thin, or is it that the tellie was too loud next door? Hope you're getting enough sleep. Can't have bags under your eyes, dear.

My cold is better. Take good care. Love, Mum xxx

*Launceston - Deloraine - Devonport - Burnie - Zeehan - Queenstown - Bridgewater -
New Norfolk - Hobart - Kingston ...*

Elizabeth asked herself what was better about this life of sixteen hour schedules and aeroplane food and skipped meals and 2.00 a.m. room service. What was so good about meeting and greeting thousands of people? Standing for foot-numbing hours with a glass of flat champagne in her hand, talking the trivia-talk that turned the mind into Jarlsburg cheese. Answering the same questions over and over for people who didn't listen for the same reply but expected it anyway. People who wanted to dance their pot-bellied, balding dance with her to say, *You're the horniest woman around, luv*. People who wanted her to wear their designer clothes so that they could tell her in the back of a limo, *Take them off and your name will be mud all over Tassie*. People who wanted her autograph in between mouthfuls, in the bathroom, on the run to catch a flight. People who wanted her head tilted this way or that. Chin up, no, chin down. Toothy smile, no, seductive smile, no, forget the smile, no, smile goddamnit. Wherever she looked cameras were aimed, words exchanged, hands reaching, touching, squeezing, pulling. Instructions landed in her lap, clouds moved under her feet. The same clouds?

She ironed without an ironing board. Pantyhose dried over bathroom taps. A budget for dry cleaning and a tighter budget for phone calls. Every moment scrutinised, every word recorded, every face talked about. Speeches to memorise, protocol to remember, thank you letters to write at midnight. Napping in the car with her sunglasses crooked while her chaperone puffed on a ciggie and flicked ash out the window. Her name stuck to the roof. Miss Model Australia was here.

The conveyor belt flattens out. She's deep in the belly of the earth. It's cool and quiet. A slight vibration beneath her feet tells her she's still moving.

List of Clothes Already Worn:

SYDNEY:

White Anthea Crawford Perri Cutten Blue/Wh. Spot Pale Blue Dress Pottybonkers
(Keens) Mercuri (Breakfast) P. Acton Blue (Mike Walsh)

BRISBANE:

Spinelli P. Cutten Spot White Skirt/Mauve Top Sportscraft Caramel Twin Suit Pale Blue
Dress Black Strappy Dress White Lace (Telethon)

ADELAIDE:

Bl, Strappy Dress Wh. A. Crawford Mauve Top/White Skirt Trent Nathan Suit

PERTH:

Sportscraft Spot White Prue Acton A. Crawford Pale Pink Lace Pale Blue Dress

DARWIN:

Mercuri Blue P. Cutten Spot Pale Pink Strappy Dress Pale Blue Cream Strappy Dress

A. Crawford White

Sheraton Palace Hotel, San Francisco

How far away she was. It shouldn't worry her. She was nineteen and grown up and plenty of girls left home. It was more than distance or age. No flares or markers or tracks suggested where she'd gone. Without family to locate her and understand her and haul her back, what was to become of her?

Box 41 Lucindale

5272 SA

Dear Miss Elizabeth Mathews

How are you going. Is it fun being Miss Model Australia. I have joined these clubs Brownies, Judo, Guitar and The Sunshine club and my Mum has joined St. Johns but I wont join it.

I am 10 years old and I am in grade 5 at school my teacher is Mr Garry. I dont Like him people call him Mr Gas bag.

Love from Kersty Titcher

P.S. Please write back.

20.9.83

Ex-Beauty Queen Hits Critics

A former Miss Model Australia yesterday hit out at criticism that the contest is 'just two steps removed from pornography'.

'It's annoying,' said Miss Suzie Cranshaw. 'If someone could come up with another form of raising money that works as well, a number of places would love to hear about it.'

Miss Cranshaw was responding to criticism that the charity component of the contest is 'a blind' and that they are a form of exploitation of women.

'It's not a vehicle for some twit ego trip,' Miss Cranshaw says. 'I made more than 3,000 appearances as Miss Model Australia, talking to people about the work of Disabled Children's Centres around Australia. I still do voluntary work for the Fund.'

There was that word, *Twit*. Elizabeth felt the sting. She lay her brittle bones on the bed and instantly fell asleep.

Sheraton Wentworth Hotel, Sydney

30.10.83

Hello Dear,

By your itinerary you've been on a harbour cruise. Hope you put suntan cream on your shoulders. Did you have to wear your sunglasses for those photos? They cover up your face too much.

Doris rang and said she was disappointed over the last newspaper interview you did. Doris said it ran along too predictable lines and you could have been different. She was surprised by it, she said.

When you get this note the Mike Walsh Show will be over - hope you enjoyed it. Remember to use plenty of face powder to stop the shine on TV.

Well, I better do the ironing. Love Mum xxx

For your collection, they said, handing Elizabeth a souvenir spoon.

Other Miss Model Australias had collected theirs and mounted them on specially made shelves. Elizabeth didn't know what she'd do with hers. They infiltrated her suitcase, tangled in underwear, filled up pockets, rattled and cracked their plastic covers every time her luggage flew across the country.

One day packets of silver spoons would spill from the 747. Little caskets falling to earth.

She wonders if she's in the underworld. Has anyone missed her? Would someone fetch her? Should she have carried twine like a good Girl Guide when she started the journey?

She calls for help but her voice is smothered by deep desert sand.

Elizabeth cried in Jim's arms when it was time to say goodbye.

You must learn to let go, detach. Don't lose yourself in the relationship, Eva said in the car afterwards, as Elizabeth mopped up tears with a tissue. Men are nothing to cry over; there's far more important things like hunger and abuse and death.

Elizabeth swallowed, sniffed, nodded her head. Miss Model Australias had to see reason. Hearts couldn't rule their heads. They had a job to do.

A Titleholder has Mixed Feelings

The nice, the nasty and the nutty. Miss Model Australia, Elizabeth Mathews, has experienced them all.

Nice? 'That's the feeling you get when you visit disabled children. They crowd around and hold your hand. It gives you a warm feeling to know you've helped to raise money for them.'

Nutty? 'The nutty ones are the guys who offer to be my bodyguard or butler! It's all good fun, of course.'

Nasty? 'Well, it was Jenny Rowling of the Women's Electoral Lobby calling the Contest a "meat market". We were really upset. Especially as we didn't even parade in swimwear.'

Elizabeth could have told nuttier stories. Like the time she flew to New York and an Arab sheik, with a checked cloth on his head, had leant over the aisle and asked where she was staying. She had foolishly told him while Exec Gay snored into the blue pillow sandwiched under her chin. Next thing Elizabeth knew, the sheik was ringing at 7.00 a.m. asking to sit in her room and watch her dress. After the second call (to smell her hair and lie in her bed) she told Exec Gay about it, blushing continuously. Exec Gay promptly contacted reception and barred all calls to Elizabeth's room. But Elizabeth feared she might find the sheik in the lobby or lift. She couldn't get the sound of his foreign voice out of her ear.

What about the phone calls from so-called photographers that admired her cheekbones and cleavage and wanted her to pose nude for magazines she'd never heard of? Those calls had made her feel dirty.

What about the time she'd sat on a boat and watched Fijians busy about her with bright orange packets of cream and makeup? Just as someone raised a camera, Exec Gay had appeared and asked, *What's going on here?*

Elizabeth had shrugged. *I thought it was something you'd arranged.*

Exec Gay had whipped her hands about, herding the Fijians off the boat.

You silly sod, she'd said to Elizabeth. *They were taking advantage of you.*

Katrina reminded Elizabeth of a romantic fiction heroine. Katrina had a curly mane of blonde hair cascading down her back. A swag of handsome men would line up to marry her.

They sat in the car; Elizabeth in the front because she was still the reigning queen; Katrina in the back seat as an up-and-coming contender for the crown.

Elizabeth checked that Chaperone Patty wasn't driving in circles. Patty had circled on several occasions: not that Elizabeth had known back then. Patty had caused them to be very late for very important appointments. Patty had mumbled about one-way streets and no through roads and how impossible it was to keep up with it all from year to year and the expense of new Street Directories that she read upside down, without her glasses, anyway, so what was the point?

Elizabeth thought about this very question.

Katrina said, *The hair at the back of your head needs teasing, or something - it's gone flat.*

Elizabeth swivelled in her seat. Katrina was looking at Elizabeth with wide, blue eyes. *Do you need a mirror? I've got one.*

Elizabeth turned to face the front and bit back from telling Katrina a thing or two. The effort made her jaw ache. Patty was definitely circling.

No, thanks, was all Elizabeth said and made a point of not touching her hair for the rest of the day.

Two men sat either side of Elizabeth at the restaurant table, unbuttoning blazers, straightening executive ties. They enquired as to how she was.

Elizabeth gave the answer she always gave, *Good, thank you.*

They asked her again. Was she really okay? Really?

She frowned and said, *Yes, I'm really okay, thank you.*

The men looked at each other and then at her.

It's just that some girls have ... fallen apart ... at this point in proceedings and said a few unfortunate things about their experiences, you know?

Elizabeth was embarrassed for those girls who had collapsed at the end of the year. She wondered who. There had been rumours, curious things alluded to on the perimeters. Elizabeth hadn't listened to the gossip. Not really. One Miss Model Australia had slept around, behind her chaperone's back. Another hadn't won the hearts of the country people and been labelled a snob. Another had let fame go to her head and wouldn't be seen in anything less than a limo. Another had stuttered giving speeches. One had behaved so badly in a department store that a major sponsor pulled out.

So we wanted to chat with you, in case you needed support, in some way.

Elizabeth stared at the men in their suits and ties. Support?

No, I'm fine, really.

She was fine. Strong. At this one thing, the end, she wouldn't fail.

When the reporters asked what it had been like, Elizabeth said, *Like ten years packed into one.*

Have you enjoyed it?

Elizabeth tried to animate her eyes. *There'll be a lot of happy memories.*

Reporters scribbled on their notepads.

What will you do when it's over?

Elizabeth went blank ... *I don't* ... She cleared her throat. *I'll return to my studies.*

And what about your boyfriend? Any plans?

Elizabeth gritted her teeth. She knew what they wanted to hear. She knew ... she knew ... She took a breath. For the third time in a year that felt like ten she did something she shouldn't have.

Releasing her jaw, she said, *No plans.*

And with that the reporters left.

She should have remembered. It would have saved her a sleepless night. It didn't matter what she said to the reporters, they wrote whatever they wanted.

The article came out the next day ...

Elizabeth Looks to her Leisure

'It has all gone past in such a whirl,' said the grey-eyed, dark-haired beauty who relinquishes her crown November 4th. 'I'm looking forward to reliving the year at a more leisurely pace, browsing through the scrapbook.'

Becoming Miss Model Australia was a dramatic change of lifestyle from shy university student to national celebrity.

At 20, Elizabeth is now one of the most travelled, most interviewed and most photographed woman in Australia.

Her list of highlights include going 3,000 feet below the surface at Mt. Isa mines, meeting the Governor General, driving a simulated air bus ('and crashing three times'), climbing Ayers Rock, playing the piano on *The Don Lane Show*, performing with Ryan Sallinger on the Gold Coast, travelling to England, America, Canada and the South Pacific and shopping all around the world.

'I'll be both glad and sad when it ends.'

You need a new gown for the Final, Exec Gay told Elizabeth.

Elizabeth had won five thousand dollars and every cent had been spent on her wardrobe. She'd worn the clothes out. No money was left, despite buying clothes, shoes and accessories on sale. Some outfits had cost her five hundred dollars. An evening gown could cost seven hundred, even more. What would she do?

Faye came to the rescue. It took her seven days and seven nights. She hand-sewed sequins because, she said, *they looked flashy under the spotlights*. A chiffon bow would

be tied on one shoulder and sweep down Elizabeth's arm. The other shoulder would be bare. The long, pencil-thin skirt would have a slit up one side, all the way to Elizabeth's thigh. The material was a turquoise satin that slipped over Elizabeth's skin. Elizabeth completed the dress with gold, metallic shoes and diamante earrings.

Faye had made a masterpiece.

Elizabeth came close to crumbling when Exec Gay said, *Ryan Sallinger is singing at the Crowning Night. It's organised with his manager. A done deal.*

Ryan Sallinger was there that night, in his tux. Elizabeth hid in the backstage shadows. But something gave her away.

You're here. Ryan grasped Elizabeth's hand and pulled her into the light of an exit sign. Her heart ker-thumped, th-thumped.

I was looking forward to this, Ryan said with his honey-tonsils. *Tonight I'll be singing for you.*

Ryan would sing and she'd collapse (wasn't she pale, wasn't she frail?). Ryan would rush to her side and yell, *Get an ambulance.* The TV producer would cut to a commercial. Dramatic scenes would replay all night, on every station. She'd slump to the floor as her puppet strings snapped.

Next day the headlines would read, *Tragedy strikes as Miss Model Australia collapses on stage ...* The article on Page 3 would continue with the story: *Australian Icon, Elizabeth Mathews, takes her last breath in the arms of pop-idol, Ryan Sallinger.*

Mr Sallinger spoke to reporters this morning expressing deep sadness over the sudden loss of a wonderful friend. The papers would speculate about the relationship between Ryan and Elizabeth. A postage-stamp photo of Jim would show him grimacing. Boyfriend suspected love-triangle, the caption would read.

Days later Ryan would be photographed at the funeral, cutting a fine figure in black. Screaming fans would wait at the cemetery gates. Overnight, Ryan's national tour would be sold out.

Elizabeth dragged herself onto the stage, pulling a ball and chain. When it was her turn to give a speech she found herself incapable of words. Just like the beginning, her farewell speech was a patchwork of jumbled sentences, mish-mashed thank yous; a plethora of pauses and stutters and mutterings. Then Ryan sauntered onto the stage and stole the spotlight and all sense of what was real.

Elizabeth found herself flying through the air before Ryan reached the chorus of his song. What went up eventually came down but she didn't care. The only way was up.

The conveyor belt stops. She's in a room, or is it a well? It's dark. There's enough space to lie down. Her legs ache. Her head is heavy. She's very, very thirsty.

A good Girl Guide wouldn't fall asleep, knowing the peril, but she does as soon as she closes her eyes.

Elizabeth hadn't known what to say to the seven hopefuls, except *don't do it, go home, be happy*. But a real Miss Model Australia wouldn't have said that, so she talked about the phenomenal experiences, the confidence-building, the overseas trips. She said it had been an honour to represent the children.

Don't forget the children ... and the girls had nodded in unison.

She gave Miss Model Australia 1984 a kiss and said, *Good Luck*. She looked away and, only later, looked back.

Part Three

Everything was smaller. The bed, narrower. The ceilings, lower. She hyperventilated in the shower, standing on the baby blue tiles angled like a mad hatter's mosaic. Walls pressed in. A tiny window puffed air. The exhaust sucked the skin off her bones. Everything looked tired: the scuffed lino, faded bedspread, chipped dresser, scratched sink, battered toaster. Everything sounded suburban: the dogs in the yard, the slap of the flyscreen, footsteps on the walkway, droning fridge, children hollering, the thin-walled sighs of sleep and the occasional snore. Everything smelt ordinary: laundry detergent, bleach in the loo, sun-dried clothes, salty breezes and fumes from the freeway half a block away. Everything tasted predictable: the spearmint toothpaste, gritty water, grilled chops and three veg drowned in Worcester sauce.

There was no doubt about it, she was lying on her single, sagging bed, back where she'd started. Wasn't life supposed to get better and better, higher and higher, bigger and bigger? Nothing in the script said anything about finding oneself at the beginning again, exhausted.

Her body, clenched in the stranglehold of something, wouldn't switch off. Hands shook. Sunlight hurt. Clouds depressed her. Wind chafed. Her tongue was dry and

shrivelled. She was cold, then hot, then cold, mainly cold. She'd returned to earth too fast.

Faye said, *You look like death warmed up.*

She'd been like that for a while. The lights were out. Hair was limp and split. Her body, flabby. Her skin, yellow.

Yellow around the gills, Faye said. Too much good living.

Just before dawn she'd drift into dreams. Clocks ticked. Spotlights searched an empty stage. Cameras waited on standby.

She woke with a start. She missed the 5.00 a.m. alarm and where on earth was she?

She told everyone she was happy to be home.

Tut, tut. Exec Gay leaned over the steamrollered body. I did my best but ... She was far too flimsy, too ... sensitive.

Why the judges chose her, I don't know. Miss New South Wales was my personal favourite.

Chaperone Patty nodded. We did our best.

We did.

Pity.

Nothing to be done now.

Nothing.

Best we leave her.

Yes.

It's over anyway.

For her, it's over.

Gay and Patty floated away.

At the bottom of the well, Miss Model Australia 1983 slowly turned to dust.

Elizabeth didn't care about the weather, petrol prices, supermarket bargains, toilet paper supplies, TV soap operas, newspaper dramas or who was drinking the most orange juice out of the fridge.

She didn't want to be called Lizzy anymore.

Why not? Faye asked, looking up from her sewing machine.

Elizabeth shrugged.

You've got to give me a reason. I can't stop calling you Lizzy for no reason.

But you can.

Faye's face paled. *I've always called you Lizzy.*

I'm not a Lizzy anymore.

You are to me. Faye examined seams, checked the stitch and turned a knob.

You're getting high-faluting. Fame goes to people's heads you know.

Elizabeth threw up her arms. *Christ Almighty.*

Lizzy! Faye's eyelid pulsed.

Elizabeth sat in the lounge room, switched on the TV, turned up the volume.

Faye's machine roared.

Jim was happier with Elizabeth's request to change her name.

I'll call you Lil, if that's okay.

She nodded, pleased with the way Lil rolled off Jim's tongue and warmed the air around his lips.

Elizabeth went through the motions. She thudded to the kitchen in her ugg boots, wrapped in a cheap silk bathrobe from Hong Kong, printed with miniature Japanese ladies: fans in hands, chopsticks in their hair, secret smiles on painted faces.

She sat at the table with toast and tea. Flicked through the paper. Watched the postie roar past the letterbox on his motorbike.

Elizabeth lay on her narrow bed, staring at the ceiling. Hair-line cracks were everywhere.

Her life was over.

Elizabeth filled albums with photos and clippings and telegrams. *Two thousand public appearances. Six hundred and fifty-three interviews. The most photographed woman in Australia ...*

She didn't worry about chronology or the angle or whether she had two or three copies of the same photo.

Faye said, *One day you'll be pleased you kept a record.*

Faye had crafted her own albums with newspaper clippings that she'd insisted Elizabeth send. She'd gone to the newspaper office and ordered black and white copies of the photos she'd seen in the paper. She'd read the reviews. *That article said you were one of the best pianists in Australia.*

Marm.

Don't downplay your talents, Lizzy.

How would a journalist know?

Of course they'd know. It's their job to know.

Elizabeth's hands became heavier and heavier. Photos and clippings and telegrams sifted through her fingers. Her eyeballs swam in their sockets. She yawned. Sighed. Rested her head in the crook of an arm. It was difficult to stay upright ...

She jammed every last memento into a box the size of a tea chest. On top of the pile she placed the old shoebox that Ken hadn't claimed or conquered. Barbie was probably dead.

With a thick, black texta she drew two intercepting lines on the lid of the box and shoved it into a cupboard. She lay on her bed and slept and dreamt she was embalmed in sticky tape.

Jane separated from Grant. Grant had had enough of Jane's vegetable peeling; Jane had had enough of Grant's shortcomings in bed. Jane thought there was someone else. Grant categorically denied it. Jane said there were irreconcilable differences. Grant agreed.

Jane moved back home and moped. The Happy Valley house was put up For Sale with its expensive wallpaper peeling in the bedroom.

I don't love him any more, Lizzy, Jane said.

Jane was too upset to call Lizzy *Elizabeth*.

Aunt Victoria was silent on the matter of Jane's divorce.

She's grieving, Faye said.

Jane's eyes gradually lost their red-rimmed, wrecked-and-lost look.

Aunt Victoria wondered why Jane couldn't keep Grant happy. *Perhaps she's head-strong.*

Faye took a sip of black coffee. *Maybe we made marriage look too easy.*

Aunt Victoria stared out the window, past Faye's homemade curtains. *Marriage has to be worked at.*

Elizabeth, hunched forward, let the words flow through her. She was sorry for Jane. Sorry about the divorce. Hoped she'd never divorce. She'd had her share of failures.

They just fell out of love, apparently. Aunt Victoria frowned. Irreparably.

Faye tut-tutted. *Jane expected wine and roses forever.*

Aunt Victoria shifted in her chair. *Grant was a solid provider.*

Faye nodded.

Ex-Miss Model Australias were supposed to move forward, upward, skyward. Ex-Miss Model Australias sifted through the excellent opportunities landing on their polished doorsteps. They worked for international banks, hotel chains, airlines. They married lawyers, had three kids and lived in mansions with water views. Ex-Miss Model Australias didn't care that all the spotlights were switched off and the crowds had dwindled and no one wanted to look through mountains of memorabilia. All was put behind them. Forgotten.

Jim's sister, Helen, married Vance. Jim took his camera and snapped photos, capturing the happiness that snaked down the lens. Elizabeth sat at a table looking on, wondering what she was doing there.

Helen danced with her father in her white wedding dress with its sweetheart neckline and hooped skirt.

Elizabeth felt unreal, incorporeal, watching the celebration. On the perimeter. Again.

She tried to be happy for Helen, happy for Vance, but Jane's divorce depressed her. Jane had such a perfect wedding ... She'd been so happy ... Jane and her husband had looked so good ... like Helen and Vance looked now.

Jim took Elizabeth home. They didn't say much. Her face was packed in ice.

On the stage, at the grand piano, the spotlights were bright and hot. A microphone hovered inches away. The band played, the audience cheered. She looked across the blur of faces and smelt over-heated fuses mixed with the sharp spice of her own fear. She opened her mouth to sing and felt the sudden sting of humiliation. All the words had gone.

If Elizabeth didn't marry Jim there was something terribly wrong with her. Jim was everything a girl should fall madly in love with. He was a doctor. And he loved her.

Of course, Jim had tarnished his reputation with Clarissa. Elizabeth wasn't sure what had happened. She didn't press for details. A mistake was best forgotten.

When Elizabeth walked into rooms, no one turned to look.

Shop assistants said, *Your face looks familiar. You remind me of someone ...*

She didn't want this halfway house.

Hands encircled her waist. Faces loomed. Smiles turned menacing.

There's danger out here, someone whispered close to her ear.

She looked down at the arms encircling her waist and screamed. Snakes slid around her legs. Snakes everywhere. Writhing, entangled masses to her left, to her right. One snake made it all the way up to her chest and buried its fangs in her neck.

Claudine welcomed her back with open arms. *Our very own celebrity.*

Cocooned in a tunnel of light, Elizabeth slunk down the catwalk. She posed and rested a hand on a bony hip. Silky clothes softened her skin. The air was easier to breathe. Spotlights warmed the top of her head. Music took over her feet. People stared. She smiled.

Elizabeth agreed to marry Jim the day Jim heard that his father had been taken to hospital. It wasn't a case of hepatitis. It was cancer.

Jim and his mother and his sister walked around with white faces, eyes half-mast, unfocussed.

Jim and Elizabeth decided to delay the announcement of their betrothal. They'd think positively. Jim's father would pull through. The doctors were wrong. Down the track there'd be a double celebration ... a return to health and a marriage.

Was sex before marriage a sin? Of course it wasn't. It was 1984 not 1954. Jim was the love of her life ... it wasn't as if she was about to do it with anyone ... and what if she was?

Jim said he'd wait. But could Elizabeth? Clarissa loomed.

Elizabeth went to the doctor to get the Pill. The doctor lowered his gold-rimmed spectacles and peered across his desk. *You're very young, my dear, and life is all before you. Don't waste it on a boy.*

Elizabeth hurried out the door with the prescription in her purse. The world had already been her oyster. Look where it had got her.

She climbed great flights of stairs. Stairs to the stars. Stairs that went up and up. But as she neared a star the stairs descended. Just as she thought to rest, the stairs promised the

brightest star. And as she neared that blue, gold, pink diamond light the stairs abruptly stopped.

Looking down into the blackest void she knew that she had failed.

Elizabeth gripped the sheets and pulled them up to her chin but Jim was on the wrong side, pressed against her body. She shut her eyes as Jim probed places she'd never touched.

Her legs were tree trunks. Big toes locked together. She'd become pregnant despite the pill and her fate would be sealed ... not such a scary thing, come to think of it.

While the sheets rustled and the bed rocked, she waited to be swept away. Jim's breathing stopped. His body shuddered.

Specks of blood smattered the sheets. Her thighs were sore. She hobbled to the bathroom, leant toward the mirror. Under the fluoro her face was liquid paper white.

Aunt Victoria says your study days are over. Faye sipped black coffee. You'll want to take on bigger and brighter things.

There was no time to waste. Elizabeth needed something solid ... and with one more semester to finish her Degree ...

Returning to the Conservatorium, she didn't recognise anyone. The office staff had disappeared, including Claire Pelham. Claire had sat at the desk with her name on it and always lifted her head to smile at Elizabeth. Claire hadn't stopped typing to smile at anyone else. Now Claire was gone and the offices had become windowless rooms, referred to as The Cells. Students rehearsed under bare light bulbs, on tuneless pianos collapsing in corners.

Electronic Ethnomusicology had moved in. Elizabeth smelt the currents and fuses and heated valves as she made her way to the toilets. She eyed the black curtain, the entrance to the New Wave Wing. Pasty guys with jeans belted just above their knees, cruised in and out on rubber-soled boots, stroking goatees, scratching beanies or cropped scalps. The New Waves sauntered, tweaking nose rings, sneering at the more lyrical efforts of their conservative counterparts. It was 1985 but Elizabeth must have been away for at least a decade.

Loralie Carvan was Elizabeth's new piano teacher. Loralie was married to a psychiatrist and was planning to start a family. Loralie's husband already had four children from a previous marriage. His children were much the same age as Loralie.

Elizabeth went to Loralie's home in the inner north for lessons. The house was a bull-nosed, bluestone villa. The veranda dripped iron lace and perfumed roses. Inside, thick carpet and Persian rugs greeted the feet. Potpourri wafted. Everything was old, original and obviously expensive. Elizabeth felt stiff and formal in Loralie's home.

Loralie encouraged Elizabeth to play *Rhapsody No. 1* by Brahms, Haydn's *Sonata in E flat major* and Beethoven's big *Concerto No. 5*.

Loralie said, *You play Beethoven very well.*

A string loosened in Elizabeth's heart then quickly tightened. Loralie must be soft. Maybe she pitied Elizabeth in her fallen state as a former-famous person. Maybe she pitied anyone who lived in the south.

Loralie said, *There are two types of games. The outer game of striving toward external goals and the inner game of overcoming internal obstacles.*

Loralie leaned in closer. *But let me tell you a secret. There's really only one game.*

Elizabeth held her breath.

The inner game.

Loralie explained. *Eliminate self-doubt and fear and the outer game immediately improves.*

And, Loralie sat back in her chair, remember this ... We never stop playing the game.

Tick, tock, tick ... The grandfather clock chimed.

But, Loralie raised a finger, we always have a choice about how we play the game.

Outer games ... inner games ... How did one eliminate self-doubt and fear? It was as difficult as slaying a dragon.

It's all in the mind, Loralie said, confusing Elizabeth further. *Our thoughts are just thoughts ... we don't have to believe them.*

Elizabeth nodded because she saw that Loralie expected her to.

Under Loralie's grand piano was a box decorated with floral paper. Elizabeth imagined it full of old letters. When she played the piano she read each love-lorn word and felt her own heart break.

Loralie said, *Give yourself permission to fail.*

Loralie had to be mad.

Elizabeth completed her Bachelor of Music degree and hung the certificate on the wall. She looked at it for a long time: the gold frame, the clean glass, the red rubber stamp slightly buckling the paper.

Princess Diana had another son.

They watched Jim's father fade away. It took him a year to die. His last breath was taken in hospital with Jim's mother by his side.

Elizabeth wore a floral dress to the funeral and tried not to cry when Jim delivered the eulogy. Afterwards she put the dress in a plastic bag and shoved it into her wardrobe where the box was stashed, forgotten.

Elizabeth opened a jewellery box. A ballet dancer pirouetted to the tinkle of Claire de lune. A tiny tiara sparkled under the spotlight. As the dancer twirled the colour of her tutu changed from pale pink to deep pink to crimson to black. The music got faster. The spinning increased. The music box became a vortex. Elizabeth was sucked into the whirlwind.

Elizabeth lay in her single bed and thought about Jim. Jim's hand holding hers. Jim's laugh. Jim's ear turned toward her ... Jim's eyes fixed upon her ... Jim's arms around her ...

Wasn't marrying the central goal, to tie her life to a man's?

She thought of Jane. Jane with the hungry, desperate look of the single woman. *I don't want that ...*

She thought of Fran ... *No, not Fran.*

She thought of her mother ... but that was her mother. She would do better ... it would be different.

To marry Jim was the logical step.

After hearing the news of the engagement. After welcoming Jim into the family. After her husband had said, *Be warned, she's expensive to keep.* After Jim had left. After they'd eaten tea. After washing the dishes Faye said, *Did you hear about Dr Giles? Ran off with a nurse, left his wife and kids.*

Elizabeth turned to face her mother. *What?*

Her mother stopped rubbing the sink. *Ran off, left his wife and kids.*

Oh. Elizabeth scratched her head. *So?*

I'm just saying ... just thought you should know. Her mother rinsed the wettex.

Nothing to get uptight about.

Elizabeth went cold. *Doctors aren't perfect, is that what you're saying?*

Her mother twisted the tap.

That's a bit rich coming from you, Elizabeth said. *You thought doctors walked on water. All those home visits and cups of tea.*

Don't be silly, her mother said, shrugging her shoulders.

Elizabeth took a big breath. *Then we found out that old Smithers was over-prescribing cortisone. Don't you remember? After the vomiting and the hospital?*

Her mother fumbled with a tea towel.

No wonder I was cracking up - blown up - fat. Elizabeth threw her arms out wide. *Ugly!*

The word clanked down an old mine shaft.

Her mother frowned. *An oversight, I'm sure.*

Now you're sticking up for doctors.

Don't get smart.

Yeah. If asthma wasn't going to kill me, medicine was next in line.

Her mother's eyelid pulsed.

If you're implying Jim's not perfect then ... but Elizabeth ran out of words. Her mother had sucked them out of her. Again.

Lizzy stands in the kitchen and asks her mother, Do I matter?

Her mother straightens her back and lifts her hands out of the kitchen sink. Blood pours from her wrists.

Let me cut your wrists and see, she says.

Her mother grips a knife. She holds it up in front of her and steps closer. Let me cut your wrists and see, she says again.

Lizzy doesn't know whether to run or stay, whether she wants her wrists cut or not, whether she can trust her mother to know. The confusion keeps her stationary, stuck. She holds out her arms.

Hold them wider and higher, her mother says.

Lizzy stretches her arms out wide like Jesus on the cross.

This is the way to matter, her mother says. This is the way ...

Her mother brandishes the knife. Lizzy squeezes her eyes shut and waits.

Elizabeth bought the first dress she tried. Pearls weighed at the neck, wrists and ankles. A pencil-thin skirt accentuated her legs. Shoulder pads made her hips proportionally smaller. If she held the bouquet at waist level, the flowers would screen her bust. A modest bouquet would do.

She stood in front of the mirror and assessed herself from head to toe. She was a slab of cream. She blended into the walls.

Where's your veil, where's your hoop skirt? Why aren't you wearing white? Her mother's hands pressed together as if in prayer. *This isn't your second wedding.*

Elizabeth bit her lip and blushed. She couldn't wear white but Faye didn't know that.

Maybe I should make your dress.

Elizabeth measured her words. *This dress suits my figure, don't you think? It'll save so much work.*

I don't mind work.

I know, Mum.

Faye's frown softened. *As long as you're happy, dear.*

Elizabeth picked out the first flowers she saw for her bouquet - cream roses - and the first cream cake, the first photographer in his cream studio, the first cream menu, the

first Reception Hall, which wasn't cream but would be filled with cream tablecloths and cream roses and cream people on the day.

What's the hurry, Lizzy? This is the most important event of your life. Her mother's eyes flashed pale blue anxiety. *Well, until you have children.*

Stop calling me Lizzy. Elizabeth shivered.

Her mother's mouth puckered. *You're very jittery, dear.*

Elizabeth wanted to elope. One moonlit night she'd climb out the bedroom window and rendezvous with Jim. They'd drive for hours in his car to some backwater town where an arthritic priest would marry them in an ivy-smothered chapel, accompanied by a wheezy organ and a bored witness who hailed rice over their heads after the short ceremony of *I do, I do* and signing the dotted line. The marriage certificate would be packed into the suitcase to work its way to the bottom. They'd pass through villages, building campfires for cooking, erecting tents to sleep, all their worldly possessions on the backseat of Jim's Golden Holden ... *for richer, for poorer* ... they could elope and never come back ... *for better, for worse* ...

Jim and Elizabeth met the celebrant who would marry them under an oak tree in the middle of Century Gardens. She didn't want a Methodist Church. Jim didn't want a Catholic Church. She didn't want to say, *to love, honour and obey.*

The future was vaguely decided. Not that they'd talked about it. Jim and Elizabeth would marry and live in the 1930s bungalow they'd bought three months ago at auction (with financial help from Jim's father). Elizabeth was going to create the perfect house. She and Jim would be happy in the east. Everyone would see what a perfect life they led.

Elizabeth twirled the engagement ring around her finger and watched how the diamond sparkled, yellow, pink, blue. She tapped the stone against her tooth, not sure if it was real.

You can't get married under a tree, Lizzy. Her mother's eyelid pulsed. What if it rains? What will people think?

That's it. I'm cancelling the whole thing.

Lizzy! What a silly girl you are. Why can't you get married in a church like everyone else?

Like Jane, you mean?

I mean getting married properly, before the Eyes of God.

So God is only present in a church we never attend, is that it?

Don't get smart with me. Her mother tapped the kitchen table with her nails. I want it to be right. One day you'll look back and be pleased.

Like Jane.

Lizzy. Her mother huffed and tightened her lips. A tree is no place for wedding vows.

I'll get married wherever I please. It's my wedding.

I'm paying for it.

I'll elope.

You'll do no such thing.

I will.

What did I do to deserve such a selfish child? Her mother took a sip of black coffee.

I'm so sorry to be such a disappointment. You and Victoria should sob in Grandma Florrie's beer.

Her mother's cup crashed into the saucer. *What a terrible thing to say.*

Elizabeth shrugged.

What has got into you, Lizzy? The pressure?

Jim and Elizabeth stand by the tree. She's in her wedding dress, he's in his suit. As they say their vows the tree waves its branches like the legs of an octopus. Lizzy shies away, too late. One slithering branch winds its way around her waist and snatches her up. She screams and wrestles with it and reaches out for Jim. Jim tries to scale the tree. He smashes his fists. Elizabeth is tossed into the lipless mouth of the tree-creature.

Elizabeth looked as she'd imagined, all cream. Jim was there in his matching cream suit. His bow tie was straight, his hair was cut, his face was freshly shaved. Jane stood beside Elizabeth and Josef stood beside Jim. Everyone was steady, except Elizabeth. She was shaking.

Jim held both her hands in his like a cradle. Would he let go if she pulled away? She tried to meet his eye. What if she looked there and saw a face she didn't recognise? Surely she'd start to scream and not stop to breathe and wheeze and turn blue. The men in white would put her in a straightjacket and take her away. In the asylum she'd watch the shadows fade to nothing.

Do you take Jim to be your lawful wedded husband? The sun dipped behind a cloud as the celebrant peered over his spectacles. *'Til death do you part?*

Lying in a coffin, shrunken and shrivelled, she said *I do*, exchanged rings, kissed and smiled for the cameras.

She thanked the celebrant, chatted to guests - *yes, this is the best day of my life!* – gave Jim the brightest of smiles, sat at the bridal table, ate the salmon trout and tasted cream, hesitated, smiled again, clapped, laughed, kissed, waved goodbye ...

Jim leant over, tucked the hair behind her ear and whispered, *You're beautiful.*

The white Jaguar accelerated away and drove, or flew, Elizabeth wasn't sure, to Mt Lofty House. It could have been heaven. It could have been hell. It felt like the end.

Jim rested his head in the crook of an arm. His bare back soaked up the sun and turned cinnamon-brown. Elizabeth, wearing her red and white bikini, counted his freckles and moles, sitting on her beach towel beside him.

She reached out and, with a sandy finger, wrote the three words she'd wanted to say.

When she was done, Jim lifted his head and kissed her. *I love you, too.*

Relieved, she dared to wonder about the difference between love and gratitude.

Wearing her pink Miss Model Australia dress, Elizabeth crosses the stage. Midway, colours fade to cream. The sceptre becomes a duster. Satin gloves harden into rubber. The crown morphs into a headpiece and veil.

When Jim appears and lifts the veil, her features are gone.

Elizabeth went to bed when Jim went to bed. They made love. She read. He snored. She threw off the quilt and wandered through the house in her dressing gown. She touched the walls and told herself they were her walls. She sat on the sofa, stroked the cushions and told herself this was her sofa. She should be happy or, at the very least, hopeful. The pitter-patter of little feet would brighten her days. She'd be a wife, mother, home-owner ... happy ever after.

Elizabeth scrubbed the toilet every day, as any good wife must. She washed dishes and clothes and swept and vacuumed and cooked. She made the bed, straightened the curtains, opened a few windows and shut them again. The ironing pile grew, so she ironed. Then she cried.

Keep the tummy happy and those other appetites satisfied and you'll have a faithful husband, her mother had said the day before the ceremony. Mark my words.

In the car, driving to the wedding, Peter had had nothing more to add.

Her mother had given Elizabeth *The Methodist Manual for Christians entering the Holy Union of Marriage*, published in 1956. Elizabeth had read about Christian Values and how the wife had to lie back, open her legs and think about doing God's work. A good wife shouldn't ever instigate. A wife was impure if she enjoyed it. Sex was for procreation not recreation. Sex was important for a man but not for a woman. A man needed to satiate his urges and drives and passions. It kept the wild beast under control. He didn't roam. He came home at night instead of boozing with his mates at the pub.

Jane had laughed when Elizabeth told her about it. *Fat lot of good that book did me. Load of rubbish.*

Elizabeth had stared at Jane.

Jane had said, *Hey, don't look at me. I've got no idea what keeps a man happy - luck of the draw, bloody bastards.*

Elizabeth had cringed.

Sorry. Jim's not a bastard. He's a real catch.

That was all very well. Wasn't there more to it? For twenty-three years she'd watched placid Peter and fiery Faye. *What keeps them together?*

Jane had nothing to say about that.

Jim's sister Helen had a baby. In the hospital, Helen handed her son to Elizabeth. Elizabeth hadn't a chance to say no. Helen must have thought Elizabeth had naturally wanted to goo and gah over its dribbly mouth.

Will there be a playmate for Edward some day soon? Helen smiled, expecting a *yes*. Elizabeth blushed, smelt the nappy, returned Eddy, noticed the dark circles under Helen's eyes and said, *Maybe*.

Elizabeth walked through automatic doors, down supermarket aisles, past cans of baked beans, carrot soup and spaghetti sauce. If she threw them into a saucepan would Jim suspect? Of course he would.

She stopped in front of the meat counter and heard, *Feed the man meat*. She looked up to find the butcher, wearing a white coat, bloodied across the belly, smiling at her. How unusual to find a butcher in a supermarket. It was the east after all.

Need some help?

Oh, er ...

Can recommend the veal today. Tender. Great with a cream and white wine sauce. Everyone will want seconds.

The butcher selected a card from the top of the counter and handed it over. *Here's the recipe.*

All you need to know is right there, luv. Just the two of you?

She nodded.

With two veal steaks Bob's your uncle.

Elizabeth's head spun.

The butcher slapped two steaks on the scales, calculated the price and wrapped the meat in sheets of plastic and paper.

Anything else I can get you, luv?

Have you any more of these recipe cards?

Sure have. Here you go.

Elizabeth took the cards from the butcher. *Thank you.*

Any time, luv. The butcher gave her a mighty wink as she turned away from the counter.

The recipe cards, splayed in her hand, were tickets to a happy marriage. She was saved.

Elizabeth made a mental list.

Cook for Jim. Clean house. Decorate house. Wash and iron Jim's clothes. Make the bed. Hug him. Play with his hair. He liked that. Organise his desk and sock drawer. Remember his family's birthdays. Buy presents. Aerobics at the gym. She couldn't afford to let herself go.

Jim and I are painting the living room.

What colour?

Salmon pink.

Oooh. Sounds a bit bright. More like a bedroom colour.

Do you think? Jim thought it was a great colour.

Oh well then.

Static filled the gap.

I've picked out matching curtain material.

Who's going to make the curtains?

The furnishing place.

With box pleats?

Gathered.

You think that's going to look good?

They said it would - the latest trend ...

What material are you using?

Chintz.

Chintz? Is that wise? So expensive. Cost a fortune to dry clean.

Well ...

I saw some fabulous polyester the other day. Looked like chintz but so easy-care.

Come to the shop - have a look.

I'll think about it, Mum.

Much better than chintz, dear ...

Elizabeth shopped in department stores where things were bright and pretty. She floated, sighed and dreamed. *If I was Princess Di, she thought, I could shop all day in Paris ...*

She squeezed the arm of a cardigan, testing its weight and warmth. She eyed a jacket and stroked a cashmere jumper. She stood in front of cabinets filled with sparkling jewellery. She sauntered around the crockery and silver cutlery sets, admiring the patterns, the shine, the crystal glassware. The muzak tinkled and soothed as she followed an impulse, a desire, a smell, a mantra ... *buy, buy buy!*

She held her breath. Her mouth went dry. Her tummy rumbled. *She needed things. Beautiful things. And there was so much choice.*

When she came home, Elizabeth sat on the couch with a tub of ice cream and the TV on for company.

Elizabeth thought about Jim through the day. How was he? Would he be tired when he came home? Would he want to go out? Would he be late? Was he having a good day? How many lives was he saving? Such important work out there in the world. He'd probably want dinner around eight. Nothing too heavy. Something fresh. She'd throw a salad in a bowl and pan-fry some fish. He'd want apple pie and cream for dessert.

I'm a married woman. She swivelled the wedding band around her finger.

That night she looked at Jim as he ate his salad at the kitchen table and said, *We're married.*

Jim smiled.

We're married to each other.

Jim laughed.

It doesn't seem real - it won't sink in.

Jim nodded. *I s'pose it will eventually.*

Do you think?

Hm.

Elizabeth cleaned the kitchen, scrubbed the bathroom and ate half a packet of yoyo biscuits before she went to bed. Jim caught up with his mail, read a medical journal, showered and waited for his wife to join him in bed.

Elizabeth still dreamt about Ryan. Ryan, blond hair flicked by the wind, standing under a tree, holding her hands, staring into her eyes, saying *I do*. Ryan and her climbing the stairs of a jumbo jet, flying up, up, up and away ...

After meeting Jane for lunch at a local café, where the music had been too loud and the day too hot to really enjoy eating outdoors, Elizabeth came home to find her living room changed. She flung a hand over her mouth. How on earth?

Jim came up behind her and placed his arms around her waist. *Happy Birthday, Lil.*

She stood very still. Jim's arms were a straightjacket. She wriggled free. *My God.* She turned towards Jim, searching his face for an explanation.

I wanted you to have the best.

I can't believe - you shouldn't have ... Elizabeth backed out of the room.

Hey, hey, come here. Jim took her arm. She melted into the wool of the David Jones jumper she'd bought him just a few days ago.

Jim turned her around to face the piano. She walked over to it, noticing her jeans reflected in its polished curves. She sat on the stool, pulled up the lid and stroked the keys. The ivories blurred.

I can't - it's too much - are you mad?

I'm mad about you. Jim stood behind her, bent forward, kissing the back of her neck.

You've got to send it back. I-I- don't think I can play.

Of course you can play. Jim rested his hands on her shoulders. *You deserve all this and more.*

Elizabeth shook her head. *But the expense.*

Forget the expense. I'm in love. I love you. Jim's hands were warm enough to fry her. *Play something.*

She sniffed, took a ragged breath and let her fingers flutter over the keys. They responded to every direction. Sound rolled out of the belly of the grand and vibrated up her arms and into the soft cavity of her heart. For a few bars of the Moonlight there was magic.

The front garden had a line of gnarled roses along the fence. The rest was a rectangular patch of buffalo grass. Jim donned overalls and mowed every Saturday afternoon. The backyard was also a rectangular patch of buffalo grass with a Hills Hoist in the middle.

The rose bush thorns - bigger than shark's teeth - kept Elizabeth away. The roses were fine to look at but that was all they were good for. If someone ripped them out, Jim could mow the lot and be done with it.

In the middle of the night Elizabeth woke for no reason that she could tell. Skin slithered over her bones. She went hot then cold then hot. Jim was the Devil and she was sleeping with Him. She snapped on the bedside light, shaking.

Jim was deeply asleep; his breathing steady, rhythmic. He looked like an angel. Short, dark eyelashes fluttered against his cheeks.

She felt confused, ashamed. What was wrong with her?

She switched off the light and tried to get back to sleep.

In the early hours of the morning she dreamt of Donald Trump. He invited her to a party. Trump provided a limo but Elizabeth was late and the limo went without her. Her hair was styled in a way that she thought old fashioned. She knew it was bad. Eventually she got to the party. She spoke to Trump and met his fiancé who took Elizabeth aside and showed her a video of Trump's previous wives and respective families. Elizabeth asked if Trump minded and the fiancé said he didn't. Elizabeth started rubbing the fiancé's bare shoulder. It didn't seem odd to be rubbing her shoulder at a party.

Driving to the supermarket like any other day, Elizabeth turned up the volume on the radio. Ryan came on singing the song he'd once sung to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth saw Ryan's face plastered across the windscreen. She blinked and rubbed her eyes but it was difficult to see the road and the traffic and even the speedometer right under her nose. She pulled over.

When she rested her head in her chafed hands, she was there, under the spotlight, seeing gold and green and blue. Her body yearned to be swallowed whole ...

Grandma Glenda died soon after Grandpa Joseph. In the hospital their deaths were helped along with morphine so no one really knew what they'd died of.

She died of a broken heart, Faye said after hearing of Glenda's death.

Peter didn't cry at the funeral. Faye dabbed her eyes. *So sad*.

Jim held Elizabeth's hand and looked sombre.

Elizabeth felt Jim's hand but that was all.

One box wasn't unpacked. It sat in the corner of the laundry, marked with intersecting lines. Six strips of masking tape showed no sign of tampering, curling, bubbling, snapping or betraying in any other way the firm intention of the hand that had sealed the lid.

If Jim had asked, *Will you unpack the box in the laundry, Hon?* Elizabeth would have replied, *What box?*

A neighbour visited and offered bits of mint, lavender and sea daisy. Elizabeth tried to smile at the tangled greenery thrust under her nose. She decided it was a kind offering and invited her neighbour inside. Geraldine declined. She wanted to come over another time when the Amway catalogues were ready. *So many useful things for the house at such good prices.*

Amway in the heart of the east? Elizabeth said, *How nice.*

Her neighbour drove a BMW, had a son at Prince Albert College and an older daughter called Ashta. The husband, rumoured to be a womaniser, worked as a sports journo for the local rag.

Elizabeth bought a pair of three dollar gloves from the supermarket, parted the earth along the back fence where winter rain pooled and turned muddy. With an old tablespoon she plugged the roots into the ground.

Elizabeth was playing the piano when Geraldine knocked again. *I thought it was the radio,* Geraldine said.

Elizabeth rarely played the piano so it was quite a coincidence that Geraldine had heard her.

Do you teach? Geraldine sat down on the antique couch that Elizabeth had just finished repaying three days ago. *I'm looking for a teacher for my son.*

Elizabeth shrank. Her skin itched around her neck and right up into her scalp. She hadn't itched like that for years.

You must meet Samuel.

Elizabeth hadn't met Samuel but she'd heard him. 8.30 a.m. every weekday there'd be a succession of raw-throated screams as Samuel's father carried Samuel out the back door to the rear-access carport. Samuel, dressed in shirt, shorts and cap, flailed his skinny, white legs in the air and drove his heavy school shoes into his father's thigh. His father moved swiftly, keeping his broad shoulders hunkered down so that Samuel couldn't wriggle free. Elizabeth, craning to see what was happening over the fence, heard Samuel's desperate screams in the car, as the motor revved and rumbled along the back lane.

We're having a few challenges. Geraldine reclined into Elizabeth's new cushions, thirty per cent off from David Jones. *He hates school. We've talked to the Head Master. We can't work it out.*

Elizabeth shook her head.

We're taking him to a psychologist. He wets his bed. Always has. Geraldine sighed. *Don't have children unless you really must.*

Elizabeth fought the urge to dig her short nails into her hair.

Next we'll be told he has separation anxiety. Geraldine crossed her slender legs and swung her foot. *Piano lessons could be a diversion. Would you teach him?*

Elizabeth's hand crept up her shoulder, neck, scalp and scratched.

We'd pay you, of course. Geraldine leaned forward. The linen shirt wasn't buttoned up enough to cover the top of a lacy bra. *I'll bring Samuel over to meet you. He's really a dear.*

It seemed settled, although Elizabeth felt sure she hadn't said a thing.

Faye had always said she should teach. Maybe her mother was right. How could she refuse Geraldine, given her unhappy situation?

Elizabeth purchased *Teaching Little Fingers to Play* from a music store. She read the book through and played the tunes. She liked *Song of the Volga Boatmen*. The more she thought about teaching, the harder it was to say *no*.

Samuel looked at her with his freckled nose scrunched up, as if smelling something bad. He wouldn't tell her what was wrong. Elizabeth asked a dozen questions but he wouldn't say much at all.

He didn't practise. Geraldine was apologetic. *As long as he enjoys himself,* she whispered. *He really loves the lessons.*

So Elizabeth took Geraldine's ten dollars and did what she could for half an hour. She tried to make Samuel smile. She praised him for getting a note right and for remembering *Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit*.

Then Samuel's Prince Albert schoolmates started calling Elizabeth.

I spread the word. Hope you don't mind, Geraldine said.

What could Elizabeth do? Geraldine was doing her a favour.

Elizabeth bought a big diary and booked students in. Everybody wanted 4.00 p.m. so she worked five days a week. She worked from 4.00 to 6.00 p.m., then from 3.30 to 6.30 p.m., then from 3.30 to 7.00 p.m., then from 1.00 to 7.30 p.m. because parents wanted to learn. Elizabeth worked Saturdays. During the week Jim warmed up his dinner (she cooked in the mornings) and played golf on weekends.

At the antique store, Elizabeth put furniture on lay-by. She made scheduled repayments on a desk for Jim, a desk for herself, two chesterfield sofas and a lovely cedar chair to sit on while she taught.

There, in the shadows, was the box marked X. When she looked away and looked back it had crept a little closer.

Elizabeth worried about it for weeks.

What am I going to do?

Jim looked up from the newspaper. *Huh?*

Modelling.

What about it?

Stopping ... maybe.

Stopping?

It's clashing with teaching ...

Just say you can't do it any more.

Jim went back to his paper.

Elizabeth watched the way Jim's eyes swung left then right as he read.

Jim looked up again. *You do want to stop, don't you?*

I think so ...

Jim frowned. *If you change your mind, no harm done. You can always go back.*

Elizabeth told Petuna's to take her off the books. She didn't have the time. She apologised. She thought Claudine would ring and coax her back, but students' parents kept the phone busy. Every week Steven's mother talked to Elizabeth for an hour.

I'm really worried about Steven. He has this great ability but doesn't apply himself.

Rita whispered into the phone. Elizabeth gripped the receiver and asked Rita to speak up.

What should I do? He's our only child. We want what's best.

Steven was a quiet boy with mousy hair and a long face and large blue eyes brimming with tears. He seemed knotted up inside, in places Elizabeth couldn't reach.

He never smiled and that was sad, especially for a ten year old. He played the piano with tentative fingers and couldn't bring himself to make a mistake. Elizabeth thought to say, *Give yourself permission to fail*, but what would Rita think?

Parents told Elizabeth how little practice their children did at home and asked, could she say something in the lesson? She did say something, in quite a kind yet firm manner, but what difference did it make? What more could she do? She couldn't run a student's life, especially not their home-life, not after what happened with Eric.

Elizabeth talked with Eric's mother about piano practice. Eric had potential if he just applied himself. Could Eric's mother work out some sort of reward system for practice done during the week, like a Star Chart? Yes, she said, sitting in her new Mercedes Benz.

Eric's father turned up at the next lesson. Eric stood behind him in the shadows. The father came in through the front door with his black brows drawn and his piercing black eyes fixed on Elizabeth. Elizabeth stopped breathing as Eric's father made a fist with his hairy, gold-ringed hand and pointed at her sternum.

If you ever talk to my wife like that again, I'll come here and break your door down. You hear me? I'm the head of the family. I make the decisions. You talk to me if you want something done.

Elizabeth nodded and Eric's father left, slamming the door behind him.

Elizabeth went through the motions of talking and clapping and encouraging. Voices ran around her head at dizzying speeds.

That night Jim asked, *Are you all right?*

Elizabeth started to cry and shake as she told Jim about Eric's father. *To think he's a doctor.*

Jim patted her back but Elizabeth didn't want to be patted. She wanted Jim to go over to Eric's home, break his door down and punch Eric's father in the nose.

Elizabeth's feet abut a void.

To fall is to know. To fall is to know.

She ached for the fall.

Falling yet flying.

She opened her arms wide, closed her eyes and took a breath.

She leapt into the air and plummeted.

She woke before she hit the ground.

Mary Stanhope was seventy with a body as slight as a seven year olds. In fact, some seven years olds were possibly sturdier than Mary Stanhope. She drove all the way from Blackwood in her white Mazda to have lessons with Elizabeth. Mary was an aunt of

Rita's – great aunt to Steven - and had heard, via the family grapevine, how good a teacher Elizabeth was.

Do you teach old fuddy-duddies like me? A frog had died in Mary's throat.

Elizabeth couldn't say *no*.

Mary had a Dowager's Hump. Wispy hair, streaked with grey, hung like a cloud over Mary's big eyes. A thin hand often pushed it aside, revealing more of her pale, puffy face. Her feet, in their white, low-heel shoes, didn't touch the ground. Elizabeth always opened and closed the front door for Mary because Mary didn't look strong enough.

I push my husband's wheelchair, you know.

Mary talked more than she played. She said her husband had a stroke.

At least he's a warm body in bed. Not many women my age have that.

Elizabeth struggled to find a suitable response.

I won't put him in a Home, not while I'm still breathing.

Mary timed her absences from her husband with meticulous precision. *I put him by the window. He's got an emergency buzzer if he gets into trouble.*

As a child, Mary went to a Catholic school and was taught piano by the nuns. *They whacked my hands with a ruler every time I made a mistake. I trembled through those lessons.*

Mary had hated school so much that she'd refused to go. Her mother had dragged her into the toilet and locked her in. Mary wasn't to come out until she changed her mind about going to school. Mary had felt angry enough to drag her own faeces over the walls.

Mary trembled through Elizabeth's lessons because the fear of those nuns was still in her.

That's why I'm here, dear. To fight the fear if it's the last thing I do.

Mary stopped in the middle of Mozart to ask, *Do you believe in God?*

Elizabeth bit her lip. *I'm not sure. I did once.*

Mary pushed her fringe. *I want to know everything before I die.* She sighed. *But I might not have that long.*

Oh? Elizabeth leaned forward.

It's my strength. I feel it slipping.

Mary stopped in the middle of Mendelssohn to tell Elizabeth about a dream she'd had the night before.

I saw myself lying in bed, as if hovering above myself. I was going to go on a very long journey. I was kind of saying goodbye to my body. Then I saw a queen sitting on a throne with a sword in her hand. She was going to sever the cord that still attached me to my body. Mary paused. *What do you think that means?*

Elizabeth shook her head.

One day Mary didn't come for her lesson. Elizabeth rang Mary at home.

I'm okay, dear, she said. Her croaky voice was feeble.

I can give you a lesson at home, if you'd like.

No, no, don't trouble yourself. I'll be right as rain soon. Expect me next week.

Elizabeth thought about Mary all through the week. She nearly rang to see how she was. She had a strange feeling about Mary.

When Mary didn't come for her next lesson, Elizabeth rang again. This time there was a man on the other end of the line. He said he was Mary's brother and he was sad to say that Mary had passed away in the night. Her heart had given out.

Elizabeth hung up. She sat at the piano and stared at the keys. Black and white blurred into grey.

Jim didn't seem to mind the hours Elizabeth worked. He kissed her forehead and said, *How's my popular piano teacher?*

Elizabeth brushed her hair, freshened her makeup and put her little cares aside as soon as he walked through the door. She asked how his day was and listened with full attention to every word. He always had socks. The fridge was stocked. If he wanted to make love, she was available.

When Jim smiled, she remembered to smile.

And as she slept the box crept around the house, searching, searching for her. Floorboards creaked. Coldness emanated like a block of ice. It was darker than dark ... the X on the lid wavered and grew.

Elizabeth hurried into David Jones, ducking past the luminous cosmetic counters, the perfected saleswomen, the prismatic mirrors. Her windblown hair, blemished face and rumpled clothes made her desperate to buy a whole new wardrobe.

She stood at the back, ten deep, forty across, and watched the girls on the catwalk. Juliet was there, partnered with someone new and gaunt and featureless under the glare. The models looked thinner than Elizabeth remembered. Were the spotlights slimming?

She wanted to nudge the woman next to her and say, *I was a model too, you know?* If she missed anything it was the fun of playing dress ups - wearing the soft, fine wool suits and satin dresses. And the attention, admiration, maybe even envy of other women ... but she wouldn't admit that to anyone.

On the catwalk the clothes were armour. The spotlights, a shield. *I'd felt successful ...* but why? A model was a ghost.

Halfway through the parade, Elizabeth turned away, headed for the escalator, craving sunlight. Fresh air. Random movement.

She descended from Third Floor Fashion to stand in the middle of Rundle Mall, inhaling the chaos of an ordinary day.

What is beauty? Elizabeth sat on the end of the bed. Jim was lying there, reading something about cardiomyopathy.

Hm?

Beauty. What is it?

Jim put down the journal and rubbed his eyes. *Isn't it in the eye of the beholder?*

But if that was true, why do we have such a standardised ideal, a stereotype?

What do you mean?

You know, skin and bone, makeup, long legs, boobs ...

Jim shrugged. *Beats me.*

Elizabeth heard a horn blast. She rose from the bed and shifted the curtain to peer outside. Under a streetlight someone ran to a car, got in and took off.

I thought the more beautiful someone was, the more likely they were to be successful ... get rich, marry well, have lots of kids, that sort of thing.

Jim slipped an arm under his head and leaned back.

Elizabeth looked for the moon.

Jim yawned.

Elizabeth released the curtain. *But I'm not so sure anymore.*

Precocious Emily flung her head, refused to play, swung her legs and thumped the piano with patent leather boots.

Her mother stood by the piano and begged her daughter to play. *Play for Mrs Japolsky. Come on, Emmy. Show us how beautifully your fingers dance.*

Emily played a march with straight fingers and a bouncing bottom. She punched the pedals with her feet.

There, see? That was good. Wasn't it good, Mrs Japolsky?

Elizabeth pressed her hands together.

You'll take my darling Emily on, won't you Mrs Japolsky? She really has promise. I can pay you for an hour lesson.

How could Elizabeth say *no*? Her teeth were tightly trussed together.

Why can't I just say no? Elizabeth wailed.

Jim looked up from his bowl of pasta. His jaw was square. His eyes met hers. *I don't know.*

Elizabeth wrung her hands. *It's so ... hard.*

Why? Jim put down his fork. The edges of his mouth twitched.

Because ... She bit her lip. *I just can't.*

Yes, you can.

I ... Can't. Another wail. *I'm afraid.*

Of what?

Elizabeth went blank.

What are you afraid of?

Elizabeth wrung her hands again. *Anger. Making someone angry. Like Eric's father.*

Jim nodded.

And it would be selfish of me to say no.

Selfish?

Elizabeth covered her eyes. *I'm supposed to keep people happy.* She was very tired. Why was she so tired?

Wind rattled the kitchen window. A gate clanged shut.

Jim stood up, folded his arms around her shoulders and held her.

And one night the box stopped its shifty, slithery shuffle. Elizabeth awoke to the silence and held her breath under the quilt. She dared not move. It was close. Very, very close ...

Emily's face wrestled with a mischievous smile as she handed Elizabeth a paper bag.

Elizabeth, suspicious, pulled the little bear out of the bag and exclaimed, *How cute.* Straight away she spotted the big black spider resting in the bottom. She shifted her lips, relaxed her jaw and went outside.

Pandora was a tubby girl with bleached blonde hair like her mother's. Her mother had a strong British accent and a loud, chesty voice. She smelt of smoke. Unlike other mothers,

she didn't wear beiges or creams or caramels. She wore strappy, low cut tops in colours that induced headaches.

Pandora was thirteen but her mother looked sixty. The makeup didn't help. Pandora's mother had too much face powder and too much blush and too much pink lipstick and too much, everywhere. Elizabeth suspected she was a Madam because Pandora's mother didn't fit any other label Elizabeth could think of.

I want Pandora to have strong female figures to look up to, Pandora's mother said. *She needs to develop her artistic side.*

Elizabeth nodded, scratched her head and commenced lessons. Pandora's mother came to lessons, something Elizabeth encouraged. Few parents actually did.

We don't call our fingers He, Pandora's mother said one day. *Our fingers are our fingers, Mrs Japolsky. Don't you have a feminist education?*

Elizabeth shook her head. *I missed out somehow.*

Pity. Pandora's mother sighed.

Elizabeth stared at the wall, her head full of images of microphones and angry women, pointing, yelling, accusing ... Feminists. What had she done to offend them? Why had they hated her? Weren't they supposed to be fighting for women, celebrating women, supporting women ... *all women?* Why had she been the enemy?

And then the word floated to her like a feather caught on a gust of wind.

Exploitation.

Her stomach knotted.

Perhaps I was ...

She'd chosen that path, for better, for worse. It hadn't made her happy. Were feminists any happier?

For Christmas, Pandora gave Elizabeth a hand-painted flowerpot. A two year old must have finger-painted daisies and a cat and maybe a wheelbarrow if Elizabeth stretched her imagination.

We encourage sex workers to pursue creative outlets, Pandora's mother said. I'm an advocate for Gay rights, you know.

Elizabeth put the pot on the window sill and purchased a geranium to fit.

A short woman with windblown hair stood on Elizabeth's doorstep.

So sorry to interrupt your day. I heard you're a piano teacher. I live around the corner. My son, my adopted son – well – his teacher's just retired.

The woman, dressed in a checked suit with gold buttons, chose her words very carefully.

I'd like Liam to continue. You're so convenient.

Elizabeth nodded when she should have been shaking her head.

Do you have any vacancies?

Elizabeth knew it was time to say *no*.

I've one time left, Elizabeth said in a very small voice.

Ooh, how wonderful. The woman giggled and extended her hand. *I'm Jill Hatter*,

My friends call me mad-as-a-hatter.

Jill's fingers glittered.

Liam Hatter was originally from Thailand. Small, slender, dark-skinned Liam needed sandbags and cement shoes so as not to blow away. Angelic Liam, with his soft brown eyes, looked nothing like his mother.

Liam actually played the piano very well. Elizabeth was pleasantly surprised. Incredibly surprised.

Out of forty students, Liam became her favourite, not that she was supposed to have favourites. She looked forward to seeing Liam. When he played the piano she sat back, relaxed. Had she ever?

Liam listened with hair in his eyes and his head cocked to the side. Her words were pennies thrown into the wishing well of his ear. He practised. He improved.

Why couldn't they all be like Liam?

I'm getting a new kitchen, Mum.

What for? Plumbers never put the sink in right, always leave a gap. Victoria says the only company she'd use is Alby Turner. Who are you getting?

Well, um, Crafty Kitchens.

Aren't they a bit dodgy? Her mother sounded clear enough to be talking in the next room. A bit pricey?

What do you mean?

Have you shopped around?

Of course I have.

Her mother was silent for a moment on the other end of the line.

What does Jim think?

He thinks it's good. I mean, that they're good.

Oh well, then. Her mother sighed.

Why does my mother always agree with you but never with me?

Jim stopped tapping the steering wheel to turn down the radio. *I'm the King of the Castle.*

Oh ha mighty ha. Elizabeth slapped his arm. You wish.

Hey. Aren't you supposed to keep me happy? Isn't that the deal?

Is it?

Your mother seems to think so.

Am I succeeding?

I can't complain.

Elizabeth grimaced. *You better not.*

Jill Hatter swayed on Elizabeth's doorstep.

Oh dear, Mrs Japoshky.

Elizabeth automatically said, *Please call me Elizabeth.*

Elishabeth. Oh dear. Jill lifted her arms and let them slap to her sides. A heavy bunch of keys jangled.

Would you like to come in? I'm not teaching at the moment.

Elizabeth guided Jill to the chesterfield. Jill collapsed onto the cushions as if she'd never leave.

Would you care for a glass of water, or a cup of tea? Elizabeth hoped Jill wouldn't ask for something stronger.

Water. Wonderful.

Elizabeth almost ran to the sink. She returned to find Jill pressing her forehead with the pads of her fingers. Her nail polish was chipped.

Sho shorry to barge in like this. Jill downed the water like a shot of vodka. *It's Liam. He wants to find his parents in Thailand. Hesh not happy.*

Elizabeth sat opposite Jill.

I dunno what to do. He goes to the best shool, the best clubs. Hesh got ev'rything that opens and shuts.

Jill passed a heavy hand over her eyes. The diamonds danced.

What can I do? Jill tried to focus on Elizabeth. Her cheeks were streaked with tears. Oh no. Jill sobbed into her glittering hands. Elizabeth sat beside her and patted her back.

Jeremy and Jennifer Backenbracht played with straight backs, curved fingers and elevated wrists. They smiled at Elizabeth and said, *Thank you very much for the lesson*, when they left. They practised every day, every week, every holiday.

Mrs Backenbracht came to every lesson. She sat on Elizabeth's antique couch with a quiet curve to her lips. At the end of the lesson she said, *Please have a lovely evening, Mrs Japolsky.*

Elizabeth sat very straight in her chair. She was careful to wear something well-washed and well-ironed. She wrote in Jeremy and Jennifer's music diary with her best cursive writing. She went a little blue around the lips.

At the end of one particular lesson, Mrs Backenbracht didn't say her usual good wishes. *I have unexpected news, Mrs Japolsky.*

Elizabeth held her breath.

I'm ten weeks pregnant.

Elizabeth exhaled. She said, *Congratulations*, as she always did but Mrs Backenbracht didn't have the glow of happiness.

I'm forty-three and there are risks. There'll be tests. We're going to have the baby regardless.

Elizabeth twisted her wedding band. The solitaire diamond had lost its dazzle.

You can expect Jeremy and Jennifer to progress as per usual. We won't neglect their music studies.

Elizabeth couldn't remember what she said in reply. She ate a lamington after they left and moved the bed from left to right.

Perspiration soaked her skin. She wheezed. She wanted to throw off the quilt and gasp for air.

It was very quiet. Too quiet. Deathly quiet. Where was the box? Had it gone? Was it near?

Elizabeth stole a peek over the quilt and nearly screamed.

The box ... Oh God. The box was right there.

When Jim confessed to having an inappropriate interest in his receptionist, all of Elizabeth's lights went out. In her white designer kitchen coldness crawled across her

skin and inched down her spine. She started to wheeze and wheeze until Jim had to get out his medical case and ply her with Ventolin. She gripped the spray and inhaled. Powder stuck to the back of her throat. The dishwasher gurgled to a standstill. Jim's armour dented like the fender of a cheap Mitsubishi *Colt*. *I'm sorry. I know it has to stop.*

Jim held out his arms as if to hug his receptionist. Elizabeth turned away and ripped the cloth off the kitchen table with the cutlery still on it. Polished silverware clattered to the floor.

Jim's arms dropped to his side. *I'll do something, I promise. You don't have to worry. It's over.*

Chardonnay eased the pain. She was the only ex-Miss Model Australia in the world to have a deceiving husband. Shadows fell, grey and stark, staining the lids of her eyes and irises and strands of hair. Not even the diamond studs Jim bought her for their fourth wedding anniversary lifted her mood. It was 1988, she was twenty-five and the skin on her face was falling off the bone.

Time had no continuum. Hours leapt about. She was teaching, then she wasn't, then she was, then she was lying in bed, cold and dreamless, then she was at the bakery eating Lamingtons, then she was sitting on the chesterfield with another bottle in her hand, eyes

half-closed, forehead smooth and fringed and *Jim has his arms around the receptionist temptress whose slender hips and toned thighs press forward and tilt to meet his. Locked together they grind, arms roaming along electrified spines until Jim's hand finds the silicone breast in its push-up bra. He claws at it as her chest heaves and her mouth opens to ...*

She took another swig of wine and thought the thoughts she'd hoped to drown. *What if it wasn't Miss Silicone's fault? What if I'm ... ? What if Jim ... ?* Clarissa came to mind before Elizabeth had time to erase the name. At least that glitch in their relationship was understandable. Elizabeth had been away. She hadn't expected Jim to wait (she'd hoped). Jim hadn't said he'd wait (he'd tried). It'd been up to the gods to decide the fate of their relationship. And they'd made it through, all the way to marriage. *But now this ...*

Where did I go wrong?

Elizabeth sat at the piano with her hands in her lap. She stared at the black and white keys. She waited. She listened. She held her breath but the Moonlight had gone.

She hovers over the grand piano from a very great height. The lid lifts and then lifts off completely, into the air. The keys detach, one by one, and float as if they're musical notes

unhinged from the stove. The legs of the piano snap and the soundboard splits. She watches the bomb explode in its belly and waits to be hit by debris.

Jim's receptionist was happy to leave.

Happy? Elizabeth shrieked.

Jim blushed. *Embarrassed ... that I'd told you ... She agreed it was untenable to stay. I'm paying her ...*

Spare me the details. Elizabeth grabbed another bottle of wine from the fridge.

Shouldn't we talk about it? Jim was pale, stretched.

Elizabeth stormed out of the kitchen and out of the house and out to the street.

An hour later she returned.

Jim went about his life as if nothing had happened. His confession absolved him of wrong. It wasn't as if he'd gone all the way. Elizabeth hadn't discovered the awful truth stamped with fuchsia lipstick on his collar. Nothing more could be done about it.

Elizabeth scrubbed, watered, swept, aired, sprayed. She vacuumed. Polished. Refolded towels, straightened the pantry, bleached the sheets.

When it was done she filled the bath and slid beneath the water.

When she reached out and touched the box with a shaking hand, the box jumped, the lid flew open and the leering face of a Jack-in-a-box bounced and cackled before her eyes.

Elizabeth went through the motions of teaching. She remembered when to smile, to nod, to write, to clap her hands. But all the while she was sinking. Soon she'd be lying on the bottom of the ocean with netball coach Eileen: bloated and bound in blue and yellow ribbons.

One night, lying side by side in bed, not touching, Elizabeth said to Jim, *You've got one more chance.*

Jim was silent.

If there's trouble again, that's it. I'm out.

Jim was still.

Do you know what I'm saying?

Jim said yes.

Mrs Backenbracht's belly expanded. Jeremy and Jennifer never skipped a beat. The roses in the garden bloomed. Elizabeth went outside and cut them off. She thought of other things she wanted to cut ...

She'd keep the secateurs handy.

Elizabeth's feet abut a void.

To fall is to know. To fall is to know.

She ached for the fall.

Falling yet flying.

She opened her arms, closed her eyes, took a breath, leapt into the air and plummeted for seconds, then minutes, hours, days, months, years, decades, centuries, eternity ... discovering a merry-go-round suspended in a void of pleasure and pain.

Elizabeth woke to the truth.

There were no happy ever afters.

Elizabeth had trouble sleeping.

I need pills, she told Jim.

Jim didn't ask questions. Dark circles under Elizabeth's eyes told him enough. He produced a bottle the very next day.

On Sundays Jim took Elizabeth for a drive to the Hills. She sank into the grey leather seat as Jim plied the accelerator pedal. The BMW cylinders hummed in ostinato to Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 2. Jim pushed a button to open the sunroof. Wind whipped her hair into rattails. Her face fried in the sun.

Jim always knew which way to go. His internal compass never let him down. He was a homing pigeon once the destination was decided.

Elizabeth couldn't keep track of directions. She couldn't even walk out of a shop the right way. Without Jim's hands on the steering wheel, Elizabeth would never find her way home.

They were driving along an undulating road when Elizabeth blurted, *What is the meaning of it all?*

Jim turned down the radio. *What?*

Elizabeth looked out the window at the rolling green carpet that stretched as far as the eye could see. *What is the point? You know?*

Jim kept his eyes on the road.

I thought I'd reach this place where everything would be perfect. Where I'd feel ... content. Safe ... Certain.

Jim steered the car left then right then left.

I've wanted a fairy tale.

Oh?

Where things work out ... happy ever after.

Oh.

But what is there if there isn't a happy ever after?

Jim applied the brake and negotiated a sharp bend.

Elizabeth dropped her head. *I'm ... lost.*

The air conditioning blew the word around the car.

They drove home in silence.

Jim swung into the driveway, turned off the ignition and reached for Elizabeth's hand. *Why don't we live in the Hills?*

You can't move house. Her mother's voice was husky from the flu. You've just finished renovating. It's perfect.

We're tired of the city.

Her mother coughed. *Don't you want to start a family? The school's just there. You've got a backyard ...*

Elizabeth swallowed hard. *I need space, Mum, and it's time to move on.*

Mrs Backenbracht wheeled a pusher through the front door, ahead of Jeremy and Jennifer.

Here's our little girl.

Elizabeth looked in. She could see a cherub mouth and a button nose and a hand-knitted bonnet. She struggled to find the right words. *How beautiful*, seemed right.

Mrs Backenbracht smiled. *Brinda has Down's Syndrome. We knew, of course, and love her nonetheless.*

As Elizabeth nodded she saw that Mrs Backenbracht was putting on a very brave face.

Elizabeth wasn't sure she wanted mud under her feet or fresh breezes in her hair or the solitude of a no-through road. Her eyes didn't shine when she talked about living in the Hills. But she needed a change, she knew that. And not just for herself. For Jim as well.

When they rounded the bend in Swamp Road and saw the white stone cottage nestled in its own little valley, with two tall poplars pointing to the sky, Jim whistled and wowed. *This is the house of our dreams.*

While waiting for settlement on the new house, Elizabeth told her students she was moving.

Emily's mother cried. *How could you do this? Emily's settled. She likes you. Now we have to break in another teacher.*

Elizabeth had never thought of herself as a horse.

Rita whispered on the phone for an hour. *I'm worried this will set Steven back. He's so sensitive and it will come as a shock that you're leaving.*

Elizabeth's lips were stiff and blue when she told the Backenbrachts. She said she'd miss Jeremy and Jennifer, which wasn't too far from the truth. As Mrs Backenbracht pushed Brinda out the door, she turned and said, *All the best to you, Mrs Japolsky.*

Elizabeth said, *All the best to you too, Mrs Backenbracht.*

Jill Hatter stood on Elizabeth's doorstep waving her hands about. *I've just heard the news. Can't believe it. I'll pay you anything, anything, just stay.*

Elizabeth shook her head and said she'd miss Liam, which was very much the truth.

I'll pay you double, truly. Double. Don't go.

Elizabeth's neck prickled. *I'm very sorry. I'm sure ...* but the words died on her lips.

Jill Hatter's eyes filled with tears. *You were the one thing that was going right for us.*

Jill Hatter drove by in her silver Volvo. Elizabeth waved. Jill leaned over the steering wheel, wrinkled her nose and gave Elizabeth the finger.

Elizabeth closed the bathroom door. While the water thundered into the tub, she stood in front of the mirror. Steam softened her reflection and gradually swallowed her whole.

She shed her clothes and sunk into the water. It lapped at the nape of her neck. Her body distorted. Her feet disappeared. She slipped lower and lower until she vanished.

Hair floated around her face like kelp.

December 9th, 1989.

In the House of Commons, Prime Minister John Major announces the official separation of Prince Charles and Princess Diana. Diana would live permanently at Kensington Palace and Charles would live at Highgrove.

They made the move from city to country and took on a large garden.

When the Adcocks left they offered their gardener. Elizabeth couldn't disguise her relief. It was decadent to have a gardener. They really couldn't afford it. Jim had over-extended himself, buying this house in the Hills. He wasn't a bottomless money-pit, much to Elizabeth's surprise.

The gardener stayed on and did her best, relating bits of garden-gossip. *Judith wanted it to look like a chocolate box. Refused to put down mulch. Into aesthetics, you know. Big time.*

Elizabeth tried not to roll her eyes. How could such things matter? Not that she didn't appreciate the overall aesthetics of a garden; the splashes of colour, the scents, the trees. Who could be bothered with the details?

On her first day of work Lesley knocked on the back door. Elizabeth answered thinking how short Lesley was. A human gnome.

Where's ya wheelbarrow?

Oh. Elizabeth looked blank. We haven't got one.

I'm gonna need one. Lesley grinned, revealing a row of small, uneven teeth. *But I can use a bin or box for today.*

Yes, great, good idea.

Don't s'pose you've got loppers?

Loppers?

Yeah, to prune with.

Er, no.

Lesley scratched her beanie.

I need a hand-saw as well for the Japonica.

Oh, yes, the Japonica. What Japonica? Where? How were they going to afford new garden implements? Jim was getting an ulcer worrying about meeting the mortgage repayments. He tossed and turned in bed and woke at four in the morning (not that she was awake then, the pills knocked her out). He thought about selling the BMW.

And a spade. Where's ya spade? In the shed?

Um, I don't know.

Whaddabout tea?

Tea? Tea for? Elizabeth hadn't heard of a garden needing tea although her mother-in-law poured tea leaves on her Camellias.

For me. A cuppa tea, later, y'know, when I have a smoko.

Oh yes, of course. Around eleven?

Yeah, sure, whenever. Milk and two sugars.

Lesley slurped at the tea two hours later. She said, in a matter-of-fact way, that she was gay.

Elizabeth said, *Good luck to you*, then shuffled her feet and stared at the door.

Lesley talked about her partner and their three Rottweilers sharing the same bed. Elizabeth tired. She saw sheets blackened by dog hair and dirt and slobber and it made her lips pucker. Lesley's square, chunky hands had thick lines of dirt wedged under her fingernails. Lesley didn't wear gardening gloves. *They're clumsy*, she said.

The scent of Judith Adcock's perfume still wafted around the bedroom. Elizabeth guessed it was *Joy*. Judith Adcock would have placed the bottle on her Huon pine 1880s something-or-other dressing table, swathed in fragile Belgium lace and cluttered with other crystal bottles, ivory combs and silver-handled brushes. Elizabeth imagined the Adcocks' antique furniture back in the house; the white nightgowns on their satin coat hangers displayed on ornate armoires in the dressing room; the fifty pen sketches of Tuscan farmhouses returned to their brass hooks in the library; Judith's delicate needlepoint cushions decorating Sanderson sofas in the drawing room; Allan's ancient Vatican Bibles on the bookshelves; the priceless stained glass window back in its frame in the cellar. The Adcocks had taken their possessions but what else was missing?

It was so ideal ...

I don't want to share you with anyone. In the dark, Jim's forehead almost touched hers on the pillow. *I know it's selfish - probably immature - but that's how I feel.*

Elizabeth was silent. What could she say? Jim's words measured the space between them. He'd given them a lot of thought.

If you want a child, I'd support you, of course.

Having a baby couldn't be all up to her, could it? Wasn't it a joint decision, a mutual agreement or an accident joyfully accommodated?

Men were known to change their minds about being a father when they actually held their offspring in their arms. They could bond with the baby and become inseparable.

Or they could run a mile.

The box marked *X* sat in the middle of a room, where the walls were beige-brown and the floorboards had never been sanded and the window ran with condensation.

The central heating needed replacing and something had to be done about the water shortage. The spring-fed dam was dry. The rainwater tank was rusting away. The Adcocks had neglected to tell Jim and Elizabeth that they were dependent on the neighbours' bore.

Elizabeth suddenly longed for something modern, inner-city, surrounded by cement. Then she felt guilty.

You must commune with a rose when you prune, Lesley said. Let it tell you what to cut, which way it wants to grow.

Elizabeth would have looked skyward if Lesley hadn't knelt in front of the rose and snipped. Something about that reverential snip changed everything.

Later, Lesley said, *It's about the head, the heart and the hands.*

Elizabeth nodded, not at all sure what Lesley meant.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Elizabeth listened to the rats burrowing, scratching, nesting in the walls.

Her mother's words echoed in her head. *You'll rot in the Hills.*

No job, no money, no friends to speak of, what would she do?

She'd do what she liked.

What did she like?

She picked at her nails.

She liked music.

Yes. And?

She looked out the window, chin in hand, fringe slipping across her forehead. Sunlight caught the golden globes of pineapple quinces. Lesley had mentioned they were good. *Cook up a treat*, she said and licked her lips.

I'll make jam, Elizabeth thought. *That's what I'll do.*

Elizabeth went into the local chemist and looked around. There were nappies and bibs and tinned formula and rubber teats and sanitary pads. She found what she was after in the back left hand corner. The bottle warmed in the palm of her hand.

Rats munched through the pantry leaving black-pellet calling cards. Elizabeth bought Ratsak at the local hardware store and refilled the tray with blue-green pellets every week.

Millipedes invaded in April, entwined and copulated in the bathtub. At night they fell through the crack in the bedroom wall.

Lesley said, *Shut your mouth at night. They drop from the ceiling.*

Spider webs criss-crossed the walls and glistened with cooking fumes and shower steam. Black spiders disappeared behind the toilet cistern.

Rats rambled about in the compost bins, fattening in the cellar, sunning their rotund bellies under the agapanthus. They dashed across open stretches of lawn and set up camp in the crumbling tank stand by the shed.

Overnight the long gravel driveway turned weedy. The creek, choked with willow and poplar roots, burst its banks in June, moving fast, threatening to take the house with it. Elizabeth nearly called the Country Fire Service for sandbags but the water slowed and receded.

Ice formed inside the windows. Without curtains, a continuous draft streamed through ill-fitting frames. Insects collected on the wrong side of the flywire and, attracted by bedside lights, flooded rooms at night.

The roof leaked. Three buckets caught drips in the bedroom. The corrugated iron had to be replaced as soon as the weather improved. According to the roofing specialist, patching wouldn't solve the problem. The iron was really beyond repair. Jim didn't know how they were going to afford the replacement bill. Dripping water kept him awake at night. Elizabeth slept through it all.

Elizabeth, wrapped in a blanket, sat in front of the TV.

The bottle waited. *It's time, no, it's well-and-truly time.*

Jim would be surprised. Her mother, shocked. Lesley, unperturbed. The garden, welcoming, as she dug into the loam, tunnelling and turning until she was deep and able to sleep. When Spring came, pale yellow shoots would sprout from the bulb of her body and search for the light.

She undid the little bottle and pulled out the top with its wand and brush attached. Elizabeth applied red paint to her fingernails.

The Adcocks had told them about the ghost so they couldn't say they weren't warned. Lesley elaborated on the exorcism. When a dead cat fell from the ceiling into the bath and onto the Adcocks' bathing daughter, the Adcocks called a Catholic priest. The Catholic priest did what Catholic priests do to put the spirit of the dead to rest. Elizabeth imagined a lot of chanting and incense and genuflection. Lesley speculated that the ghost was the builder of the house, Thomas Pugh.

You know John Adcock, Allan's dad, reckoned it was Pugh. He said Pugh kept messing with his pictures on the wall. Lesley threw her head back and hooted and flashed a line of amalgams. *More likely the cleaner had something to do with that.*

Lesley told Elizabeth about former owners of the cottage who'd left after only five months of living there. Bloodstains on the carpet. The click of an ancient gas light in the attic. A terrifying presence. Doors slamming. *The full bit,* Lesley laughed.

You know someone died there? Lesley pointed toward the brown-painted room where Elizabeth kept the box. *Someone drove past one day and told me. The old codger said that his father's brother had been born there and had died there, going back eighty years or so.*

Elizabeth shuddered. She'd never seen a ghost. She kept an eye out. She heard a strange creaking in the library on a windless night. She whispered, *It's all right Mr Pugh. Rest in peace.*

The creaking stopped but Elizabeth wasn't sure she'd heard the last of Pugh.

Nothing dried on the outside clothesline. The house turned into a Chinese laundry when Elizabeth set up portable clotheslines in front of the woodstove.

Clothes looked and smelt and felt dirtier after they'd been washed in bore water. The iron couldn't snap Jim's shirts out of a terminal limp rag slump.

It's country clean, he said and got into the car to head down the freeway for work.

Elizabeth said, *To hell with it* and jumped into her own car after Jim had gone. She drove and drove and drove with the accelerator pedal as close to the floor as she dared. She drove so far and so fast that, when she arrived at the beach, she almost drove straight into the sea.

She waded into the water and let the tide suck at her legs.

Jim's mother visited on a Sunday to see the new house, the new conquest, the new plans to renovate?

The windows were bleary with dust. The muddied floorboards and tired lino tiles in the kitchen hadn't been washed for days. The dishes sat in the sink with Jim's leftover muesli stuck to the rim. Dead flies littered the window sills with bent legs stiff and skyward.

Elizabeth slunk around the house, following her mother-in-law, wishing she'd had warning of the visit. But what did it matter? *It matters, it matters ... Rubbish. Rubbish?* She felt very, very tired. *Must be the sleeping pills.*

It's lovely, her mother-in-law said, not meeting Elizabeth's eye.

Elizabeth gave her mother-in-law an awkward hug, handed over three jars of jam and waved the Commodore away with her red fingernails.

Elizabeth threw the sleeping pills down the toilet. The septic would have to cope.

Did the spirit leave a garden when its owner moved away? The question stuck in her head like a fly to flypaper as she walked around the garden.

Elizabeth tried to explain it to Jim. He gave her a little smile that said he was making an effort to understand. She hid her disappointment. She wanted to share this revelation with someone who would stand in the middle of the garden and say, *Yes, I feel, I see, I know what you mean.*

Despite Lesley's mulching, weeding, blood and bone nothing revived the spirit. Birds stopped singing, abandoned speckled blue eggs in designer nests made of feathers, insulation, straw and mud. Silver Birches refused to blend into a grove. A melancholic Weeping Mulberry cast a humped and hobbled shadow over lime-washed walls. Garden

furniture looked contrived instead of cosy. Leggy Santolina failed to add substance. A Tulip Tree went through the necessary display, shedding every petal in record speed to expose a brittle skeleton. Dry leaves rustled, stirred by pilfering breezes. Elizabeth expected weeds to tumble over cracked pavers. A white-sheeted spectre could float over the rectangular rose garden, dart into a hedge of hawthorns and not raise a hair.

Elizabeth slipped off her shoes. Spiky grass pricked her feet. She was still among the living.

Elizabeth lifted the lid of the piano. She pushed down the b flat key, felt a sharp pain in her chest and released the note. Her fingers were cold. She'd snap if she sat on the stool.

She closed her eyes. *Do people die from loneliness?*

Mother Nature's my temple, Lesley said on her fortnightly visit. Why we need to worship in a church, I'll neva know. No offence, of course.

Elizabeth shook her head. *No offence taken.*

Lesley patted her beanie. *I've always thought of my soul as a wilderness. What about you?*

Elizabeth inhaled fresh, unsalted air. *I've not given my soul much thought.*

Lesley slurped her tea.

Elizabeth gazed at the sky. *But if I were to call it anything ... it'd be lunar.*

Ahhh, Lesley grinned. *Loony lunar ...*

Howling at the moon, Elizabeth laughed.

Lesley threw back her head. *Arrrrrrroooooooooo.*

Elizabeth joined in.

Feral dogs barked in the distance.

Jim didn't cut down his work hours. He talked about *ramping up the business*. Thoughts like that cheered Jim up. Not that he needed cheering but he needed something. He was losing weight. His skin was dry between his fingers, around the knuckles. He woke several times during the night to go to the toilet. Elizabeth put it down to over-work.

Jim said, *I've either got HIV or diabetes*, and took some of his own blood to be tested.

Are you serious? Elizabeth asked as Jim slid the vial of blood into an envelope.

It's just a precaution, he said.

That very night Elizabeth woke to the sound of a truck roaring through the bedroom. Just as she was about to scream some sort of warning, she came to her senses and switched on the light. There was no truck, only Jim, lying on his back, struggling to breathe.

Oh my God.

Jim was surrounded by water, lying in water, soaked in water. She tugged on his arm. *Jim, Jim, wake up.* She looked at the ceiling. *Where?*

Jim didn't stir. His laboured breathing was worse than snoring, worse than anything. *He's choking on something.*

She shook his shoulders. *Jim, you're frightening me. Jim, Jim.*

Jim so pale. Jim not moving. Jim dying?

Oh my God, Oh my God. What should she do? What should she do?

She had to call an ambulance.

She made her feet move. *Christ Almighty.* She made herself think. *Christ Almighty.* She made herself pick up the receiver and dial. *Christ All Bloody Mighty.*

She heard a voice, moved her tongue, answered questions, explained the symptoms, gave the address. *Oh my God.* She wanted to cry. *Help, help. Hurry ... HURRY.*

She almost dropped the phone.

She ran to the bedroom. Jim was in the same state. *Was he dehydrated? Running a fever? What was wrong with him?*

She switched on all the outside lights. She looked at the clock. How much longer to wait? She put on her dressing gown. Then she took off her dressing gown and tugged on a tracksuit. They had to be heading for the hospital.

She held Jim's hand, rigid and cold, not wrapping around her own. She talked to Jim just in case the sound of his name would stop him from slipping away. 2.02 a.m. She remembered a movie or was it a documentary? Family members talking to loved ones in

a coma and the coma victims reviving to tell the family how they could hear their voices.

How it kept them from going toward the light. *Don't look at the light, Jim.* 2.16 a.m.

She ran out of things to say. She started to cry. 2.21 a.m.

She heard a car on the gravel driveway. Elizabeth exhaled, let go of Jim's hand, opened the front door. 2.36 a.m. thank you God.

Two men entered the house wearing white coats. *I'm Pete, he's Adam.*

They asked Elizabeth lots of questions. They looked over Jim's damp, cold body. *Could be a stroke.*

The bedroom tilted. Elizabeth sat on the end of the bed with her heart ker-thud, th-thudding.

Could be a coma, Adam said. *He's really out to it.*

Crikey. Pete lifted the bedding off Jim's body. Elizabeth and Adam stepped forward to see what Pete was looking at. *He's turned the bed into a swimming pool.*

Jim's t-shirt, sheet and quilt covering was saturated.

Adam listened to Jim's heart, pricked his finger, took his blood pressure. *It's a coma. Blood sugar 1.2.*

Pete gave Jim an injection and waited. *First timers are always the slowest to revive.*

Pete said Jim's name very loudly, over and over. Jim's breathing changed to a normal-sounding snore. His legs began to twitch. *Looks like we're winning.*

Jim stopped snoring. His eyelids fluttered.

He'll have to go to hospital. Best off in the city. They can observe him overnight.

Elizabeth nodded and stood up.

Jim's legs began to move about, pedalling a bike. His fingers lost their straight, bunched appearance and relaxed. His eyelids fluttered again and then opened.

Hello there. Adam bent over Jim. Good to see you, mate. Can you tell me your name?

Jim looked around, parted his lips and rested his eyes on Elizabeth. She tried to smile but her own muscles were having just as much trouble working.

We're going to take you to hospital. You've been in a coma. Do you understand?

Jim nodded his head very slowly.

I want you to suck on this tube. It's pure glucose. Adam wrapped Jim's fingers around the tube and guided his hand. There you go, mate. Suck hard now.

Jim's lips pouted around the tube. Pete and Adam stood watching Jim's legs slow then cease their pedalling.

He'll be okay. Adam smiled at Elizabeth who wasn't sure if anything would ever be okay again. Rough night for you.

She nodded and remembered to breathe.

Follow us in your car. You'll need to come home again once he's checked in.

Pete and Adam wheeled Jim out on a stretcher. She kissed Jim's forehead and squeezed his hand. He smiled like a kid with a lolly.

Elizabeth returned to an empty house and a wet bed. It was 5.20 a.m.

She pulled off the quilt and sheets and mattress protector. The pillow was soaked. The mattress was soaked. She stood back from the bed and stared at the damp clump of sheets on the floor. Breath whistled past her lips, shuddered and stopped.

She placed two towels over the dampness. She covered her half of the bed with fresh sheets and a spare blanket. She slid out of her sandals and, in her tracksuit, lay down.

She closed her eyes but they magically opened. She stared at the ceiling. Cold.

Hours later, she crept back to her body.

She'd married Jim because ... She wasn't sure. She could have lived with him but hadn't thought ... Wasn't it better to marry?

She liked the feel of him, the sound of him, the smell of him ... He was kind, generous, a good listener. He made her laugh. He tried to understand her ... Their relationship was like little lollies unwrapped and rewrapped in cellophane. But the morning she stood by his hospital bed, holding his warmer hand in hers, stroking his forehead, shell-shocked by all that had happened, uncertain about the future, teetering on the brink of herself, she'd felt something deeper ... Perhaps it was Jim's vulnerability or the fact that he needed her ... or was it something else?

In the middle of chaos, her life seemed to sort itself. Suddenly she felt ... grateful.

Jim had to give himself four injections a day. *I'm a pincushion.*

His pancreas had completely shut down. Diabetes One. Insulin-dependent. It was rare for someone his age.

The words drifted past Elizabeth. She walked through water.

Jim was supposed to be strong. Her rock.

Too much insulin and he'll go into a coma. Too little and he'll suffer serious complications later on.

It was a tight-rope.

There are lots of theories about the cause but we really don't know for sure.

Consolation?

If he manages his blood-sugar levels he can expect a healthy, normal life. It'll be hard to control in the early stages. Most people don't know they need sugar. They can't feel it.

Jim and Elizabeth went glassy-eyed.

You'll know when he's heading for a coma. The specialist nodded at Elizabeth.

He'll most likely kick you in bed.

Elizabeth woke three times a night, stretched her hand out and felt Jim's forehead.

Hot or damp, she pulled off the quilt.

Jim took Elizabeth for a Sunday drive to Port Willunga. Everything was going well until the car zig-zagged on the open country road. Elizabeth gripped the armrest and asked Jim, *Are you okay?*

Jim nodded but Elizabeth, pivoting in her seat to really take a look at him, saw that he wasn't.

Jim, stop the car.

Jim took his foot off the accelerator pedal but didn't apply the brake.

Jim, you must stop the car. Elizabeth steadied the steering wheel with her right hand. *You're not okay.*

Jim pushed the brake but the car continued to careen.

Jim, please, please, stop the car.

Jim's foot complied. Elizabeth heaved at the steering wheel and pulled the car over. It was a downhill slope so the car rolled. *Jim, Jim, the brake.*

Jim pushed the pedal again and Elizabeth yanked on the hand brake. A car sped by blaring its horn.

Elizabeth heaved a sigh of relief.

Jim rested his head against the headrest and passed out.

Do ya miss it? Lesley slurped her tea.

What's that? Elizabeth frowned.

You know, being famous.

Oh. Elizabeth gripped her mug for warmth. No. Not really. I don't think about it.

Hmm ...

How did you find out?

Rumours. It's the Hills. Lesley rubbed her nose with a soiled hand. What was it like?

Elizabeth sipped her tea. Like jumping out of a plane without a parachute.

Scary.

Elizabeth nodded.

Why did ya do it?

It seemed glamorous ... adventurous. I thought it would make my mother proud.

Would ya do it again?

No.

Not for the glamour, the glory?

Elizabeth laughed. Especially not for the glamour or the glory. If you only knew just how unglamorous it was ... But maybe I'd do it again for the children.

Lesley slurped. I can't wait to have a kid. Whaddabout you?

Elizabeth bit her lip. I don't know. I should know ... but I don't.

Gusts of wind blew leaves across the gravel driveway. Elizabeth tugged at her jacket and hunkered down.

Some women always know they'll have children, but not me. Not really.

Lesley grinned. Whaddabout Jim?

Elizabeth shrugged. No pressure there.

Lesley grinned. You're lucky to have a choice.

Elizabeth nodded. *I'm grateful to have a choice but it's fearless choice that interests me ... and sorting out what's right for me.*

You'll know if it's right, Lesley said.

Do you think so?

Uhuh, you'll know.

At the café, Elizabeth ordered coffees and found a table near the window. She gazed out into the street and watched the Hills people stroll by wrapped in jackets and knitted scarves and matching gloves. Faces ruddy with the cold. Where was Jim? He was taking longer than usual to get the newspapers. Had he met someone he knew?

The coffees arrived but Jim was still missing. Elizabeth rose from the table as her pulse leapt. She walked out of the café and headed up the street, toward the newsagent. She spotted Jim staggering toward her. She ran. She took his arm. *You need sugar.*

She led him into the café and made him sit down. She knew not to talk to him. He'd think he was responding when he wasn't.

Elizabeth grabbed a sugar sachet from the middle of the table. She ripped the sachet open, placed it in Jim's hand and guided it to his mouth. She repeated this four times. She was reminded of her mother, sitting on the end of the bed, waiting.

Elizabeth looked in the mirror and saw that her face was ruddy too. It should have alarmed her. Why didn't it alarm her?

She took a step back from the mirror. What did it matter? *Of course it matters. You can't let yourself go.*

But it really didn't matter.

Elizabeth poured sugar into the fruit and water. She stirred and stirred and watched the sugar dissolve. Then she let it boil and thicken and fume like a hot spring. She warmed her hands over the pot.

She eased a spoonful onto a plate and let the liquid cool. She pushed it with her finger and watched the surface concertina. Too little boiling and the jam would be runny. Too much boiling and the jam would harden into toffee. It was an art to get it just right. When it was set she licked the plate clean with the tip of her tongue. When it was wrong she boiled again, careful not to burn the bottom. To let it roil and seethe. To have a colour that was rich and opaque. To have it taste of fruit not sugar. To pour it to the brim of the jar so it'd keep for months. To cover the lid with calico and string. To store it in her cupboard. Row upon row.

Lesley asked about music teaching.

What was that like?

Frustrating.

Why?

Elizabeth straightened, looked at the house and considered the question for a long time. *It wasn't ... fulfilling. When I stopped teaching I felt relieved, released, freer.*

Lesley picked up a pebble and threw it into the birdbath. *Gold or granite ... Splash!* She caught Elizabeth's eye. *See?*

Elizabeth laughed as light emanated from her body.

Jim walked out of the kitchen with a red, bruised bump on his forehead.

Oh my God, what happened? Elizabeth stood up from the sofa and drew Jim to the window. Just ten minutes ago Jim had gone into the kitchen to get a snack.

I don't know. I think I passed out. I woke up lying on the tiles.

Elizabeth's mouth dropped open. *What? You collapsed? In the kitchen?*

Jim felt the lump. *Lucky I didn't break anything. The backs of my knees feel funny.*

Elizabeth sat down, suddenly tired, sour, bitter. Jim appeared to be standing at the end of a very long tunnel. *I just don't know if ...*

Jim shaded his eyes and looked at her.

It's a lot to cope with.

What?

This. The uncertainty. You know?

Jim shook his head.

It's all right for you, you don't remember most of it. It feels so ...

Jim frowned. The room darkened.

... out of control. She looked down at her hand and the diamond that needed cleaning. I wish I could control it for you. I wish ...

You wish?

I wish it would go away.

In a box, more like a casket, Princess Diana hid her palace secrets.

Jim sat at his desk and wrote,

Darling Lil,

Thank you for being there, for being you.

You're the love of my life.

Jim

A sparrow lay in the ashes of the woodstove; little wings folded underneath like a picnic blanket. Elizabeth scooped the bird up with a dustpan and took it outside. It wobbled and flopped with half-opened eyes.

She placed the bird among the honeysuckle, under the plum tree. Kneeling there, birds twittered above her head. Life and death. Life. Death. *Was there a word that combined the two?*

Lesley found her and lit a cigarette. *Time for tea?*

Elizabeth nodded. *Sure.*

They sat on the bench nursing mugs of tea.

Sometimes I wish I was normal, you know? Elizabeth glanced around the garden.

Why? Lesley puffed then slurped.

To fit in. To feel ... less alone.

Oh.

Even now I'm on the perimeter. Elizabeth gestured at the hills to her left where woolly sheep grazed.

I'm no expert on normal, as ya know. Lesley grinned. *But I reckon normal is just an opinion.*

Lesley coughed and sniffed. *As for the perimeter... it's just a question of perspective.*

Elizabeth gripped her mug for warmth. *You mean, those sheep are on my perimeter?*

Precisely, m' dear.

Why don't you have children? Faye asked on the phone. *It's the most rewarding thing.*

Elizabeth muttered through her teeth. *I don't want to talk about it, mum.*

Hogwash. You need a good talking to.

No, I don't.

You're not getting any younger, Lizzy. Someone's got to knock some sense into you.

Elizabeth laughed: hollow, metallic.

Faye breathed into the receiver. *Doesn't Jim want children?*

Why is it always Jim? Why aren't you asking what I want? Me – your daughter – and when will you stop calling me Lizzy?

Elizabeth hung up and trembled all over. She'd had enough of her mother *forever*. She grabbed her secateurs and headed into the garden to do battle with the blackberry canes arching over her fences.

Much later Elizabeth returned to the house and flopped in front of the TV. Headlining the news was the crowning of Miss World Australia. Cameras feasted on the winner's bones and bosom. Her crown glittered. She was a princess.

Viewers were told that this was more than a beauty parade; it also raised funds for charity. Although thirty thousand dollars had gone missing the previous year and the aforementioned charity never received a cent, things were back on track and better than ever.

Oh no, this isn't a meat market. We're not being exploited, Miss World Australia

beamed. *I'm so honoured. I haven't stopped crying. I can't wait to be Miss World.*

A fashion parade of Miss World Australia entrants was a bouncy affair: bikinis, shorts, gowns worth thousands. Every smile was jaw-achingly wide. Men in black tie laughed and applauded from their seats in the audience. Elizabeth believed she was watching an animated Barbie doll party. She blinked several times and shrank in her chair. Had that been her? Had she looked as stupid, fragile, fraudulent? And where were the feminists now?

Give me ya hand, Lesley said as she stubbed out a ciggie.

Elizabeth proffered her hand. Lesley grabbed it, bent the fingers back, turned it this way and that. Her skin gritty with dirt. *Hmmm. Interesting ...*

Elizabeth leant forward, craned her neck, dragged her chair closer.

It's your Mount of Luna. See? Below your little finger.

Elizabeth examined her hand.

It's well-developed. Thought as much. Shows you're creative.

Elizabeth smiled. *You're kidding?*

No, no, Ritchie-ditch. I'm a palm reader from way back. Can always pick a good mount. Lesley released Elizabeth's hand and winked.

Jim came home at 6.48 p.m. to find Elizabeth trimming a daisy, dirt on her shins, smeared across her forehead, tangled in her hair. Her sun visor was pushed up. Gloves were caked with mud. A jagged hole in her tracksuit showed scratched and bloody skin.

Oh hi. Back so soon?

So soon? Jim laughed. I've been gone ten hours. Haven't you missed me?

Elizabeth shook her head and slung her arm around Jim's neck. Jim drew her to him and smelt earth and perspiration and washing powder. Her eyes glinted in the semidarkness.

Had a good day?

She nodded. *And you?*

Not bad. What's for dinner?

Don't know ... fish and chips at the pub?

Elizabeth slid her gloves and visor off. *It's gotten dark. I didn't realise.*

She went into the house and washed her hands. The weary ache in her felt good. She rolled her shoulders, yawned and brushed her teeth. She straightened her hair and thought about lipstick. *To hell with it.*

In Jim's BMW, she felt soft leather through the hole in her pants.

The box waited in the empty room.

Elizabeth learnt to read the signs. The slight puckering of Jim's lips. The glassy look of his eye. The difficulty finding words. The deviation in his walk, albeit slight at first. A lack of his usual patience. Frequent, jaw-cracking yawns.

A new language evolved. *What's your blood-sugar? Do you need sugar? Will you be all right? Shall I get more supplies? Will you check yourself?*

Jellybeans littered glove compartments, handbags, pockets, drawers, filing cabinets. Meals had to be prepared on time. Jim needed a routine. He needed snacks. He needed her.

Elizabeth prayed that if someone saw Jim staggering in the street they wouldn't dismiss him as some drunk or druggie. They would rush to his aid, look to the bracelet, give him sugar. She hoped they would care.

Jim left a note wedged between Elizabeth's gardening gloves.

My Darling Lil,

You're the best thing in my life.

I love you.

Jim

Elizabeth sat at the piano. Listened. Waited. Listened. She lifted a hand as if to play. It hovered for a moment before coming to rest on the keys.

Silence.

Something still wasn't right. Not quite right.

She opened the newspaper. Miss World Australia was driving a black Maserati.

Fame is funny, she said to Jim. It's not about what you've accomplished but how visible you can become.

Wouldn't be dead for quids, Lesley said, smudging her brow with mud. Out here we're free to be ourselves. To say to hell with it. Know what I mean?

Elizabeth pulled at a dandelion, using a fork to lever it out. *There's something liberating, yes ...*

Well, look at you. Quite the country gal these days. Lost your city retention.

Retention?

Yeah, anal retention, that's what we call it.

We?

We country folk can spot a slicka a mile orf. First they mention the snakes. Then it's the cold. Then it's the rain or the mud or the mice. Wimps the lot of 'em.

Yep, that sounded like me. Elizabeth threw a weed over the fence for the sheep.

But in the Hills we've room to shape our own lives. Lesley dug around a rose bush. We can make ourselves into anything we damn well like.

Lesley patted the freshly turned earth. And I've come to the conclusion that living life well is the best revenge.

Jim entered the house, placed his bag by the door, hung up his jacket, walked into the kitchen and gave Elizabeth a kiss as she stirred a large pot of soup.

Dinner won't be long.

Jim glanced at the clock. *I'll make a few calls.*

Elizabeth nodded.

Jim did a double-take as he passed the doorway to the living room. He returned to the kitchen, rubbing his forehead. The tendons stood out in his neck. He threw his hands up and looked at Elizabeth. *Where is it?*

Elizabeth took a piece of paper from of her pocket and held it up. Her hand shook.

Jim came toward her, tall and angular. She avoided his eye.

What's this? He took the piece of paper and held it up to the light. *What? Are you crazy? What have you done?*

Elizabeth shook her head.

Jim scratched his temple. *Why didn't you tell me?*

Elizabeth stirred the soup.

Jim slapped the piece of paper against his thigh. *Why did you ... ?*

Because I love you, Elizabeth blurted, dropping the wooden spoon.

Jim stared. Elizabeth was a Martian.

Elizabeth lifted her chin. *The money will go toward the mortgage.*

Jim shifted his weight from left to right. His hand went back to his forehead, shading his eyes. *You sold it for the money? There are far more important things ...*

Exactly. Your health, for one.

Jim tipped back on his heels. The line between his forehead softened. His lips parted as red dots appeared on his cheeks.

With an extra fifty thousand in the bank you'll get to ease up. I get to see you. It's win win.

But the piano ...

Elizabeth placed a hand over her heart. *The music's in here.*

Lesley cupped a rose in her grubby hand. *If ya can't find happiness in small things, ya'll never find it in the big things.*

Elizabeth stood where the piano had been. She felt drawn to the fridge. She swayed.

She inhaled, exhaled and let the moment pass. The box waited. She hesitated in the doorway, thought about Pugh and decided to make more jam.

Elizabeth dreamt that she flew to the moon and planted a rose. It multiplied, carpeting the moon with petals.

When she dug, something ran up her arms, over her shoulders, down her spine and legs and feet and back into the earth. Her hands started to ache when they needed the dirt.

Lesley said, *Sometimes when I'm working in the garden I can hear the sound of nothingness.*

Afternoon sun filtered through the trees at odd angles ... a musty smell of mice nesting behind the kitchen cupboards ... the creak of the ceiling as the wind changed direction. Pugh's prowling, spiking the air with static and spice. The stale stillness that settled in the empty corners of the house ... But something plucked at the muscles in her feet,

whispered across the hairs of her neck, rumbled around her stomach, jumped from synapse to synapse. It pulled at her body like a magnet. She didn't resist. She closed her eyes. It was somewhere, somewhere ...

She stopped. Silence. A heat behind her eyes. A pressing weight on her shoulders.

A tightness in her throat.

She opened her eyes to discover the source ...

The box.

Are we seeing you for Christmas lunch?

No, Mum. We've other plans.

Are you going to Jim's family?

No.

Are you having friends over?

No.

My goodness. Jim can't be happy with that.

He wants a break from people.

Is everything all right?

Of course.

His family must want to see him for Christmas.

Elizabeth bit her lip.

What a funny Christmas, not seeing anyone.

Elizabeth counted to ten.

You haven't seen Victoria or Florrie for ages. What are they to think?

Elizabeth spoke quickly. *They can think whatever they like.*

Lizzy. Her mother paused. *How terrible.*

Elizabeth didn't know where to begin. She pulled at her t-shirt so the stitches unravelled and the hole grew bigger.

But it's so - so - upsetting.

I don't want to upset you, Mum. I don't mean to.

Well then, come and see us, or we'll come visit you. Would you like that?

Mum.

Her mother sighed. *What on earth will you do?*

Things.

But Christmas is supposed to be about family.

Christmas is whatever it is.

What do you mean?

I'm not a Christian anymore, Mum.

Lizzy! What are you saying? I raised you to be a good Christian. I raised you properly.

Elizabeth eyed the secateurs resting on the table by the back door. *Jim and I want to spend Christmas together.*

Silence.

Mum?

I don't know ... Her mother said in a very small voice. *Where did I go wrong?*

Elizabeth rubbed the spot between her ribs where her heart was aching. *I'm really sorry, Mum.*

Silence.

I'll see you soon, okay?

I suppose. Very soft.

Okay.

Elizabeth hung up and disappeared into the garden to turn on the sprinklers.

Finches darted in and around the water.

She closed her eyes and stood in the soaking spray.

Miss World Australia had Trump's arm around her waist. Lacquered Trump pouted and squinted at the camera. Miss World Australia's smile was wide, her teeth very white: blonde hair hung straight and cascaded over bare, bony shoulders.

The magazine said that Miss World Australia was the new female role model. The world was her oyster; lusted after, as she was, by every man she met.

Elizabeth wondered why she'd ever aspired to that. To be an object, slavered over. To be a pawn in someone else's game; someone else's cash cow.

Elizabeth threw the magazine in the bin.

Men don't get it, Lesley said.

Don't get what? Elizabeth asked.

Sex. Lesley grinned.

Elizabeth blushed before she could stop herself.

Women know how to please women. Lesley picked at her grubby nails. Men only want to please themselves.

Elizabeth blushed.

Lesley lit her cigarette. I reckon, if ya give the right way, ya'll always get it back the right way. Know whad I mean?

Elizabeth nodded, not at all sure what Lesley meant.

Gripping the knife, Elizabeth stepped into the room. A freight train rattled the night air four kilometres away. Frost smeared the window white. Poplars cast blacker shadows on the other side of the glass.

She stood under the bare light bulb, expecting Pugh to swoop at any moment, grab her feet and pull her through the floorboards, into the cellar where she'd be bound with chains and have weird, sadistic acts performed upon her flesh. She shivered, clenched the wooden handle harder and held it to her chest. The window ran with condensation.

She swiped at her forehead with the back of her hand and stepped into the centre of the room. Her eyes were too big for their sockets. Her shoulders ached. *Are you sure you want to do this?*

She turned to check she was alone. A high-pitched monotone, as piercing as a radio frequency, wailed in her middle ear. She stepped toward the box. Shadows crowded the room. She feared she might see blood and scream. Her throat constricted. The *X* warped and shifted. She lifted the knife and slit the packing tape in two.

The box is an open wound. She's standing in the middle with a large key gripped in her hand. A power plant of energy is building up inside her. She tastes something salty. A beam of light warms the top of her head. Cape and crown and sash and sceptre fall from her like chains. She lifts her arms as if to fly and, amazingly, she does.

Elizabeth slipped her hands into the mess and pulled out silver spoons and unopened packets of photographs. Pictures sifted through her fingers and fell to the floor. Newspaper clippings spilled over the lid. An avalanche of letters and telegrams and itineraries pelted the floor. She set the embalmed shoebox to one side. She hauled out photograph albums. At the very bottom were three notebooks. She traced the gold letters that spelt *Diary*.

Elizabeth found a plastic bag and placed the diaries at the bottom of her wardrobe.

Now what?

Outside, sunshine bleached the images out of her eyes.

One by one Elizabeth stuck photos to the walls, creating a crazy collage from floor to ceiling. She dragged the ladder around the room. Aluminium clattered against bare boards. She didn't stop, didn't hesitate, didn't think. She forgot to eat.

Eventually she walked out of the room and stepped through the pearly wall of a moon shell.

Elizabeth rested her head on the wooden rail of the rocking chair. Fresh air caught in her throat and cooled her face. She closed her eyes and dozed.

Halloo!

Elizabeth jumped and twisted in her seat. Jane appeared wearing designer jeans, v-neck sweater and high-heel slides that stuttered against the paving.

There you are, she said. Red lips smiled from a mask of powder, blusher and eye shadow. *Thought I'd drop by. See the new house.*

Drop by? Like the rest of Elizabeth's family, Jane lived an hour away.

Well, aren't you looking very ... country. Not a hair on Jane's head moved in the breeze.

Elizabeth fingered the ragged hole in her tracksuit. For some reason, she looked past Jane's shoulder expecting Trump to round the corner. Jane's silver Mitsubishi was parked on the road.

I didn't realise the cottage was so ... big. Jane swung her shoulder bag and hugged herself. *Well don't just stand there, it's cold, show me around.*

Elizabeth led Jane into the house. Jane *oohed* and *ahhed* and made little comments about the Baltic floorboards and the view over the creek. She asked, *Are there snakes?*

Jane's fingers slid along the window sill where blow flies buzzed half-dead. Her slides crunched millipedes and caught in the sisal. Eyes darted left then right and around to Elizabeth's chipped red nail polish.

So that's it, Elizabeth said, steering Jane toward the kitchen.

But hang on. What's in here? Jane turned the doorknob.

Elizabeth said, *Don't ...* and rushed to pull at Jane's hand, too late.

Jane opened the door, strode into the room and came to an abrupt halt. *Wow.*

She spun on spiky heels. *This is wonderland.*

She stopped in front of a large photo of Elizabeth. *Weren't you the glamour-puss?*

Elizabeth blushed. *Look, if it's all right with you ...*

You did all this? Jane waved her arms around, eyes wide, feet planted.

Elizabeth nodded. *Let's have a coffee and talk about ...*

I mean, I knew a bit ... but wow.

Elizabeth stood in the doorway watching Jane, wanting her to leave, feeling exposed, when a warm current of calm caught her mid-anxiety. She relaxed. Breathed deeper. It didn't matter. *It doesn't matter. Jane can think whatever she likes ...*

Jane circled the room again, eyes on the photos. *It must have been good being the Beauty Queen.* Jane made quotation marks in the air with her fingers. ... *the genuine article.*

Elizabeth stared at Jane. *I never felt that way. I felt ... I felt like a fraud most of the time.*

Oh. Jane's lips collapsed around her teeth.

I didn't earn the fame. It came too easy ... for the wrong reasons.

Jane looked lost.

Elizabeth tried again. *A long time ago beauty was important to me, but not so much now.*

Jane's eyes came into focus. *Why not?*

It wasn't a productive thing. Elizabeth laughed. *I froze like a rabbit caught in headlights.*

Huh?

Elizabeth felt warm and light. *I tried to be perfect all the time. I felt like a failure for not measuring up. It was a prison.*

Oh. Jane stood very still. Sunlight poured through the window behind her.

Elizabeth stood up straighter. *Beauty might promise happiness but it doesn't always deliver.*

You'd rather be ugly Jane's mouth tilted.

No, no. I just want to be free ...

Jane shook her head. *Free to do what?*

Elizabeth went very still, listening for something. Her words shook the air. *To live my own life ... To discover what fulfils me.*

Jane dived on her handbag as it slipped from her shoulder. *Woa ... What's the time? Gotta run, you know?*

Jane left the room. Elizabeth followed.

It's quite a story to tell the grandkids. Jane's eyes bored into Elizabeth's stomach.
Come to think of it, you're not ... ?

No.

No rush, I suppose?

No rush.

Jane sighed. *When Mr Right comes along you'll hear me ticking.*

Elizabeth shepherded Jane toward the kitchen. *Sure you won't stay for coffee?*

Nope, no, gotta run, Jane said, giving Elizabeth an airy kiss.

Jane disappeared down the road in her silver Mitsubishi.

Elizabeth returned to the house, cruising the current of calm.

Lizzy's in a white-tiled bathroom with her mother. They're chatting about nothing in particular. Her mother kneels down and opens her mouth. Lizzy places the nozzle of a hairdryer in her mother's mouth as if it's the proper thing to do. Her mother's expression

doesn't change. She's looking up at Lizzy, expecting something. The hairdryer explodes in Lizzy's hand, shooting directly into her mother's mouth.

Elizabeth bolts awake, gripping the sheets.

She stood in front of Ryan's photo. Up close. Her lips almost touching his.

Other photos called to her. She stared at the pencil-thin girl. The smooth, unblemished skin. The shadows under her eyes and in her eyes. The tell-tale tendons sticking out of her neck. The stiff way she clasped her hands. The whites of her knuckles. The tilt of her right foot as she waited for the photographer to finish. The dip of her chin. The forward slope of her shoulders as arms circled her body, drew her close, pulled her this way and that. Hairy hands, meaty hands, sweaty hands squeezing ... Ruby lips kissed Killer Whales, commemorative coins, wiry beards and the soft cheeks of dribbling children.

Under layers of makeup her face would surely crack ... talking, laughing, pointing, adorning, promoting and emoting in front of banks, bridges and buildings. Her face, a full moon, hovered over pianos in hotel lobbies, cocktail bars, town halls, private houses and Mayoral reception rooms. Fine fingers stretched over keys. Thin wrists about to break.

Perfection ... what an impossible dream.

She touched the glossy smile, the fearful eyes, the spray of freckles across the nose. She caressed the soft cheek. Pressed her face against the face. Closed her eyes. The room was still. Silent. Her fingers slid from the photo, cold and calm.

When she left the room and shut the door behind her it was much like closing a book. Yet it wasn't the end. The best was yet to come.

She's in a deep, dark forest running but not getting anywhere. Hot breath heats the back of her neck. There's a hungry howl. Shadows are gaining, gaining. Creatures take shape around her. Yellow eyes, salivating mouths, sharp fangs, claws. She's fodder. There's no point in running.

She stops. Breathless. Her body turns to stone. The fierce creatures crowd in. She closes her eyes.

She feels a warm embrace and opens her eyes. Before her is an ancient face. She smells compost and morning dew and sun-bleached bark. The nose is that of a tiny tree trunk. Long, leafy branches grow toward the lightening sky.

She kisses soft lips and places her arms around a moss-covered body.

I've seen what you did to the room, Jim said. It's incredible.

Elizabeth wrapped her arms around Jim and leant into him.

One night she looked out the window and was riveted by the moon, full, clear and stark before her.

She inhaled deeply.

The moon poured its numinous light into her.

She sets up the ladder again and pulls the photos off the walls. They dive to the floor and skid along the bare boards.

She works faster and faster, not caring if paper rips or buckles or messes with blue tak. When her right arm aches, she switches to her left. Newspaper tears. Words crumble, letters split.

The floor is completely covered with eyes and words and smiles and hair and faces mashed together. She's light-headed amid the chaos. *It's a work of art.*

She grabs her carving knife from the kitchen and hacks at the old sticky tape to open the shoebox. She tips the contents onto the floor. A stalagnite thumps. A book flutters. Barbie clunks. She grabs the doll and pulls its legs and arms and head off.

In the middle of the room, in the middle of the mess, in the middle of the night, she wrote on a piece of paper ...

Dear Mum,

She looked around the room.

She cupped her chin in her hands and stared at the box. Tapped the pen against the page. Re-read what she'd written.

She sat for a long time, remembering.

She crumbled the paper. Stood up. Flexed numb legs.

An ocean liner sailed away, towards the horizon.

Elizabeth picked up her oars and paddled out of the room.

Large garbage bags list against the bins. Bulges, dips, bumps, small tears and stretched plastic ... *No one would know.*

Elizabeth watches the garbage collectors throw them into the back of the truck, tattooed arms straining. For a moment the bags are in the belly of the truck, then they're gone. Memorabilia mixes with dog tins and tuna fin and meatloaf, pulped with pineapple skin and gravy and bits of soap, crushed with empty cartons of juice and milk and custard.

She smells a rank odour and covers her nose with her hand. The truck crunches gears, rattles down the road, puffs smoke and disappears. *Lizzy's quest is over ...*

A great weight lifts from her shoulders. She stretches her arms over her head and waves at the sky. Cows low across the hills, spreading the news. Her heart beats like butterfly wings. Her feet fly over gravel to the car.

She drives, leaning into the wheel. Back straight. Neck stiff. A crazy smile on her face. Wild laughter bubbling in her throat. Rattail hair whisking around her head as the wind streams through the car window. Her foot presses the accelerator pedal with short, sharp jabs. The engine roars. She cuts corners and edges close to the oncoming traffic. A pedestrian crosses the road and hurries to the pavement.

Elizabeth parks the car, yanks at the handbrake, gathers her purse, forgets to lock the door or close the windows.

In tracksuit and sandals she strides to the counter and asks for cans of paint and brushes and rollers. The shop assistant, infected by her mood, bustles about and bands together the equipment.

Got a painting job at home?

Elizabeth nods and gathers up the cans.

She opens the window. It complains under her hands and resists. She tackles it again and pulls until a cool breeze ruffles her shirt.

She sands down the woodwork. The scraping sound irritates. Arm sockets smoulder. She leans into the rhythmic movement as if grooming the skirting boards.

She works along the cornices with the paintbrush. The roller glides, wet and sticky across the ceiling. She can hardly stand the wait of it drying. Fumes make her dizzy so she sticks her head and shoulders out the window, takes in big breaths, notices the dainty white sea daisy bordering the paving by the front door.

She opens another can for the second coat. The ladder is scaled and descended, scaled and descended. Perspiration gathers around her hairline. Speckles of paint coat her skin as she works the paint along the walls. Her tracksuit is smeared and streaked. An ache spreads across her shoulders. Her eyes are wide and full of the glare of white paint. She loses track of where she is in the room, doesn't see the can on the floor behind her and trips. An avalanche of white paint runs out over the floorboards. She rearranges drop cloths to stem the flow, but the paint has a mind of its own. *A little blood goes a long way*

...

She wrings her hands at the puddle in the middle of the floor. What a disaster. Perhaps. She picks up her roller and spreads the paint over the boards like the petals of a flower. Then the floor, fully painted, becomes the surface of the moon.

Elizabeth watches Lesley wrestle with the periwinkle. Lesley, with her grubby hands clenching and pulling. Her beanie jammed and crooked. Her holey tracksuit fraying at the knees. Her muffled, pitchless singing of *I am woman hear me yawn ...*

Elizabeth clears her throat.

Lesley looks around, sees Elizabeth and smiles a gappy smile.

Thank you, Elizabeth says.

What? Lesley cocks her head.

Elizabeth clears her throat again. *Thank you*.

For what? Lesley squints.

For your friendship ... and help.

Oh. Lesley sits back on her haunches, wipes her brow, smears dirt. *No worries.*

Lesley grins again. *No worries at all.*

Every day Elizabeth searches. Her hands shake.

She walks into shops smelling the air. Feeling for rhythm. Listening. Sometimes she's cold, sometimes hot. Fingers slide over timber. There's an echo of something, then nothing.

When she finds it, a little battered, covered with dust and cobwebs at the very back of an antique shop, she knows. She pushes down a single key. The sound vibrates up her arm.

In the moon room the piano sits against a wall, near the window.

With an old toothbrush Elizabeth gets grime out of the delicate filigree and the deeper canoe-shaped carvings decorating its walnut cabinet. She rubs oil into thirsty

wood. Little circles clockwise then anticlockwise. Moisture seeps in, making it a deeper, richer brown. With a damp cloth she wipes the yellow ivories of faint but sticky streaks of grime. Traces of fingers that have played there. She hears an echo of minuets, lullabies, waltzes and her grandmother's *O Breathe On Me, Breath of God*. She stretches her fingers over the keys. Her left hand is shaped like her father's. The right, her mother's. *But the music is mine ...*

She applies Brasso to the simple sconces and scrapes off the wax that dripped from lighted candles. *A soft glow, a slight scent of beeswax, a gathering of people leaning closer to sing ...*

She piles music books on top of the piano to cover a buckling of the timber and a pale water-stain. She adds a metronome, lamp and a small vase of red roses. She books the piano tuner to bring it up to pitch.

Through the window, the garden teams with finches and magpies and a greenness that sucks at Elizabeth's eyes. Cows graze in the paddock. Willy-wagtails jig along their spine.

Lesley crouches near a camellia, snipping away old growth and spent flowers. The beanie frays about her head. Sunshine filters through the corrugated leaves and notched branches of the Weeping Mulberry.

Elizabeth sits on the piano stool. Listens.

The Moonlight starts like an incoming tide.

Exegesis:

The Genteel Performance

Lisa Jedynak

Presented as part of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

South Australia

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Introduction

Novels can be read through different prisms (or prejudices perhaps). If the reader knows certain biographical details about the writer before opening the book, this can work for or against the writer. For example, a story about motherhood, written by a non-mother, will evince a range of responses from women, depending on their views on and experiences of motherhood. How much should writers divulge? And what of the recent trend to fashion writers into celebrities, making them perform in public, revealing their private lives? Is the cult of the writer as celebrity nothing more than harmless marketing (if there is such a thing), designed to get the book off the shelves and into the hands of appreciative readers? Or is it a reflection of the consumerism that dominates the contemporary Western world, undermining the integrity of writers who wish to be read rather than seen? Is there a connection between the cult of the celebrity and the cults of beauty and youth? Clearly, there is. 'Image' is crucial to marketability. It is easier to 'sell' a writer who is young, beautiful and a good 'performer', than it is to promote someone of nondescript appearance and unremarkable performance skills, especially if the writer is a woman.

An exegesis could be a marketing campaign unto itself, where the writer becomes the promoter of her own press, so to speak. Given that potential for control, afforded me in this essay, what do I, the writer, reveal about myself? Do I say that, in fact, I was a beauty queen in 1983? Would this admission diminish or enhance my literary accomplishments? Would it repel the serious reader rather than interest them? Does it matter at all? In the context of this exegesis it might matter to a degree. It would explain much of the content of *The Moon Garden* and why the main character becomes a beauty queen. It would explain the existence of the novel. I, the writer, had been there, done that and couldn't rest until I had written a novel about the whole experience. If that were the case, arduous research would be reduced in the mind of the reader to mere autobiographical reportage.

A reader might still ask how much is true and how much is made up? Would the reader be more receptive to the story if it were true, or if it were completely invented? If I described the story as a 'confession', would the writing of the novel seem that much harder? Would the reader wonder how I managed to detach myself from such an intense experience in order to write an unsentimental account of a tumultuous time in my life? What if I protested: 'Hang on a minute, I was a beauty queen but the novel is fiction'? Who would believe me?

In interviews, Augusten Burroughs (author of *Running with Scissors*, 2003) spends much of his time trying to convince his critics that his dysfunctional family stories are 'true'. In 'Shrink Wrapped' (*Weekend Australian* May 21-22, 2005), Burroughs says: 'I didn't make anything up and I didn't exaggerate it. It's ... very, very true' (5). Why does he assume that it is so important to know what's true and what's not? What really matters here, the writer's background or the story itself?

Here I could say that despite not having been a beauty queen in 1983, I have always been fascinated by beauty quests. The beauty contest is a kind of fantasy. Keith Lovegrove connects the beauty quest and its trappings with 'the legend of the court of King Arthur and the tragedy of Lancelot and Guinevere', insisting that the victor evokes 'the romantic fable – winning the crown, as well as the hearts and minds of "the people"' (Lovegrove, 12). Clearly I am not alone in wanting to know what lies behind the fantasy of the beauty pageant. Surely, whatever it is, it is connected with the fantasies that sell magazines. Celebrities are captured off-guard, on vacation, working out in the gym. The ordinary life of celebrities, what happens behind the scenes, drives magazine sales. Why?

I have wondered what kind of girl enters a beauty quest and becomes a beauty queen? What happens to these girls afterwards? Why do they disappear? What might the effect of a year in the limelight, paraded as a beauty, have on a young woman in whom everyone then seems to lose interest as the new queen is crowned? Would such a young woman be aware of the feminist movement? What if she had been bought up by a mother who believed that becoming a beauty queen was the pinnacle of feminine achievement? Could the mother pass on the values that belonged to her generation, overwhelming the influence of a younger feminist generation? If so, it would then not be unusual for such a girl to aspire to marry and be a good companion, householder, mother. But what if, having fulfilled her mother's pre-feminist values, she found herself to be unhappy and unable to endure societal pressures to conform and perform (be beautiful, good, polite)? How would such a woman find a voice of her own? Would she become a feminist, or has feminism failed such women?

These preoccupations gave rise to a story about such a woman. I wrote to find out how Lizzy Mathews, who wanted to be beautiful, became trapped in an ideal. I wrote to discover what Lizzy Mathews would have to do to be free of the 'genteel performance'.

Adagio sostenuto: Beauty and The Moon Garden

Things are quite transparent on the surface ...

Like the first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata (Opus 27, No. 2)*, The Moon Garden, explores the transparency of beauty as image. Beauty as image sits on the surface like a tantalising melody, hinting at something more, something deeper. Beauty promises much but, on occasion, fails to deliver. What if a woman is defined as beauty, only beauty? How does a beautiful woman handle that: the admiration, the objectification, the expectation? What if beneath the beautiful surface lurks trouble, confusion and complication? What if beauty masks something that is more than 'purely seductive or elegant'? (Allen-Mills, 41) What if beneath the beautiful surface there is 'a collision between an irrational need to make a perfect world and the impossibility of doing so' (Allen-Mills, 41). What if beauty becomes a trap, or a prison?

Sempre pp e senza sordino

On the 18th of May, 2005, the Miss Australia crown, worn by winners of the prestigious Miss Australia Quest from 1965 to 1991, became a major addition to the National Historical Collection at the National Museum of Australia. The crown, with its hand-crafted silver, blue velvet and excess of eight hundred pearls, will feature in the National Museum's upcoming Miss Australia exhibition that will launch Professor Kay Saunders' *A Crowning Achievement: A Study in Australian Beauty and Charitable Enterprise* (due for release August 2005). Like me, Professor Saunders, from the University of Queensland, also had a fascination for the Miss Australia Quest as a child. In recent email conversations with me (8.3.05), Professor Saunders revealed that fictional as well as non-fictional accounts of Australian beauty queens are rare, if non-existent. Professor Saunders wrote that she found just getting the historical facts for her book about the Miss Australia Quest hard enough. She noted how difficult it was to track down former titleholders to talk with them about their role. It was as if they had dispersed to the four winds, changed their names and purposefully made new lives for themselves well away from the limelight. Maybe some felt burnt out by fame and the rough and tumble world of the celebrity, like Miss World beauty queens who 'have faded into obscurity or met with tragedy' (Lovegrove, 26). Maybe others felt they had done their due, having upheld what they had to uphold (a megawatt 'genteel performance') and remain mindful of protest groups who are 'as enduring as the

contest; there may always be cries of female degradation and exploitation from the public and the media' (Lovegrove, 26). Perhaps many former titleholders changed their names, or at least surnames, cultivating a life that revolved around home, family and a husband. Perhaps some became career women, jetsetters, expats. Former titleholders' lives are probably as diverse as the choices now available to women in the twenty-first century.

At the start of the twenty-first century, 'the use of the beauty contest as a marketing tool for commercial gain continues' (Lovegrove, 20), the exploitation of young women's vanity also continues and a fascination with past beauty queens remains. *The Moon Garden* tries to address some of the pressures women face, despite the legacy of feminism, as they continue to navigate a complex, materialistic society (that increasingly emphasises beauty and acclaim) and grapple with their personal desires for meaning and fulfilment.

The Moon Garden begins its exploration of beauty in the 1960s. Unaware of the feminist movement (growing up in conservative, Christian suburbia), Elizabeth (Lizzy) Mathews, matures to grapple with the enormous pressures a contemporary woman encounters in an increasingly materialistic society. In *Kiss My Tiara* (2001) Susan Gilman sums up those pressures:

For all the 'human progress' in the last two thousand years, we still feel an obscene amount of pressure to be beautiful. And we can all name the culprits: The media. Boys. Patriarchy. Capitalism. Calvin Klein. That moron in elementary school who insisted on weighing everyone publicly in gym class (5).

In Part One of *The Moon Garden*, Lizzy feels the pressure to be beautiful from a very young age. She recognises, almost by osmosis, the need to value physical appearance. Taunted by her peers, Lizzy is made aware of her shortcomings as a sickly, medicated child in the schoolyard. Lizzy strives for beauty in order to gain status and ensure safety. At the age of nineteen, Lizzy becomes a fashion model by embracing an accepted regime of eating (or, in this case, non-eating). She starves herself in an effort to attain the beauty ideal her peers unquestionably pursue. Fat is seen as an evil that must be vanquished from the body to make way for the prized appearance of bones. Hunger pangs are evidence of increasing beauty. Lizzy, living a secret life of food denial, comes close to succumbing to an eating disorder. During the first draft, the writing teetered towards the tragic territory of anorexia (rife among fashion models today). Food is a 'site of anxiety, regulation, control, self-control, and that is especially the case for women. Pride. Shame. Despair. Anguish. All of those emotional terms get linked to various facets of food and eating' (O'Neill, 16). I decided, however, that if I let Lizzy succumb to anorexia, a huge problem for young women, especially, this would take over the story and

narrow my scope. I wanted to suggest a broader range of issues that women like Lizzy face as they mature and find a place for themselves in the world.

As a fashion model, Lizzy's tight control over what she eats and the rigorous amounts of physical exercise she endures, show how firmly she embraces the doctrine of control and containment so prevalent in contemporary society. She becomes Miss Model Australia at her self-inflicted slimmest. At this point Elizabeth (in Part Two) has virtually relinquished her sexuality as starvation affects the endocrine glands. In *The Beauty Myth* (1991), Naomi Wolf writes: 'The ideology of semistarvation undoes feminism; what happens to women's bodies happens to our minds ... Where feminism taught women to put a higher value on ourselves, hunger teaches us how to erode our self-esteem ... Hunger makes successful women feel like failures' (196-197).

Beauty queen Elizabeth (in Part Two) certainly feels like a failure yet she continues to uphold the 'genteel performance' (perfected womanhood). In *A Wish of Distinction* (1994), Penny Russell describes the 'genteel performance' as a 'complex combination of display and concealment, masquerading as accidental revelation' (60). The 'genteel performance' was 'overlaid with complex and shifting meanings, in which performers and audience, imagined and real, were caught in an endlessly coded and contested language' (63). The concept of 'cream' was intrinsically woven into the 'genteel performance'. In *The Moon Garden*, cream is deliberately introduced into the narrative (this is explored in greater depth later in the exegesis) because the concept of cream refers, like the phrase 'cream of the crop', to social eligibility. The 'genteel performance' is relevant to both music and beauty. It is linked to ideals of how to perform in society, how to succeed and how to maintain the status quo. Beautiful Elizabeth is ensnared in the 'genteel performance' as she tries to uphold society's ideals of perfected womanhood. It's an invisible prison that few escape.

Lizzy's mother, Faye, makes sure the 'genteel performance' is maintained, training Lizzy to care about what other people think of her, to smile, to perform the piano in the clothes she makes for Lizzy. Faye's clothes 'contain' Lizzy's body, shape her identity and rob Lizzy (literally as well as metaphorically) of a self-image. Fashion-conscious women today claim that their clothes are an expression of who they believe themselves to be. Making a 'fashion statement' has become a 'personal statement' that hinges around self-expression and, hence, self-identity. In *The Heart Garden* (2004), Janine Burke points out that French fashion design insisted on 'freedom, quality and style. For women, fashion can be a primary mode of self-expression, an exercise in discernment and an education in aesthetic judgement' (37). As a young woman in the

1920s, Sunday Reed was influenced by French culture and French style which 'impressed her and shaped her future aesthetic choices' (Burke, 37). As a child, Lizzy never has the opportunity to exercise aesthetic judgement or develop a personal sense of style (Aunt Victoria cuts her hair and Faye makes her clothes). Her skills in discernment are weak. It is only when Lizzy becomes a fashion model that she discovers the freedom to have her hair styled in pleasing ways and to wear clothes that enhance her natural attributes. In *The Heart Garden*, Janine Burke writes: 'Previously clothing had been an expression of social conformity or a way of advertising financial success. But the best designers like Paul Poiret and Coco Chanel revolutionised the social role of dress and liberated women's bodies' (37). Lizzy needs her own liberation from Faye's clothing and Aunt Victoria's scissors. By becoming a fashion model, Lizzy takes a crucial (but fraught) step toward self-determination while, ironically, becoming an object. Lizzy, in the process of exercising choice and determining her own life, is doing what Susan Maushart exhorts all women do in a society that is 'positively fetishistic about freedom of choice' (61) and that is to learn how to garner the 'courage to choose fearlessly and the wisdom to choose well' (233).

Susan Maushart also writes that 'one-off intense positive experiences – like winning your dream home, or being made Pope, for example – don't really have much effect on happiness' (63). Far from escaping pressures by conforming to a beauty ideal, beauty queen Elizabeth still finds herself unhappy (Part Two). On the one hand she has her mother's aspirations: beauty as a means to success (social approval). On the other hand, Elizabeth has a Christian education where beauty is vanity, leading to sensual temptation and corruption of the flesh. These contradictory attitudes to beauty expose a deep conflict between spirit and the flesh that traces back to Plato. Plato believed that mortal beauty was a reflection of ideal beauty. Ugliness was a sign of 'the bad, mad, or dangerous' (Etkoff, 41). Scientific research shows that people are more likely to help attractive people even if they don't like them. 'Good-looking people are more likely to win arguments and persuade others ... people want to please the good-looking, making conciliatory gestures, letting themselves be persuaded, telling them informative gossip' (Etkoff, 46-47). Faye is aware that status is a prize conferred on the beautiful, but for Lizzy there is a hidden catch. Status is given but much is expected from the beautiful in return; they have to be better at everything; marriages have to be happier; careers high-flying; houses bigger. They must also exude positive qualities, optimism and enjoyment. Beauty queen Elizabeth feels the pressure to perform the role of the privileged beauty, upholding a nation's expectations. But beauty does not bring Elizabeth the expected happiness. Quite the opposite. Her sense of personal control is continually undermined. She has little to no chance of sustaining relationships during her fast-

paced year of fame. She is isolated by her beauty. Her self-esteem remains low. 'Even if others think we are beautiful, we may not if we are constantly comparing ourselves to the even more beautiful' (Etkoff, 87). Elizabeth compares herself to Miss Model Australia 1982 who is blonde and beautiful. Elizabeth comes up short in comparison. Her own happiness is not guaranteed, as she thought it would be. Elizabeth discovers that beauty is full of contradictions:

a source of strength and a source of weakness and enslavement, something that blinds others to our deeper nature. The desire of women in particular to have their totality recognized is deeply felt. Beauty may be a 'pure gain', but its social effects, from harassment of the beautiful to discrimination against the unbeautiful, to the neglect of less visible 'inner' beauty, may be anything but positive (Etkoff, 27).

A question I had to grapple with, as the novel evolved, was how would Elizabeth, paralysed by opposing dogma, unconsciously wanting her 'totality recognised', resolve these deep dilemmas? Would beauty be Elizabeth's 'source of strength' or would it prove to be 'a source of weakness'? By becoming a beauty queen, she would have to confront the gains and disappointments, pluses and minuses. She would have to learn how to live with beauty in a way that navigated its pleasures and its pains.

A memoir I found useful in developing Elizabeth's dilemma was Hope Donahue's *Beautiful Stranger: A Memoir of an Obsession with Perfection* (2004). Hope Donahue navigates her own beauty, wealth and social status while being seduced by the promise of perfection through cosmetic surgery. Lacking self-esteem, Donahue tries to keep up appearances to hide a dysfunctional family's dark, ugly truths. Donahue's relationship with her mother is problematic. Donahue writes, 'It shocks me, now, how little my mother knew me. I was most definitely not a people person. Though I hid it well, I was staggeringly shy ... I concealed a myriad of insecurities and self-doubts ... it was an exhausting daily performance' (23). Shy Lizzy (Part One) suffers a similarly exhausting fate. Faye doesn't really know her daughter or, perhaps, doesn't really want to know her daughter. Faye is interested in what her daughter can become in order to ensure social approval. This means going against everything that comes naturally to introverted Lizzy who must perform (in school, at church, for her Aunt Victoria) to meet her mother's expectations. Lizzy, like Donahue, is 'wilting under the strain of having to look perfect' (23). Donahue finds that the only place she feels truly safe is in her bedroom because she is uncomfortably 'idiotic and out of place' (28) everywhere else. For Lizzy (also uncomfortable and out of place), one of the few places free of expectations is sick in bed. Donahue also depends on her mother's affection when she is sickly:

My mother became confident, more sure of herself and her role when I was ill. The boundaries between us as mother and child were clear and straightforward. I needed her. Healthy and robust, I knew that I became somehow frightening, even despicable, to her, though I didn't know exactly how. Damaged, though, I was a bird she could fold under her wing. It was the only time she and I could be sure of her reaction to me (99).

Lizzy (Part One) can ensure Faye's reaction to her by fulfilling expectations. Lizzy clings to this fragile certainty and doesn't question her mother's knowledge of the world. To not 'keep up appearances' is to expose failures and deep insecurities within Lizzy, Faye and other women in the family. These things must be concealed at all costs. Like Donahue, Lizzy learns to equate beauty with safety and security as she strives to 'feel at home in the world' (269). But Donahue learns, as Lizzy eventually does, that 'feeling whole has to come from within. It has very little to do with outer beauty. That fact is astonishing to me, but it is freeing, too. Profoundly freeing' (269). This is the freedom Lizzy yearns for as she tries to escape her invisible prison (the 'genteel performance'). Her mother is watching. The eyes of the public are watching her too when Elizabeth (Part Two) gains public approval by winning a beauty quest.

In *B Model: An Embellished Memoir* (2004), Miranda Darling's main character, Justine, has similar difficulties to fashion model Lizzy (Part One). In the 1980s, Justine's loss of self begins when her name is accidentally changed by a 'caring' modelling agency. Justine undergoes a transformation. Her hair colour is changed. Her body shape is reorganised and reduced. Justine is finger raped and dry-humped by a male model and a photographer respectively. Like Justine, Lizzy knows that she must be stunning, thin and blonde (preferably) to succeed in the world (this is the surface melody young girls are indoctrinated to desire). Both Justine and Lizzy are intelligent young women who act as a warning for any wannabe models. It might seem a glamorous world on the surface, even a big, wide world of travel and designer clothes, but who would want to see it? What of the truth that lurks beneath? Unfortunately, young women are seduced by media images, persuasive marketing propaganda, ethically-challenged big business interests (the beauty and fashion industries), in an age where, 'Image is everything' and 'Money can buy you happiness (aka beauty)'. Recent headlines scream, *Fashion and Fame: How to dress like a celebrity* (*The Advertiser*, 11.1.05); *Universal Appeal: Why everyone wants a piece of Jennifer Hawkin's Fame* (*The Weekend Australian*, October 9-10, 2004) and a casual stroll down any supermarket's magazine aisle will reveal headlines far worse: *Four Weeks to a Killer Body* (*Cleo*, March 2005); *50 Easy Beauty How-Tos* (*Marie Claire*, March 2005), *Princess Mary's Million Dollar Makeover* (*New Idea*, February, 2005); *Kate's Body Bliss: How She Dropped*

Three Dress Sizes (*Woman's Day*, February 28th, 2005); *50 Fabulous Fashion and Beauty Ideas* and *World Exclusive: My Life as a Princess* (*The Australian Women's Weekly*, March 2005).

Modest Lizzy grows up in an atmosphere of movie star exposure. As avid movie-goers, Lizzy's parents talk about the celebrities they love. Lizzy has a beautiful mother who aspired to be something when she was a young woman but somehow fell short. It's up to Lizzy to make something of herself, but where does shy Lizzy start and how can she be a woman in the world when there are few demonstrations of worldliness in her family? Perhaps the celebrities offer the most hopeful clues. Lizzy pores over fashion magazines to learn how to become fashionable and therefore successful (acceptable). Today, fashion models have become celebrities: Naomi Campbell, Kate Moss, Elle MacPherson ... The list is long and skinny.

According to Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, women's insecurities are heightened by unrealistic images of beauty portrayed in movies, advertisements and MTV. Wolf argues that in comparison with impossible standards of beauty, most women see themselves as flawed. Women are brainwashed into believing they need new products, creams, procedures to correct their flaws; they are exploited in the sense that they are encouraged in a consumer capitalist world to believe that they should be perfecting themselves in order to enable a multi-billion dollar beauty industry. Women today are led to believe that beauty can be purchased and success assured with the right products, brand names and clothes. Lizzy is trained (through her parents, peers and media marketing) from an early age to conform to the 'genteel performance'. Lizzy must be conscious of her appearance; girls must also be docile, neat, pretty, obedient and pleasing to gain status. To love and belong, to be approved of, is something every child craves but for a girl and later, for a woman, these crucial needs are inextricably linked with superficial values of attractiveness and the attentions of the opposite sex. In other words, love and worthiness are conditional and continually uncertain. Today a woman must, like her nineteenth century counterparts, work very hard (sometimes to the point of exhaustion) on her 'genteel performance' in order to attain status in society. On a treadmill of self-improvement (via cosmetic surgery, physical fitness and fashion), women are prevented from successfully focussing their energies (or having any energy at all) to make an impact in the world; robbing them of financial and political power. Elizabeth (in Part Three) eventually rejects superficial, media-driven standards of beauty and the constant need to perfect. She realises that she colludes with her own demise by buying fashion magazines, investing in beauty products, striving to live up to impossible ideals. Elizabeth retreats to the Hills and painfully recovers her own values. Although the isolation is difficult, Elizabeth learns about herself and explores new possibilities for being by literally cleansing herself of the images

that have symbolised her entrapment. Elizabeth, through gardening and her friendship with Lesley, is further supported to move beyond the 'genteel performance'. Lesley provides Elizabeth with emotional sustenance. Perhaps Lesley is truly the first woman in Elizabeth's life to do this. Lesley's friendship represents the sort of relationship society tends to place well down the list of priorities (very much secondary to sexual partners and biological family members). Elizabeth tends a garden and metaphorically cultivates the connection she has with her own feeling nature through music. She experiences what Maushart refers to in *What Women Want Next* (2005) as 'thou time' (244). As a beauty queen Elizabeth yearns for disconnection, downtime, pauses, breath, a chance to make links during the chaos of life as a celebrity. In Part Three, away from society's expectations, Elizabeth has room to develop these deeper aspects of herself. Free to be herself for the first time in her life, Elizabeth becomes emotionally and spiritually autonomous and begins to shape her own destiny.

In *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (1999), Nancy Etcoff says, 'Outside the realm of ideas, beauty rules. Nobody has stopped looking at it, and no one has stopped enjoying the sight of it' (4). This is exactly what Elizabeth discovers as a beauty queen. Beauty becomes a mask (the enthralling melody) when the visible self is assumed to mirror the invisible, inner self. Etcoff writes: 'Beauty has consequences that we cannot erase by denial. Beauty will continue to operate – outside jurisdiction, in the lawless world of human attraction' (7). Being beautiful is more complicated than Elizabeth could ever imagine. She is applauded by the public who admire her work for charity, her beauty and her crown, but is denigrated by feminists for perpetuating a meat market and the objectification of women. Her own response to fame baffles her. Part of her wants to run and hide while another part enjoys the accolades. She can't decide if she's being exploited or not. Is beauty an asset or a liability? Is there such a thing as perfection or is it an impossible dream? Elizabeth grapples with the impossibility of perfection and later, completely reassesses the basic tenants of the 'genteel performance' that she's been raised to believe.

Elizabeth is not mindless but deeply inculcated with an imbalanced sense of beauty's power. Introverted and insecure throughout Part One and Two of *The Moon Garden*, she is unable to utilise her beauty in ways that enhance her assets and optimise her own power. When intrinsic power is lost, no amount of external manipulation can activate it but the desire to do so is very strong. In this way, outer beauty becomes the cake instead of the icing. Beauty queen Elizabeth is judged and compared and expected to perform. She must cultivate an elaborate

façade that keeps everybody happy. To not do so would be anarchy. Punishment is disapproval and the stigma of failure.

Exec Gay manipulates Elizabeth and the media to suit her ends (successfully raising money for charity and maintaining her position within the organisation). She's like a 'cultural gatekeeper' who can, 'spin and tilt coverage, place rumours (true and untrue), invent trends and fads, and create a merchandised reality, adjusted for maximum appeal' (Blundell, 2). Elizabeth discovers that her classical training on the piano is not fit for mass consumption. Exec Gay wants Elizabeth to appeal to the general public, which Graeme Blundell defines as, 'not T.S. Eliot, the poetry of John Donne and high-art Indian cinema. Members of this audience would rather understand and live through other people's lives than their own' (2). Exec Gay tells Elizabeth that she must lift her head, make eye contact with the audience and smile (the antithesis of Elizabeth's Conservatorium training). In other words, fame must be about connecting with the people and Elizabeth (albeit unconsciously) wants to connect but struggles. She's literally had no training. Elizabeth has used music as a vehicle to connect with herself. Connecting with others through music has rarely, if ever, been her intention. Here is the clash between the public and private worlds that contemporary women must face. Does the private life of home and family become compromised for the sake of the public life of work, career and financial gain? Or vice versa? How do women manage when one or the other vies for domination: when having it all proves impossible? Pop singer Ryan Sallinger knows how to appeal to his audience. Perhaps that is part of his appeal; why Elizabeth is attracted to him. Ryan keeps his fans clamouring. His PR machine is well-oiled. Elizabeth falls under Ryan's spell and is exploited to serve his publicity needs. Elizabeth has lost her private life and this part of the story serves as a warning. In many ways, Elizabeth is struggling with a contemporary issue that goes beyond the tussle between private life versus public life. Underpinning the melody, the relentless arpeggios suggest a deeper struggle 'between self-realisation and the domestic, between wanting to fulfil yourself and knowing that the ultimate goal of your life is a husband, family and a home' (Maushart, 236-237). At this point in the story, Elizabeth doesn't know her ultimate goal (only the goal society expects her to fulfil) but she does know what relentless public life can do to a person. Elizabeth longs to disconnect. As Maushart writes in *What Women Want Next*, this need to 'dis-connect [sic] is real, too. A life without pauses and stillnesses [sic], like a paragraph with no punctuation, leaves you short of breath and gasping for coherence' (244). Elizabeth is gasping. Gone are the days of isolation, practising the piano in a room by herself, enjoying the space 'to get *beyond* self' (Maushart, 244).

Elizabeth never considers having plastic surgery (her childhood predates the rise in its popularity in Australia), but she is subject to the very same pressures that lead contemporary women to explore surgery as an option (like Hope Donahue). As a fashion model, she watches television, keeps abreast of fashion trends, buys clothes, shoes and fashion accessories, spends large sums of money on makeup and beauty products at a time when the beauty industry hits its straps (1980s). Elizabeth is seduced by the surface melody: the glamour, the expensive clothes and the approval she receives on the stage. In *The Shape of Things to Come* (2005), David Bennett claims that magazines and television have a role to play in overt body consciousness. He quotes Australian National University researcher, Richard Eckersley:

It's eroding our sense of worth and significance by parading before us people who are more powerful, more beautiful, more successful, more exciting. It's a lousy deal that young people get – particularly in a materialistic society ... It's about a very secular, narcissistic society when what you acquire is more important than what you can do to help people (37).

As a beauty queen, Elizabeth (in Part Two) must uphold an ideal of Australian womanhood, perpetuate the myths of the celebrity life (being far better than her average life as a music student), while helping disabled children. She becomes the voice of the disabled, despite the fact that the disabled want a voice of their own (true representation in the public eye). This may be noble (and necessary) but is it financially prudent? Beauty quests can raise millions of dollars for charity. By the time the Miss Australia Quest ended in 2000, it had raised over ninety million for the Spastic Centres of Australia. Perhaps for the disabled, beauty quests are a necessary evil until more effective forms of fundraising are found. In recent times, creative marketing minds have been on the job with the invention of Red Nose Day, Canteen's Buy a Bandana and the Cancer Foundation's morning tea parties, to name a few.

For the winner of beauty quests, social approval follows, but at what price? Some women are (seemingly) happy paying the price (if their media interviews are to be believed). Is there even a price to pay? Not according to the winners who deny being exploited. In reality, young women's lives change and possibly improve in terms of prize money, job prospects and travel. Entrants say they are willing participants. It's their choice (implying liberation). But what of the wise choice? As Maushart points out, 'freedom of choice ... is only the beginning' (233). Beauty doesn't always deliver on its promises of a happier, better life. What happens to the thousands of beauty parade entrants who don't win the big prize? What of them? The Moon Garden breaks 'the taboos against talking about it, the one that prohibits women from narrating

the dark side of being treated as a beautiful object' (Wolf, 285). Here we delve to the bass notes of Elizabeth's life just as she hits the jackpot. As a beauty queen she never needs to worry about the negative side of losing. She's made it. She's set. Nothing can ever be bad again, or so she believes as she skims the surface. She's stepped into the fairy tale and become the princess who lives happily ever after. And that has to be good, doesn't it? But the truth slowly, relentlessly, sadly reveals itself in the middle of her hectic celebrity life. Sinking to the depths of her situation, she senses she's trapped and there's no way out. Again.

After being famous, Elizabeth is desperate to dismantle the beauty myth; to forget about the attention from people she didn't know, from the rewards for things she didn't earn, from the unwanted sexual advances from men, from the hostility and scepticism of other women and from the long, hard struggle for identity. Elizabeth puts everything in a box and hopes her problems will disappear. Then she plunges into depression.

In *Silencing the Self: Women and Depression* (1991), Professor Dana Crowley Jack writes: 'trapped by expectations to enact a pretense, [a woman] experiences depression, hopelessness, and fear' (188). When her year as Miss Model Australia is over, Elizabeth sinks into the bass notes and wallows on the couch, noticing hairline cracks in the ceiling. Elizabeth, as Dana Crowley Jack puts it, 'abandons hope of an authentic connection ... when she can imagine only two possibilities for her future: subordination or isolation, holding a form of loss on either side' (191). Elizabeth makes her choice to marry, thereby choosing another form of subordination. However, with marriage comes an unexpected isolation (especially when she moves to the Hills) and this is almost too much to bear. However, a kernel of possibility for movement and change is available to Elizabeth later on, in the form of gardener Lesley. Strengthened by her friendship with Lesley, Elizabeth finds the courage to 'leave ideas and pain that have become familiar and leap, like a spider held only with an invisible silken thread, into the unknown ... Adrift ... she must trust her own capacity to build her own web of meaning and connection' (Crowley Jack, 193). With Lesley's support, Elizabeth 'allows [a] natural solidarity to overcome the ... obstacles put forward by competitiveness and rivalry artificially evoked among us by the beauty backlash' (Wolf, 282). Lesley and Elizabeth represent how women can outgrow the divisive myth of powerlessness (pitting generations of women against each other) by supporting each other (female friendships are crucial in aiding women to move out of depression). As Naomi Wolf suggests: 'The toughest but most necessary change will come not from men or from the media, but from women, in the way we see and behave toward other women' (283).

When Elizabeth (Part Three) marries Jim, she is still firmly trapped in the 'genteel performance'. She begins life as a wife by cooking, cleaning and maintaining her husband in a manner true to conventional form. She fulfils the role expected of her and hopes to be a good wife, deserving of the happy ever after promised her as a validated married woman ... as a validated, beautiful, married woman. But Elizabeth is shocked to discover that 'what she sees is not what she gets' (Maushart, 4). Jim is as good as unfaithful in the early stages of marriage. Soon the gloss of marriage wears off and Elizabeth is faced with the harsh reality that there are no happy ever afters. As Maushart explains: 'depression and marriage go together like the proverbial horse and carriage' (5). Most depressed women are married. More unmarried men are depressed. Marriage generally works for men but it doesn't work for many women. Maushart says: 'Becoming a wife will not only erode your mental health, it will reduce your leisure, triple your unpaid domestic labour, and increase the odds that you will be physically assaulted or murdered' (5). Elizabeth is left at a loose end like an improvisation that is abandoned unresolved. What comes next if it's not the promised happy ever after? At this difficult, terrifying moment of truth Elizabeth has her life in her own hands at last. Not that she recognises the moment as such. When Jim suggests they live in the Hills, Elizabeth goes along with the idea, almost incapable of doing anything differently. Compliancy is part of her make up (a result of nurture not nature). She has allowed other people to shape her life for her (first her mother, then Fran, Claudine, Doris Thrupp and later, Jim). She is relieved not to have such an onerous responsibility as her own happiness (of course, this is precisely what Elizabeth must learn to take responsibility for). Elizabeth knows how to make other people happy, but how does she make herself happy? Opting for certainty, not confident in her ability to make the right choice for herself and her life, Elizabeth moves to the Hills. In *What Women Want Next*, Maushart writes:

Having so many choices has now become part of the problem. The responsibility of making the *right* choices used to belong elsewhere. Our fathers, our husbands, our churches. No more. Now it is up to us ... For all but the most intrepid among us, it is certainty – closure, even – that allows us to sleep peacefully' (61).

As a married woman living in the Hills, Elizabeth now feels lonely, isolated and still under pressure to be a good wife, cook, housekeeper and support-system for her husband. She is dutiful and self-sacrificing. Jim remains central to her life. It's not so much a choice as an imperative. Her life is secondary to his. As long as he is happy, she is happy. She's trained to be self-sacrificing. Her success is reflected by the health of the marriage because marriage

defines her place in society and she mistakenly believes it should define who she is as well. Jim is mainly defined by his work. His marriage is secondary.

In *Good Wives?* Margaret Forster asks: 'Why, in the twenty-first century, in a social climate where it is acceptable to live in a partnership, and even to have children within one without any stigma, why ... does any woman still want to be a wife?' (7) Like Forster, I find the reasons for marriage very hard to identify and understand in contemporary society. Of course there are women who marry for religious reasons and economic reasons (to achieve what they think of as security). Women also marry for a respectability 'otherwise lacking, ensuring a status they see as valuable whatever the evidence to the contrary; and there are almost certainly many more who become wives without much pondering over what the role means, who regard it as a rite of passage' (Forster, 317). There are women who subscribe to none of these reasons, who think about marriage deeply and refuse to marry just because it seems like the right thing to do, yet these independent, intelligent, strong-minded women still agree to become wives. 'What do they still see in the role that attracts them when for decades now feminist theory has depicted it as very nearly a fate worse than death?' (Forster, 317)

Elizabeth doesn't think too deeply about marriage. Marriage is the right thing to do. It's expected of her. The lack of a feminist education is once again evident during this crucial stage of her life. Elizabeth doesn't equate her mother's unhappy married life as a possible future for herself. Elizabeth thinks that it will be different for her, better for her, happier for her. Marriage is not the problem ... it's Faye.

Although Elizabeth experiences some real and pleasurable sides to a healthy marriage, it is a marriage, nonetheless, and is therefore inherently rife with unspoken inequities and assumed psychological prescriptions. Unconsciously, Elizabeth is imbued with the nineteenth century ideology of separate spheres for men and women. She complies with the idea that women have to be protected from the outside world. She imagines she is safe as a married woman. The outside world is channelled through the filter that is her husband.

Elizabeth's sphere becomes the home where she looks for the promised rewards a married woman is supposed to receive. She and her husband slip into habits that parody a traditional marriage. Elizabeth is the homemaker and decorator; her husband is the breadwinner and protector, bravely facing the perils of the outside, slaying the dragons and bringing home the bacon for the good woman and the children, not that Elizabeth has any, but there's the expectation that they're on the way.

In *Wifework: What Marriage Really Means for Women*, Maushart writes that being a wife remains a full-time job.

The problem is, so much has remained the same ... much more than we are comfortable admitting to ourselves. Much, much more than we ever read about in the press, or watch on television. (The media, never forget, is change-driven, focusing always and everywhere on what's new and improved – or new and debased, it doesn't really matter – at the expense of what persists) ... [For] the vast majority of [women], the real picture – beginning with the fact that being a wife is *still* a full-time job - remains sepia-tinted ... marriage remains a matter of dancing to somebody else's tune till death, or divorce, turns down the volume for good (16).

I wonder how many married women would think of themselves as 'dancing to somebody else's tune till death'. Has marriage become a more flexible arrangement in contemporary society? Is there more equality between the sexes? Does a man ever dance to a woman's tune? In *The Heart Garden*, beautiful Sunday Reed is a woman who instigates and navigates an unconventional marriage. Very early in her marriage Sunday Reed takes a lover, enjoys independent financial means and relies on her hard working husband to make her creative visions a reality. Sunday Reed never dances to anyone's tune; she makes distinct choices, exercises control over her life wherever possible, enjoys a rich social life and creates a beautiful garden in the verdant Yarra Valley. But Sunday Reed was exceptional.

In *The Moon Garden*, Elizabeth (Part Three) doesn't choose motherhood, although she still has potential to be a mother, biologically, by the end of the novel. I wanted to explore the idea that feminine fulfilment could be found and that it didn't have to hinge around motherhood (in contrast to prevailing ideologies). Maushart points out that, 'Motherhood does not "bring" happiness any more than ... marriage or mortgage does. Unhappy women are as likely to have children as they are not to have them' (119-120). Maushart goes on to say that childless people (male and female) 'enjoy *greater* wellbeing – possibly because they also enjoy greater marital satisfaction – than parents do. Where childlessness has been genuinely chosen, research shows, women at midlife express a high level of contentment with their lives' (120).

At the end of *The Moon Garden*, there's a sense that some problems haven't been resolved, that they still hover, yet to be confronted. In this sense, we have gone on our musical, improvisational journey and somehow come to the end none the wiser. Maushart writes: 'Accepting that our lives are not problems to be solved, or a set of scales that may one day be righted ... may be the toughest assignment of all' (158). But there is resolution for Elizabeth in

terms of her redressing an 'ancient imbalance' (Maushart, 158). Rather than merely being in service to her husband, Elizabeth is eventually served by her relationship to Jim, and this disrupts the usual patterns of marital discontent that often leads to divorce (according to Maushart, women initiate two-thirds of all divorce). More importantly, Elizabeth fights against self-sacrifice and a multitude of mandates that dictate what she should do with her life. Maushart says: 'Neoconservative critics who point sourly to the rise of the "self" in contemporary culture forget that, for women, this is the good news' (229). For Elizabeth, it is good news. It's not that she wants to find self-actualisation through marriage, or even personal fulfilment through marriage (as Maushart points out, this is surely 'problematical to the point of delusion' 229). It's that self-actualisation (or individuation) and marriage are not necessarily exclusive goals. *What Women Want Next* is founded upon research that suggests that marital success can be achieved not by the *merging* of identity, but by mutual acknowledgement and support of the individual (their differences and preferences). In other words, marriage can't 'manufacture a sense of self where none existed before' (Maushart, 230) nor can it give a woman a sense of identity (as much as she might like it to). What a woman needs (married or not) is a strong sense of her own individuality quite separate from labels and roles and relationships. She needs an understanding of her own boundaries, where she starts and stops and what, in fact, pleases her. Women may not have this entirely right when they enter relationships but, as Maushart suggests, what women want next is the space to be themselves, or at least discover what it means to be themselves and to hold within their very own hands the power to shape their own destinies.

In *The Moon Garden*, Elizabeth (Part Three) remains married and discovers creative pleasure in the ordinary domestic setting of home and garden. Elizabeth slowly turns her back on external symbols of success and materialism. *The Moon Garden* describes a woman's journey to happiness and, despite brushes with feminism, Elizabeth chooses not to fully embrace its ideologies. She manages to take control of her own life, to live by her own rules and enjoy the freedom to be herself without colluding with prevailing ideologies. If her marriage had impeded her progress, perhaps it would have collapsed. In the end, her marriage does not cramp Elizabeth's desire to shape her own destiny. Her husband supports her path and there's a sense of interdependence in the relationship. Elizabeth finds the happiness she seeks, finally becoming Lil. Lil is the author of her own story, not the subject of someone else's plot.

David Bennett echoes the truth at the very heart of *The Moon Garden*. He says that parents and schools should enforce the message that 'your worth is about your inner beauty, not the outside.' This is the very message Elizabeth needs to hear as a child, a young adult and also

as a woman. Naomi Wolf writes: 'As long as the definition of "beauty" comes from outside women, we will continue to be manipulated by it' (277). Elizabeth's story describes this form of manipulation; how it started in childhood, connected to fashion and fame, led to marriage and ended in a garden.

The Moon Garden tells the story of a woman who, during the life and death pursuit of an image of beauty (in order to be visible, loved, accepted), eventually stumbles on the truth: beauty comes from within. Elizabeth finally has the strength to free herself from 'beauty bondage' (Young-Eisendrath, 47).

[T]rapped in the double bind of female beauty: damned if we are ugly and damned if we are beautiful ... we are restless and unsure, needing the affirmation of others. For many women ... identity is appearance, so everything is tied to approval and attention. Princess Diana was a perfect example of a woman trapped in beauty bondage (Young-Eisendrath, 47).

By the end of *The Moon Garden*, Elizabeth (as Lil) lives fully: she enjoys the freedom to look however she wishes; to be heard as she deserves to be heard; to eat whatever she wants; to drop her guard and relish the moment (sitting in the garden, looking out the window, staring at the moon); to acknowledge her own desire and pursue it. In effect Elizabeth (as Lil) symbolises what Naomi Wolf calls, 'the feminist third wave' (274). She lives 'by [her] own light in [her] own time' (130). Elizabeth (Lil) no longer fears herself or the world and, as a result, gains the whole world (represented by her garden), freely being herself. At last Elizabeth (Lil) cultivates her own desire. This is truly an accomplishment (a heroine's journey) given the suppression of desire Elizabeth experienced throughout her childhood and early adulthood.

In *The Moon Garden* I wanted to look at the dark, secret side of beauty, in the context of contemporary preoccupations with the cult of celebrity. *The Moon Garden* was written in the hope that more women would acknowledge the significance of inner beauty, liberation and empowerment.

Attacca subito il seguente ...

Allegretto: A Conversation

The flower between two chasms ...

The Allegretto rinses the listener's ear of the melancholy first movement. It's an uncomplicated prelude to the reckless abandonment of the third. Without the Allegretto something would be missing. This can also be said of what follows: a conversation between writer and character. Here's the contrast. The lighter mood. The interlude that acts as a spritz for the mind, a sorbet for the palette. Insights into the process of writing *The Moon Garden* would be missing without it.

La prima parte solamente una volta

The writer looks around. She's on a stage. There's a throne, a gaudy prop: metallic paint and cardboard like King Arthur's throne in an amateur production of *Camelot*. A spider web clings to the torn seat and chipped legs.

Spotlights strike the top of her head. There's applause, faint, but growing louder. Women wearing diamonds and designer dresses drift across the stage and disappear. But then a hand tugs on the writer's sleeve.

'Hello? Anyone there?'

Perfume, hairspray, sweat saturate the air. The throne repairs itself and begins to shimmer. The cobweb dissolves.

Like a developing photograph, a beautiful young woman takes shape and colour. She sits on the throne without acknowledging the writer. A microphone descends, hanging from a cord. The young woman reaches out and catches it. She flicks the switch on the stem, taps the bulb of the microphone. She's done this before. But who is listening? She faces the writer.

Elizabeth: Why did you make me wear that awful pink dress?

Writer: [Startled] What?

Elizabeth: [Sighs] The pink dress with those hideous frills and flounces.

Writer: [Perspiration covers her forehead. The spotlights blaze.] You mean ... when you were ... Not the one Faye made?

Elizabeth: I looked like a dolly doily covering a spare toilet roll.

Writer: [Clears throat]. I ... Well ...

Elizabeth: Well?

Writer: Well, what can I say? Angela Carter's *Bloody Chamber* was on my mind. Deep pink turns red on tellie.

Elizabeth: What's so significant about red? Isn't red just red?

Writer: It's a very evocative colour. A dangerous colour. Red wax, red fingernails, red lipstick, red clothes. Charlotte Wood made much of red in *Submerged Cathedral*. So did Margaret Drabble in *The Red Queen*. I was playing with an idea of innocence corrupted.

Elizabeth: If you'd read Patrick Tierney's *The Highest Altar* I might never have survived Part Two.

Writer: I wasn't about to bump you off. It's not that kind of book.

Elizabeth: I didn't like it.

Writer: Why not?

Elizabeth: Well ... I was confused.

Writer: You never really suffered.

Elizabeth: Ha. [Leans forward.] You gave me a painful childhood, made me collapse in Part Three, had me on the turps ... It wasn't exactly a party.

Writer: [Crosses her arms] But that was before the third draft.

Elizabeth: And you named me after that silly woman.

Writer: Which silly woman?

Elizabeth: Lizzie Siddal.

Writer: No, I didn't. Who is she?

Elizabeth: She was the forerunner of the supermodel. I read about her in a magazine. The most famous face of her generation.

Writer: When was that?

Elizabeth: 1840s.

Writer: But this is a contemporary novel.

Elizabeth: So? Lizzie Siddal was an idol way before Marilyn Monroe and Kate Moss. She lost control of her own life. She was an artist, trapped by her own beauty, trapped by men's desires. She was exploited. I get the connection, you know, I see what you were trying to do.

Writer: I just wanted your ... situation to tug on the reader's sympathies.

Elizabeth: Oh, oh, wait a minute. I was either at your mercy or used to manipulate the reader's feelings. Great.

Writer: Most of the time you had a purpose. As a writer I was entitled to be in control ... Wilful characters can be ... disruptive.

Elizabeth: I was never disruptive.

Writer: You were passive-disruptive, hiding most of the time. You put up barriers. In the early stages I couldn't see past this ... fog ... Of course, it would have been much easier if you'd had a strong, forthright personality like Faye, but you were introverted and sensitive.

Elizabeth: I couldn't help it.

Writer: You had every reason to be shy and wary. Your sense of self was so ... shaky. When I wrote the first draft of Part Two you weren't even there, despite the fact that the story was about you. I had to dig and dig. I was beginning to think you'd not show. For a while the story was more about Faye than anyone else.

Elizabeth: Faye had control of the home and everyone in it.

Writer: It was a bit stifling, wasn't it? No wonder you had trouble breathing. I think Faye could star in the next novel, like Kate Grenville's Albion in *Dark Places*.

Elizabeth: Who was Albion?

Writer: Albion was a monster. Faye wasn't. Well, some mothers are domineering and that can be monstrous. Faye had her moments.

Elizabeth: So how did I survive to become the main character?

Writer: Like I said, I did some digging. Your secrets were repressed.

Elizabeth: What sort of psychobabble is that? You'll have me in a straitjacket next.

Writer: I had you in a straitjacket at your wedding, remember?

Elizabeth: Ugh. Another fashion disaster. That wedding was the tale of the princess all over again.

Writer: So? We're talking about legends and fairy stories here dating back to medieval Europe ... Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, The Princess and the Pea. Come on ... This is an important part of folk culture.

Elizabeth: [Shrugs] Now you sound like a Jane Austen.

Writer: Jane Austen was interested in class and social mores.

Elizabeth: Oh.

Writer: At least you married well.

Elizabeth: I suppose so.

Writer: You wanted to be a princess.

Elizabeth: Yes, I was waiting for a handsome prince. You made me marry Jim. I wasn't sure.

Writer: You're not so different from many young women today. The princess myth is a conservative ideology. It's still with us, despite what our feminist mothers warned us about. We're still trapped in visual signifiers; beauty equals worthiness while ugliness equals wickedness. The princess remains the trophy even if she has the economic power to buy her own tiara. We're locked into a newer version of the same old story: snaring the handsome prince, social betterment ... and it's all complicated by consumerism.

Elizabeth: Crikey. You sound so ... I don't know ...

Writer: Up myself? Angry? Frustrated? I've heard that before. I read a lot.

Elizabeth: Maybe you read too much.

Writer: Philosopher Epictetus said that books are 'the training weights of the mind.' Books have changed my thinking, opened my eyes, broadened my understanding of the world and how to live. That's not insignificant, surely?

Elizabeth: I suppose not. I know about weight training.

Writer: At the 2004 Adelaide Writers' Festival, Jeanette Winterson said that writers can save the world. She said words are a precious resource. They help us get through life, reminding us that we're not alone. She said that writers undo the 'islands of separation' and the 'rafts of despair' that is the human condition. Stories are like a lighthouse; she writes that in *Lighthousekeeping*. I like that idea. Through stories, language, words, we have the opportunity to create our own dignity, pride and self-understanding. Words can reinforce our identity. Literature is invaluable. Winterson calls it 'the highest pinnacle of human achievement'.

Elizabeth: [Stifling a yawn] Why's that?

Writer: [Annoyed] Weren't you listening?

Elizabeth: I'm thinking about the 'rafts of despair' ...

Writer: Margaret Simons says in her book, *Resurrection in a Bucket*: 'Hardly anything is as exciting or as diverse, as strong a confirmation of life and hope and the universe's urge towards creativity, as a lively compost heap or the first draft of a novel.' She says that when she is polishing her writing 'some alchemy occurs to transform the rubbish of consciousness into a creative act.' I've heard so many writers talk about this sort of magic.

Elizabeth: Have you experienced it?

Writer: Yes. In many respects writing a novel strikes me as an organic process ... a vitalistic experience that can't be reduced to bits and pieces through analysis.

Elizabeth: Vitalistic? What do you mean?

Writer: It's the opposite of mechanistic ... You know ... ? *Descartes' Error* ... Vitalism understands that we are more than the sum of our parts.

Elizabeth: Huh?

Writer: Beethoven's pensive first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata* has been described as deceptively simple yet, as a whole, so much more than the sum of its parts.

Elizabeth: Hey, were you a music teacher? Is that why ... ?

Writer: That's my business.

Elizabeth: I bet you were a music teacher.

Writer: I'm talking about writing here. I'm making an analogy. I'm not saying there aren't a swag of rules and regulations and research that goes into writing ... and a painful number of mundane tasks to perform to shape the mistake-ridden mess of a beginning. But there's something incredibly serendipitous, to use a word Kate Grenville frequently employs, about writing. Isn't that weird?

Elizabeth: Weird.

[Silence]

Elizabeth: Of all the books you've read, which book do you think had most influence on you?

Writer: That's very difficult to answer. In shaping your life, perhaps ... *Lilian's Story*.

Elizabeth: Is that why I was called 'Lil' in Part Three?

Writer: I began with Lizzy. And then I needed a more grown-up name, something more suitable for a beauty contestant. And then Lil just seemed to happen. But when I read *Lilian's Story* I found myself wanting to have some sort of dialogue with that book ... the structure interested me. The three parts. And the name changes as Lilian's identity evolved. As my various drafts developed I found myself wanting to hint at the possibility that public exposure did to you what sexual abuse did to Lilian. I thought of your celebrity as another form of exploitation.

Elizabeth: Sexual abuse? What happened?

Writer: Lilian was abused by her father. She never did quite fit the accepted mould of a lady. He tried to subdue her, in the worst possible way, but she remade herself.

Elizabeth: I don't think I'll be reading that book. How could you possibly compare rape with fame? I liked being famous, but you kept interfering.

Writer: You can't say you liked being a celebrity! You were miserable.

Elizabeth: I liked being the centre of attention. Who doesn't like being the centre of attention? That's the only reason some women want to be brides.

Writer: You might have liked being Miss Model Australia, but you mistook celebrity for fame because you were ignorant.

Elizabeth: What!

Writer: About how exploitative it was.

Elizabeth: Oh come on! That's so ... feminist. I can see you've shaved your legs and you've painted your nails as well. And they're red! What's wrong with a bit of show? Isn't feminism dead?

Writer: Feminism isn't dead. The waves keep coming. But feminists are under siege. Maybe we should use different terminology. In the newspapers you always know when politicians are about to get sacked. Journalist describes them as embattled. I hope feminists aren't embattled. There are still battles to be fought.

Elizabeth: So I missed the boat?

Writer: Yes ... you did. Subconsciously you knew the beauty quest wasn't right. Those bad dreams ... and the men who tried to grope you. You were powerless over your own life. Beauty quests exploit women.

Elizabeth: A girl likes a bit of glamour ...

Writer: As long as it doesn't take away your individual identity. As long as you have control.

Elizabeth: [Rubs a knee.] You'd never let me live happy ever after.

Writer: Of course not. Well, I would if I were a nineteenth century novelist. I'd be writing 'happy ever after', but I'd know that the poor heroine died after she married.

Elizabeth: Is that what happened?

Writer: Not on the pages of the novel, she usually didn't *actually* die. Women's narratives had to fit the accepted rhetoric of the times to be published. But women novelists then were saying something very different about marriage, between the lines, or so it's thought by contemporary feminists.

Elizabeth: But what's wrong with romance and happy endings? I like romance.

Writer: It perpetuates a patriarchal myth that a woman is not fulfilled without a man. Women can have satisfying lives without making a man central to their lives.

Elizabeth: But a woman needs a man.

Writer: Sometimes ... but that's not all. A woman needs her own life too.

Elizabeth: It's all so complicated and ... and exhausting.

Writer: Look at it this way ... If you hadn't needed a man I would have divorced you and Jim. But you did need a man. You're that kind of woman. I gave you what you needed, and a life of your own as well.

Elizabeth: Great! How do you know what I want? You really should stop playing with me. That's all you've been doing ... right from the start. You've been manipulative ... And exploitative.

Writer: That's because you're just a ...

Elizabeth: ... pawn in a silly game. I don't get it ... glamour ... romance ... feminism ... vital-something-or-other ... Happy ever after should be happy ever after. You went beyond the end of story. Why can't I have what I want? I can never have what I want.

Writer: But you're ...

Elizabeth: I've got feelings too, you know? [Stands up.] You're just like Faye. [She glares at the writer.] Hang on a minute ... You're not ... ?

Writer: Of course not. Do I look like Faye?

Elizabeth: This is so confusing ... [Passes a hand across her forehead.] I've no idea who's who and what's what. I've had enough of you and your books.

Writer: Hey, don't say that.

Elizabeth: See. You can't control me. I can say what I like.

[Elizabeth begins to stride off the stage.]

Writer: Wait ... Where are you going?

[Elizabeth's footsteps fade.]

Writer: Lizzy?

[Voice from off stage]: And don't call me Lizzy.

The writer loses track of time. She is alone, sitting at her desk, in front of her computer, tapping away at the keys. 'Lizzy Matthews wanted to be beautiful.'

Attacca ...

Presto agitato: Music and The Moon Garden

Something dangerous looms ...

The pianist reaches for the keys and begins: staccato notes accompany rapid arpeggios that rattle the bones. The pace is remorseless, adrenalin-raddled. The heroine is strapped to the train tracks. In the distance, a train whistles, rounds the corner, hits the downhill slope. The heroine hears it approach and screams. No one comes. No one will save her. She must save herself. But how will she free herself from the ropes and knots? How will she avoid the oncoming train? As the music reaches its final chromatic crescendo, is it too late to flee?

One only has to look to Helen Garner's *The Children's Bach* to appreciate how complementary music and fiction can be. The possibilities open to the writer with musical interests and knowledge are considerable. Kerryn Goldsworthy, in her analysis of *The Children's Bach*, points out that Garner 'investigates the possibility of alternative means of communication, means other than the "symbolic" or patriarchal order of language. Obviously music is one of these' (44). In *The Children's Bach*, Athena turns her back on the world and plays the piano. She plays for her own satisfaction, not at all interested in playing for others or meeting an external set of criteria. Music is another language for Athena. She is aware of her own limitations yet she perseveres. For Athena, playing the piano is an opportunity to step outside circumscribed roles as wife and mother, into another world. This escape is still within a patriarchal context (hence the photo of Dexter's father hanging over the piano), but it is an escape. In the contemporary world where time is money and the pursuit of anything must be justified with a measurable or praiseworthy result, Athena picks out her notes on the piano (albeit in a narrow, two octave range), and feels a gamut of responses to that music. Here Garner acknowledges that Athena's life may be viewed as somewhat 'limited' but at the same time, within that limitation is a rich emotional life, as broad and as satisfying as any life can be. In *The Moon Garden* I wanted Elizabeth to seek to escape patriarchal ideologies and express herself ultimately through music. At the same time, I wanted to show her escape as a complex journey, fraught with pitfalls.

In Part One of *The Moon Garden*, Lizzy learns the piano with endearing Mrs Finch and discovers beauty in the music she plays. Then Mrs Whitmore begins to reshape Lizzy's musical education through a conventionally structured, theoretical and technical approach. Lizzy loses

her natural, spontaneous engagement with music. Lizzy is not encouraged to explore any feeling response to the music she learns. The pursuit of musical attainment via prescribed criteria (musical examinations) stifles possibilities for self-expression. Learning music becomes a mechanical procedure of adhering to the musical score without developing any depth of understanding. This is quite the antithesis of what music means to me. Music, for me, is an expression of creativity. Music can foster feelings of connection, commonality and transcendence in both listener and performer. It can cultivate the player mentally, emotionally and physically. Stellar concert pianist, Freddy Kempf, sums it up: 'I really want to convey all these emotions to the audience ... I always feel that music is a way of recharging your heart with all kinds of feelings that you don't normally experience' (Limelight, 27). Technical proficiency can impress but it can leave an audience cold. To develop a balance of head, heart and hands is an important factor in any education.

While music, most particularly the *Moonlight Sonata*, is finally my main character's means of recognising and expressing her own voice and identity, it was important for her first to achieve some much needed balance in her life. When I was thinking about gardening as a way to signal the start of my character's return to wholeness, I read Sara Hardy's biography of celebrated landscape designer, Edna Walling. I was delighted to find that when Edna Walling was placed with the nuns at the Notre Dame Convent as a young woman, she enjoyed a 'head, heart and hands' approach to a balanced education for life. According to Hardy, this development of the 'whole' student was to prove pivotal to Edna's success in later years (26). Throughout her life, Edna read poetry and frequently listened to Bach and Beethoven for respite and inspiration.

Twentieth Century music critic Eduard Hanslick points out in *The Beautiful in Music*, that music 'operates on our emotional faculty with greater intensity and rapidity than the product of any other art...This, its characteristic sway over our feelings, is most vividly realised when we are in a state of unusual exaltation or depression' (77). Young Lizzy is enraptured by music because it moves her into these feeling states described by Hanslick (and demonstrated so well by Ada in Jane Campion's *The Piano*). Apart from music, Lizzy's life is an emotional desert; she is culturally trained to please, to be good, to smile, to be seen but not heard. Lizzy is indoctrinated with the nineteenth century ideology of pleasing others, deriving security from intimate relations with others (her mother and husband) rather than being encouraged to foster a relationship with her inner self (what Patricia Waugh refers to in *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, as 'being-for-herself'). This 'being-for-herself' can be equated with 'pleasure for its own sake' (Maushart, 25), something that, in the ideology of separate spheres, women were not supposed to

indulge in. In *The Children's Bach*, Athena manages to embrace this secret pleasure when she plays her chosen music, at her chosen level, in her own time. In *The Moon Garden*, Lizzy is initially discouraged from clinging to her favourite piece of music as a source of consolation. She is discouraged from the notion of 'being-for-herself'.

In *What Women Want Next* (2005), Susan Maushart writes:

the warning that women's desires for personal happiness is somehow missing the mark – that it is misguided or immature or even dangerous – is one of patriarchy's oldest tales. It's the same old story of female self-sacrifice in an excruciatingly 'correct' cover: Women should be selfless. Women should be 'good'. Women should think about the happiness of *others* (25).

In Part One of *The Moon Garden*, Lizzy lives in metaphorical isolation. She is as an outsider because of illness and feelings of inferiority. Trapped in 1950s ideologies, Lizzy pleases others. With behaviour patterns established and in a vulnerable state, she eventually succumbs to narcissistic vanity as she becomes a fashion model and beauty queen. Thinking this is what women aspire to, she is unaware of her objectification.

During her childhood and young adulthood Lizzy finds music to be a source of consolation, but she also unconsciously uses the piano as a kind of 'neutral ground' on which she can navigate the complexities of power in both domestic and social arenas. The piano is for Lizzy, as pianist and scholar James Parakilas describes it in *Piano Roles: A New History of the Piano* (2001), a 'cultural go-between' (4). At every stage of her life, playing the piano is a way of navigating, encountering and siphoning experience in the private and public arenas. In *Piano Roles*, Parakilas notes that 'the history of the pianoforte and the history of the social status of women can be interpreted in terms of one another' (76). *The Moon Garden* depicts how a woman slowly moves from private to public arenas. The journey from private to public arenas is still fraught for contemporary women (like Lizzy/Elizabeth) who continue to shoulder domestic responsibilities and husband maintenance, as argued in Susan Maushart's *Wifework: What Marriage Really Means for Women* (1999) and *The Mask of Motherhood* (1997). In *What Women Want Next*, Maushart writes that, in contemporary society, there are even more pressures to contend with, not the least of which is the lack of evidence suggesting that women are happier today than they were fifty years ago. She writes: 'Between the longer hours we work, the shorter hours we sleep, and the burden of the guilt that we seem inevitably to carry regardless of life choices we have made, most of us feel less exalted than we do exhausted' (36). As she grows up my character, Lizzy, has moments of exaltation and long stretches of exhaustion. In the public

arena, Lizzy/Elizabeth must learn to make the *right* choices, not just exercise choice. She must face what Maushart describes as a problem for women today: 'Having so many choices ... has now become part of the problem ... Now it's all up to us. We wanted the freedom, but we never reckoned on the anxiety, let alone the guilt that goes with it' (61).

Lizzy is shaped, initially, by her musical education. Parakilas notes that: 'The experience of learning the piano, or even trying to learn, stays with people all their lives... It is in the teacher's studio and the students' practice room, more than anywhere else, that the piano has shaped a musical culture' (111). Lizzy is moulded by the teachers she encounters week after week and through them, exposed to issues of social status, both domestic and public. In particular, Lizzy's piano teacher, Mrs Whitmore, represents a stultifying continuity of a trend that emerged early in the nineteenth century when machine-like uniformity in piano playing was promoted. In the 1830s Carl Czerny was reputed to encourage the idea that piano playing should be a machinelike, repetitive activity, with mechanistic ideals of regularity, evenness and exactness in every aspect of playing. Czerny created an entire scheme of practising via exercises, scales and etudes which quickly became the cornerstones of piano teaching. Czerny's rise in popularity also corresponded with the invention of the metronome. Mrs Whitmore is inordinately fond of the metronome and the nineteenth century method of holding the wrist and arm absolutely still while playing in order to rely on finger strength. Mrs Whitmore perpetuates Czerny's influence in the twentieth century. Accepting patriarchal premises, she teaches mechanical techniques that steer clear of music's more sensual, emotive potential. For Mrs Whitmore, music must be measured and graded and contained as an exercise of the mind, as a display of skill, as a worthy participation in public life, rather than a pleasurable pursuit of the heart. As long as a division between the mind and the body, the head and the heart, is maintained through fear, ignorance and sexual containment, patriarchal institutions will clearly flourish for such a division disempowers the individual and strengthens hierarchy.

Contemporary sociologist, Tia Denora, writes that 'music serves an almost allegorical function' in that music can offer a vehicle by which the listener might seek to 'organise knowledge about the world' (83). Lizzy turns to music as a vehicle into another world (her emotional self or interior life), as well as a means with which to view the external world. In the act of playing the piano, Lizzy organises what she learns of both worlds, concurrently reordering the world and encountering life. Denora explores this idea in *Music in Everyday Life* (2000), suggesting that music is a 'device or resource to which people turn in order to regulate themselves as aesthetic agents, as feeling, thinking and acting beings in their day-to-day lives'

(62). In this respect, music is much like sleep, providing a chance to heal, repair, recoup. Edna Walling, whose biography is one of the sources for my conviction that a 'whole' life requires a balance between head, heart and hand, certainly knew this when she listened to her favourite Bach and Beethoven at the end of an exhausting day of hard labour.

Playing music is not only reparative, it is also strengthening. In light of this, Mrs Whitmore's influence is a critical turning point in Lizzy's life. Cold Mrs Whitmore exemplifies control and discipline. She is not at all interested in Lizzy as a person or in fostering Lizzy's love of music. Mrs Whitmore's approach is correct and measured and results-driven. Lizzy does her best to please.

Unmarried Miss Nugent sits on the margins of convention with her unique approach to music teaching. Miss Nugent tries to shake Lizzy loose from the rigours imposed by Mrs Whitmore but Mrs Whitmore leaves an indelible mark. Miss Nugent also fails to engage with Lizzy as a person, keeping her distance, encased in her practical clothing. Lizzy fantasises about Miss Nugent's private life, longing for a sense of connection on a personal level with her teacher. A void opens up in Lizzy. She misses Mrs Finch.

Moving on to the Conservatorium, Lizzy is pushed to achieve, to strive, to perform to meet the institution's criteria. Unlike Athena in *The Children's Bach*, Lizzy refines her technique through discipline and becomes highly accomplished. However, during the process of refinement (which began with Mrs Whitmore's rigid approach to technique), Lizzy loses something that Garner's character Athena remains connected to. Lizzy wants to fit into Conservatorium life but doesn't quite. There's something inside her that jars with the over-riding pressure to perfect her craft. It's not that she doesn't want to be good, she does. Discipline has become a well-honed habit. She must handle the pressure to perform but is given few resources to do so. Not that she identifies this fundamental deficiency. Around her, other students are trying to handle the same sorts of pressures. Some resort to consulting with doctors for medication. As a music student and teacher I have observed students seeking psychological support, learning about self-hypnosis and state-control. My character Lizzy discovers that medicine is far from effective. Through her experiences I wanted to offer some insight into the pressures young women (not only musicians) face in contemporary society and the lack of support (sometimes from family, as well as from those in positions of power) they contend with.

In my experience, a life lived with music can refine intrinsic values and sensibilities. Learning music expands one's feeling nature and fosters a sense of an inner life that is unique and creative. This kind of inner development sets Lizzy apart from many of her unmusical

contemporaries. Lizzy is essentially kind and sensitive. She is not, by nature, competitive and simply tries to do her best to cope with expectations and pressures to perform.

Lizzy looks to escape into another world. In *What Women Want Next*, Maushart writes: 'For the great mass of humanity, the only commodity that will reliably buy happiness is *belonging*' (57). And again: 'The evidence is clear that no human being ... will be happy without a sense of *belonging*' (63). When Lizzy discovers that her physical appearance fits the requirements of a modelling agency, she thinks she has found somewhere to belong. Her appearance is measured against an external ideal. She has what many women aspire to, but do not have. She thinks the door to opportunity has opened; she thinks she has found an escape from what troubles her. She makes superficial connections with other models. Then she discovers that maintaining her position is hard work in the fickle fashion industry. She stands on shifting sand as she tries to keep her place in the beauty chain.

Creativity connects Lizzy to something that she can never really abandon, although the pressures of modelling erode her commitment to music. She remembers Mrs Finch and that very short period of time when her external world fitted her internal world. She wants to get back to that place, not to revert to childhood, but to express something innocent, spontaneous and glorious. Lizzy unconsciously understands that bliss is not ignorance, but, as Maushart puts it, 'innocence' (*What Women Want Next*, 41). How to get Lizzy back to this place of innocence became a dilemma during the process of writing the first draft. What could I do with a character yearning to return to the Garden of Eden? Should I put her in a real garden?

Not knowing how my novel would end meant that the process of writing *The Moon Garden* became a quest unto itself. As Sara Hardy writes in *The Unusual Life of Edna Walling* (2005): 'The point of a quest is that it never turns out how you imagined. The journey, the destination, the Holy Grail, all shift and change as the experience progresses' (xiv). This encapsulates my experience of writing *The Moon Garden*. The novel, like a person, underwent 'a journey of becoming' (Maushart, *What Women Want Next*, 113). Maushart uses this phrase in the context of women as mothers, but the 'journey of becoming' is really every woman's quest, mother or not.

In *The Moon Garden*, Lizzy clings to a certain fairy tale innocence, seeking out a happy ever after that, as the writer, I didn't want her to have. I wanted to show Lizzy living with a disjuncture within herself. I wanted to show her wrestling with her disconnected selves, doing what she had to do to survive. For a woman, tackling the big, wide world, this experience is akin to having some form of paralysis, or disability. In *The Heroine's Journey*, family therapist and

educator, Maureen Murdoch writes that this split from what she calls her 'feminine self' affected her life in a variety of ways. She is aware that she has 'overridden her body, ignored its needs, and pushed it beyond exhaustion to illness ... I felt guilty about taking time to relax or to incubate. I have ... not fully enjoyed this precious gift of life' (133). This is a useful articulation of the state of mind I wanted my character to represent.

To add to Lizzy's plight, I wanted to create the sense that she was cut off from words (her own voice) and, as a result, defenceless. Ironically, Lizzy becomes a victim of words: her mother's, her peers' at school (Cindy and Sandra), Mrs Whitmore's, Fran's, Claudine's, Exec Gay's, to name a few. Where some young adults use words to retaliate, to shield or distance themselves, Lizzy is mute. Fashion modelling suits Lizzy in this respect because she doesn't have to rely on words to succeed. Without words of her own, Lizzy struggles to think for herself. She can't decipher what is right and true for the person she is and the values she holds dear. Lizzy is someone who doesn't know how to trust herself and therefore she looks to the world (society) for guidance and validation.

Music is Lizzy's means of self-expression and, as that avenue narrows and calcifies near the end of Part One, she turns very strongly to the music she most identifies with, the *Moonlight Sonata*. Because the *Moonlight* is considered inappropriate for her to perform in the Conservatorium setting, just when she most needs its spiritual support, Lizzy turns away from her musical education and is absorbed by the world of fashion, where, for a while, her appearance seems to guarantee acceptance.

In many respects, the maturing Lizzy lives in spiritual exile, despite her Methodist upbringing. Isolated through illness and social alienation at school, introverted Lizzy looks for 'emotional resolution and fortitude' (Aronson, 91) and finds it through Beethoven's music. Beethoven brings her closer to intangible spiritual truths that offer faith and fortitude in ways that are more real to her than the people and institutions surrounding her. I grappled with the problem of Lizzy receiving 'emotional resolution and spiritual fortitude' from music by a male composer, rather than a woman. I thought back through my own education as a pianist and flautist. Had I ever learnt a piece of classical music composed by a woman? After considerable research I came across the *Concertino* (Opus 107) for flute by French composer, Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944). I'd played the *Concertino* while studying for my Licentiate in Music Diploma (Australian Music Examination Board). As a pianist learning in Australia in the 60s, 70s and 80s, Elizabeth wouldn't have come across anything composed by women, except for Australian composer, Miriam Hyde. Hyde started appearing in piano tuition manuals (and on the A.M.E.B. lists) in the

mid to late 80s. But Hyde's work could not be conceived of as having anywhere near the influence of well-known European composers in the classical tradition. I recalled my reaction (at the age of sixteen) to the astounding discovery that a woman had actually composed a flute concerto. In my early adolescence, I also experienced a similar reaction to reading novels that focussed (for the first time in my reading history) on strong, curious, adventurous female heroines (particularly Nancy Drew). In the end, however, because I wanted to use a piece of music that readers would know, because the *Moonlight Sonata* is a 'popular' classic, of a kind that resonates with Lizzy's background and personality, because Beethoven is generally accepted as 'romantic' and appealing to women, and because the sonata form appealed to me and seemed to suit the story I wanted to tell, I decided that this was the most suitable piece of music to convey what I needed to convey in relation to my character.

Lizzy is never fully cognisant of Beethoven's influence upon heart, mind and spirit. She feels connected to some deeper part of her self when she plays the *Moonlight* and cannot put the feeling into words. Nor would she want to, even if she could. Nor would I as the writer want her to find the words, for words would never be adequate. In a sense, Lizzy escapes her invisible prison (like mute Ada in Jane Campion's *The Piano*) as soon as her hands touch the keys. This is left for the reader to ascertain without being told. As Eric Prieto states in *Listening In: Music, Mind and the Modernist Narrative*, 'words denote and notes do not.' Prieto writes, 'music is essentially syntax ... literature, on the other hand, uses language. And although language, like music, operates on certain physical characteristics of sound (phonetic oppositions), it orders them according to semantic criteria' (25).

In the process of writing *The Moon Garden*, the *Moonlight Sonata* influenced my choice of words during successive edits. I worked hard to determine the validity of every word and to hear inherent rhythms. After several drafts, the manuscript became for me a musical score; sentences were phrases; words were notes on a staff. Words had to be deleted; no embellishments required; nothing extraneous or frivolous was called for. The first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*, with its clear and simple melody, translated into the naïve voice of Lizzy as a child. Certain harmonies in the music hinted at secret yearning, introspection and submerged possibilities in Lizzy's character. My rhythm needed to be as subtle as the movement of a lake on a very still night.

To a limited degree, the *Moonlight Sonata* also influenced the structure of the novel. Calvin Brown in *Music and Literature: A Companion to the Arts*, like Prieto, offers a warning about going beyond the general analogies of sonata form when attempting to write, be it poetry,

the novel or a drama. Brown claims that as soon as an author attempts to parallel precise musical patterns with any exactness, the writer becomes 'inextricably entangled' (176). Brown points out that the greatest success comes when writers use the sonata form as a hint, or a starting point, more than 'as a pattern to be rigorously followed (176).' The idea of a musical pattern offers much novelty, but I agree with Brown when he asserts that a writer should use 'superior literary judgement [to reject] strict sonata form as an unpromising literary medium' (177). I had no ambition to make *The Moon Garden* follow the mechanics of sonata form. Such a task would have been doubly difficult because Beethoven, in the *Moonlight Sonata*, breaks away from the traditional sonata form in a number of ways. Instead of following the usual quick, slow, quick pattern of movements, Beethoven chooses to start slow and get faster (*adagio – allegretto – presto*). Only the third movement (*Presto agitato*) follows traditional sonata form. Even then, this movement comes across to the listener as deceptively free and improvisatory. Beethoven instructs the pianist not to stop, or even pause, between movements (as is traditional) by writing *attacca* at the end of each movement. Each movement must grow out of the previous one, as if the *Moonlight* is an organic whole. No one, until Beethoven, had written a sonata like the *Moonlight Sonata*. It proved that a sonata could convey individual expression. Listening to the first movement, it is easy to imagine Beethoven simply sitting at the piano improvising because the synthesis between formal structure and fantasia is seamless.

In Part Three of *The Moon Garden*, Elizabeth breaks away from convention. In the Hills her life becomes her own improvisation. Part Three of my novel alludes to a connection with the *Moonlight Sonata's* third movement sonata form via a recapitulation (when Elizabeth finds herself back at home after fame is done with her). Sonata form offered a way of structuring *The Moon Garden* in three movements. It seemed important not to labour it. What was to have much more of an influence over the novel was not so much sonata form but what the *Moonlight Sonata* represented to Elizabeth.

Analysing the three movements of the sonata assisted in mapping the territory of my novel: the Adagio correlates with the relative simplicity of childhood, where things are quite straightforward on the surface. The overbright, over-sweet and over-sprightly Allegretto, the 'flower between two chasms' (composer Franz Liszt), corresponds with the beauty queen. Then all the dramatic disturbances of the third movement *Presto agitato* mirror the disintegration of Elizabeth's character; there is a sense of thrashing about in the darkness, being out-of-kilter with the world around her, and of something dangerous looming. It's the 'monster' that nineteenth century society feared would tear the fabric of their patriarchal society apart: the liberated

woman. How ironic that the 'monster' should turn out to be a contented Lil, playing the music she loves, on her own piano, in the Hills.

In the third draft of *The Moon Garden*, I felt that the novel needed to break from its loose connection with sonata form. Inspired by Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* (1986) and wondering how to grab the reader's interest right from the start without giving too much away, I decided to experiment with bringing a section of the novel forward as a prologue. Which section would I select to create the prologue? Did I want the reader to know from the very beginning that Lizzy was destined to become a beauty queen? Or did I want the win to be a surprise? Would Lizzy's childhood of illness and rejection be more interesting to a reader, knowing that she would one day become a celebrity? I decided to use a section that revealed Lizzy's destiny in a way that suggested she wasn't happy with the change in her circumstances. I wanted this section to raise questions in the reader's mind about why the main character felt this way about fame. Once the reader understood Lizzy's history, the answer would be evident.

The sonata is a form that dominated serious Western music from the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. In simple terms, the sonata seeks to resolve two conflicting themes. In many respects, Lizzy is caught between opposing forces, being both in the world and somehow not of the world; she battles society's prescriptions for what it means to be a woman while struggling with her own inner imperatives to be true to something unique about herself. She's caught between a 1950s cultural ideology and a 1970s feminist revolution.

In *The Children's Bach*, Helen Garner uses music as an 'ordering principle ... an alternative for those with no access to language' (Goldsworthy, 47). Goldsworthy likens *The Children's Bach* to a fugue. A fugue, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, is a 'contrapuntal composition in which a short melody or phrase (the subject) is introduced by one part and successively taken up by others and developed by interweaving the parts.' Garner certainly takes a number of very different characters (most notably, Athena the housewife and Elizabeth the liberated feminist) from contrasting lifestyles and ideologies, to create a harmonious, interwoven existence for them in her vignette of contemporary life. Athena could be thought of as the 'subject' and Elizabeth the 'countersubject', where feminism and patriarchal ideologies dovetail in a fascinating exploration of two quite different women.

I was very interested in this idea of 'subject' and 'countersubject', and in *The Moon Garden*, I think of Mr Longland and Lizzy, respectively, as subject and countersubject. Conservatorium teacher, Mr Longland and Lizzy battle over a choice of music that represents much broader issues in terms of gender. Their battle is an exploration of how willingly women

subjugate their own desires and, in the process of subjugation, perpetuate the patriarchal order. I wondered how a young woman like Lizzy could flourish in the Conservatorium, where men had always made the decisions. And by extension, I worried about whether she could ever flourish in a patriarchal society when personal desire is discouraged.

The concept of subject and countersubject obviously appeals to many writers. It is implemented to great effect in Anne Bartlett's novel, *Knitting* (2005). Homespun hand-knitter Martha counterpoints academic Sandra as they collaborate over a textile exhibition. Martha stubbornly insists that she knits for enjoyment: 'I'm just a home knitter, that's all' (114). Sandra, on the other hand, bothers her with deadlines and schedules, pressing her to expand upon her skill as a 'real artist' (114). Martha is not at all keen to turn her passion for wool and knitting into work. She says: 'My work needs to be playing' (114), highlighting how personal pleasure is an essential ingredient in the creative process. Martha, technically brilliant and very accomplished, is aware that becoming too outcome driven will destroy her love of knitting. I imagine Martha as like Mrs Finch, in combat with Mrs Whitmore (like Sandra). Martha is in touch with her feeling nature. She knits not only because she enjoys it but also because she cares about the people she knits for. She agrees to support Sandra with the exhibition when she recognises that Sandra needs her help and her friendship. Martha tumbles headlong into trouble as the pressure to satisfy Sandra's goals escalates, just as, in *The Moon Garden*, beauty queen Elizabeth (Part Two) also crumbles when the pressure to perform becomes too much. When the spotlights are suddenly switched off, Elizabeth hits rock bottom, harder than most.

The *Moonlight Sonata*, subtitled *Sonata quasi una fantasia*, is described by Lawrence Kramer as being:

from beginning to end one pure whole, rising out of the deepest emotions of the soul, carved from a solid block of marble. There cannot be a single person in any way sensitive to music who can fail to be seized by the first Adagio, led up and up and finally, deeply moved, sublimely uplifted in the Presto agitato (30).

A compelling narrativity is evident in the *Moonlight* that musically 'traces out the stages of spiritual progress' (30). The movements of this sonata are unbroken as 'the first movement Adagio finds its catharsis in the agitated finale' (31). This parallels Lizzy's journey of becoming: the idea of spiritual progress depicted through her relationship to music. More importantly, Lizzy is on a quest, itself quite romantic, given her notions of heroes and heroines. The pattern of such a journey is universal, as Christopher Vogler suggests in *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (1998). The journey occurs 'in every culture, in every time. It

is as infinitely varied as the human race itself and yet its basic form remains constant ... an incredibly tenacious set of elements that springs endlessly from the deepest reaches of the human mind' (10). A heroine leaves her 'comfortable, ordinary surroundings to venture into a challenging, unfamiliar world ... that becomes the arena for her conflict with antagonistic, challenging forces' (13).

Elizabeth, in Part Two, is launched into the world when she becomes Miss Model Australia and from this point of departure comes strife – initiation – as the promised 'happy ever after' never arrives and the unglamorous reality of life at the top as a hard working beauty queen takes Elizabeth by complete surprise. Elizabeth grows and changes, as a good heroine must. She makes the journey 'from despair to hope, weakness to strength, folly to wisdom, love to hate, and back again' (13). Vogler describes the heroine's journey as like a 'movement of a symphony, with its own beginning, middle and end, and with its own climax (the highest point of tension)' (xxi). In Part One of *The Moon Garden*, Lizzy begins her difficult journey toward the catalyst, Fran, who introduces Lizzy to the idea that she can be beautiful if she enrolls in a grooming and deportment course. This leads Lizzy into the field of fashion, catching the attention of Doris Thrupp, promotions officer for the Miss Model Australia Contest. Then the ordeal begins in Part Two, after the story climaxes with the Miss Model Australia crowning. Elizabeth begins to understand that fame and fortune are fraught with perils (quite the opposite of what she imagined). There's a sense, in Part Three, that Elizabeth is making a journey 'home', once 'fame' has relinquished its hold. Elizabeth keeps 'returning' to the *Moonlight* throughout *The Moon Garden* and each time there's a sense of things organically changing, shifting, unfolding.

In *Music and the Novel: A Study in Twentieth Century Fiction* (1979), Alex Aronson supports this way of using music to underpin character development, relationships and narrative drive, and even to underscore the main ideas. Music can hint at psychic states that no vocabulary can possibly encompass. Music can suggest a character's soul in ways that words cannot. Music can be 'an aesthetic equivalent for the interior monologue, expressiveness uncontaminated by the ambiguity of verbal communication' (Aronson, 22). Through music, Helen Garner hints at depths of feeling in *The Children's Bach*. Music creates a captivating rapport between Philip and Athena when Philip steps into Athena's kitchen and plays a few chords on the piano. When Philip strikes 'one quiet chord, a wide blue one' (41) we know, instantly, that there is going to be much more to the relationship between these two characters. Furthermore, Garner parries with nineteenth century domestic ideologies where the piano dips under the radar as an unspoken means of seduction. This is alluded to brilliantly when Poppy plays the piano in a music store

and, in the process, engages the attention of the store salesman. In *The Moon Garden*, Elizabeth, in Part Two, and Ryan have a similar meeting around the piano where there is unspoken but potent seduction.

Australian Film Director Jane Campion explores how the creative thread of music and its seductive sensuality affects the life of mute Ada in *The Piano* (1993). *The Piano* is a story, set in nineteenth century New Zealand, about a woman forced into an arranged marriage. Here the emotive, turbulent theme music by Michael Nyman is matched with Ada's (Holly Hunter) nimble fingers, fine, pedalling ankle, long neck, trussed and corseted figure and feminine vulnerability. The piano is her voice, her heart and soul and her husband has sold it to farming neighbour George Baines (Harvey Keitel). Baines is the predator, the aggressive male circling the piano, claiming the passive, stationary woman as his own. But who is in control? Is it Ada or Baines? Is Ada seducing Baines or is her natural, unrestrained expressiveness attractive to Baines? As she plays the piano, Ada fluidly moves her body without nineteenth century constraints. There's an obvious expression of rapture as she plays the emotive theme music, *Big My Secret* by Michael Nyman. On the beach, Ada's daughter dances around the piano and an innocence, as well as an exquisite sensuality, is revealed without embarrassment to the observing, captivated Baines. As soon as Ada touches the piano keys, she escapes. She is free. But the piano is abandoned on a beach, attacked and dismembered and finally drowned. The piano beautifully represents a woman's inner life; it is a voice that is later silenced in the climax of the film. The jettisoned piano, rapidly sinking in the middle of the ocean, becomes a sort of narrative closure on issues such as colonialism, female repression and sexual frustration. Interestingly, Campion's intended ending for the movie (Ada dying at the bottom of the ocean, bound by rope to her capsized piano) was changed in post production. Would Campion's ending have been dissatisfying for the viewing public (who look more favourably upon happier Hollywood endings) and consequently disastrous for box office takings?

Lizzy, like Ada, must navigate a path between familial duty and that of personal desires (including romantic love). There is a similar sense of 'voice' through the piano. Lizzy is saying something crucial about herself when she plays the *Moonlight Sonata*. The music connects her to her own feeling nature and gives it expression. It's her 'alternative language', describing what is true and unique about herself. However, without the aid of music, this fragile 'authentic self' that has no words and no validation in a patriarchal society, is lost amid the pressures to please and achieve. Lizzy wants to believe the indoctrinated dream of 'happy ever after', the fairy tale of the handsome prince who rescues her. She has become so helpless, insecure and trapped by feelings

of failure, that marriage becomes a welcome mirage. But the pressures to meet ideals continue, as she encounters new criteria as wife and householder in Part Three. The longed for escape from expectations, duty and obligation is foiled again. Music becomes a tenuous thread in married Elizabeth's life as she continues to battle society's ideologies. Entrapment, as a wife, is all but total, much to Elizabeth's surprise. In Part Three of *The Moon Garden*, music and marriage dovetail again around themes of containment and repression.

As Dr Lucy Green explores in her thoroughly researched analysis of Victorian debates around women and music, *Music, Gender and Education* (1997) women, in the context of musical practice, were particularly regulated, circumscribed and repressed. The debate about whether music raises the mind and spirit above the earthly level or incites promiscuity and decadence is ancient. Lizzy, in Part One, experiences repression, physically, emotionally and mentally, while undertaking instruction from Mrs Whitmore and Mr Longland. Lizzy cannot move her body, show a spontaneous engagement with music, or come to any independent understanding about music that may lead to a unique or different interpretation. In short, Lizzy must follow the rules and play in a manner that is recognised as correct and acceptable. Music becomes a pursuit that must be perfected at the expense of pleasure. Like Athena in *The Children's Bach*, Lizzy plays the instrument that has long been considered perfect for a homebound woman 'whose life of self-sacrifice, at once an expression of her familial duty and her essential nature, often produced pent-up emotions unsettling in their intensity' (Gillet, 4). Are Lizzy and Athena so very different from their nineteenth century counterparts? And if not, what does that say about feminism and contemporary life?

Athena and Lizzy have few outlets for expression and no serious pursuits outside the home. Their music studies do not lead to enduring connections with the outside world, so nothing threatens familial duty. In Part Three of *The Moon Garden*, Elizabeth is a homebound wife, even though she has no children. She cooks and cleans and thinks about her husband out in the world, saving lives, doing important things that she is excluded from participating in. Faye has made sure that her daughter is geared toward self-sacrifice. Elizabeth knows how to deny personal pleasure. She's succeeded in 'silencing the self' (Maushart, 82). She seeks satisfaction circuitously through the approval of others, particularly her mother, then through public acclaim, and then through her husband. Athena, in *The Children's Bach*, represses her own pleasure by comparing herself with pianists more gifted than herself. Athena sometimes thinks her approach to music 'under the portrait with its yearning, nineteenth century look, was so unrhythmic and lacking in melody that she was ashamed, as if she had defaced an altar' (2). Garner hints at the

age-old division between passion and the intellect that was projected onto women and, especially, female artists in the nineteenth century.

Lizzy's mother, Faye, is upset when Lizzy steps beyond the bounds of propriety by playing to her cousin, Jane. Jane perceives Lizzy's performance of the *Moonlight* as a form of one-up-man-ship. Lizzy is unfortunately ignorant of Jane's pianistic accomplishments and may have downplayed her own skill to ensure a favourable response from Jane. Jane is immediately mortified by Lizzy's playing because she instantly compares herself with Lizzy. Jane is a patriarchal product as much as Lizzy; competitiveness keeps women (and young girls) in a hierarchical structure that brings division rather than mutual support. Consequently, Lizzy is discouraged from showing her talent (self-display) and is accused of bragging. Shamed Lizzy is sent to the containment of her bedroom. Lizzy must be taught to take her place in the patriarchal order by women who are entrenched in its ideologies. In this way, Lizzy is kept safe, acceptable and worthy of the man who will one day want to marry her for her self-effacing, complying qualities.

This strongly connects with the real life story of Sunday Reed who rebelled against a similar indoctrination. In *The Heart Garden*, Janine Burke writes about Sunday Reed in a way that throws light on Lizzy's dilemma. As a child of a wealthy family, Sunday Reed undertook a very similar musical education to Lizzy. Early in the twentieth century Sunday (then Baillieu) played on her mother's baby Bechstein grand piano and was taught watercolour painting and embroidery. These were considered essential skills for 'a well brought-up young lady' (18). Sunday felt she was treated merely as 'a nicely arranged bowl of flowers or a nice meal' by the men in her family. The skills she learned were for show, 'not for a greater purpose or even her own pleasure' (18).

Sunday was critical of her place as a woman within her family and her society. Sunday called it a 'grandiose, bourgeois existence'. She was pampered and protected as a child and had enough perspective to criticise her upbringing. As a young, spirited woman she sought an alternative life to the circumscribed one her family expected her to live. It was a perilous path that cost her dearly (in terms of family relationships, friendships and her own fertility).

In my novel, protected but not so pampered, Lizzy hasn't the perspective to understand her life in a broader social context. However, later in life, she sees the need to relinquish the hold her mother has over her, make peace with the past and stand on her own two feet. By the end of *The Moon Garden*, Lil (as Elizabeth becomes in Part Three) is not interested in 'show' any more, but in cultivating a deeper, nurturing connection to life via music, the garden and her

relationships. In a sense, Lil's home in the Hills becomes what Heide (Heidelberg, where the house was located) was to Sunday Reed. Like Sunday, Lil finally finds the freedom to follow her passion. Like Sunday, Lil reinterprets 'the accepted structures of a woman's life and the essence of "women's work". [She] challenge[s] ideas about marriage, fidelity, family and domesticity, transforming them with her own personal, and very modern, touch' (442). Unlike Lil, Sunday Reed naturally embraced women's liberation. Painter Albert Tucker called her a feminist: 'She did the washing up, she did the cooking, she did the salad, she grew the vegetables and she had tremendous discipline ... [she] had no problems in entering the forum of men, no self-consciousness' (183). Sunday was described by a friend as having 'this confidence ... organising her life the way she wanted. It was very impressive ... there was a great air of freedom' (215). It is not until the later stages of *The Moon Garden*, after considerable internal struggles, that Lil discovers this kind of freedom. Both my invented Lil and the 'real' Sunday Reed, whose life story contributed to my character's development, 'found a continuing and potent expression in the routines of daily domestic life and seasonal change' (183).

Sunday Reed was inspired by D.H. Lawrence when he pleaded with his generation:

to get back into vivid and nourishing relation [with] the cosmos and the universe. The way is through daily routine ... sunset, the ritual of the kindling fire and pouring water ... This is an affair of the individual and the household, a ritual of the day ... Vitality, the human race is dying. It is like a great uprooted tree, with its roots in the air. We must plant ourselves in the universe again (184).

For Lil, the house in the Hills is her opportunity to take the 'uprooted tree' of her life and plant herself in the soil as a gardener and householder, wife and pianist. The thread of her creativity that survives through music finally has a chance to flourish once the stranglehold of the past is released.

In *The Moon Garden*, Faye is a product of lingering nineteenth century aspirations that considered music a great accomplishment because it 'tunes the mind.' This phrase comes from Mary Granville who wrote in the 1730s that she knew of no accomplishment for a lady so great as music. Music was synonymous with embroidery, drawing and dancing, promoting an 'uninterrupted cheerfulness of mind' (Kramer, 28). This 'cheerfulness of mind' was considered attractive to men who concerned themselves with tiresome responsibilities in the competitive world of business and commerce. Protected from vice and the social chaos of an urban, public world, a middle class woman was a distraction, a reliever of worries, an uncomplicated companion who, in the interests of gentility, must entertain, delight and flatter.

Images of 'cream' reinforced the idea that all the 'most superior elements in society rose naturally to the top' (Russell, 64). In *The Moon Garden*, the metaphor of 'cream' occurs twice: at the conservatorium and as Lizzy prepares for her own wedding. At the conservatorium, 'Miss Holbrook taught in a cream room with cream lino and cream scrim curtains ... Miss Holbrook's cream complexion had never weathered hardship' (89). Pre-feminist Miss Holbrook has risen to the top. Her situation is complex, being a woman in a male-dominated environment. She must make sacrifices (marriage and children) to maintain her position in the Conservatorium, but there are some compensations, such as the distinction associated with the profession.

Miss Holbrook is an example of the dilemmas female artists face, choosing between career and art versus relationships and family. This is addressed thought-provokingly in Drusilla Modjeska's *Stravinsky's Lunch*. Australian painter, Grace Crossington Smith, asked if she had deliberately decided not to marry, replied: 'If I had married ... I don't think I would have been able to paint so much ... I think it was because I was wholly interested in painting' (Modjeska, 245). Modjeska writes: 'The war might have saved [Grace] from the fate Madge [Grace's sister] longed for, a life with a husband and children, a *kitchen*, but it released her into the fullness of her own inner life, a complex relationship both to feeling and painting, to herself and the world beyond' (249). This is what Lizzy longs for in *The Moon Garden*. Lizzy yearns to develop a relationship both to feeling and music, to herself and the world. She doesn't want to sacrifice herself in the way she has been taught a wife should. In a dream Faye tells her to lift her arms out straight so that Lizzy's body becomes the cross, the sign of the martyr. Faye says that this is the way to matter; this is the path toward worthiness as a woman, as a wife. But Lizzy wants what Grace Crossington Smith worked hard to achieve all her life:

[Grace] didn't escape the grab and tension that inevitably occurs if one is an artist in a culture that allows the way we value and understand art to remain in the keeping of men. When she found a way through, it was not by moving between one and the other, art and life, but by encompassing both in the same fluid gesture (339).

Lil, in Part Three, eventually achieves a satisfying relationship to feeling and music and herself even though she doesn't bring that newfound connection forward to interact with the outside world. Perhaps, like Sunday Reed, beyond the page Lil might be imagined as inviting the world into the refuge of her home and garden where she might continue to navigate a path between artist and married woman. Perhaps Lil might eventually find a way to be both artist and wife 'in the same fluid gesture'.

In *The Moon Garden*, Conservatorium teacher, Miss Holbrook, might have questioned painter Stella Bowen's sentiments, had she known of Bowen: 'If you are a woman ... and you want to have a life of your own, it would probably be better for you to fall in love at seventeen, be seduced, and abandoned, and your baby die. If you survived this, you might go far!' (Modjeska, 20). If 'going far' leads to the arid life Miss Holbrook experiences then perhaps this statement is misleading. What happens when a woman must earn a living via her creative talents? Do economic imperatives and the overriding need to meet an employer's external criteria gradually destroy the enrichment a creative endeavour can bring to an artist? In Part Three, Elizabeth turns to music teaching and finds the work doesn't match the fulfilment she feels when playing the piano on her own. A wide chasm divides the two occupations. She finds the needs of her students and those of their parents a complete disjuncture from her own creativity (like Martha in *Knitting*). If Elizabeth had continued teaching would she, too, have stared out the window and longed to leap?

In *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Modjeska writes: 'Stella Bowen ... never had children and for her it was, I think, appropriate that she did not ... [she] knew what was at stake, and that knowing is in her first painting, *The Sock Knitter*' (20). Miss Holbrook would have faced many of the dilemmas Stella Bowen and Grace Crossington Smith also struggled with as they pursued the considerable demands of their art. Modjeska describes the demanding nature of art as 'intense as any love affair' (21). I believe this to be true. Writers will describe the creative process as obsessional. Hours pass in minutes. Daily concerns disappear. To be fully engaged in the act of creativity is to be enthralled, enraptured, enthused. But can a woman become overly identified with her art? I read an article in *The Weekend Australian* (February 19-20, 2005) about painter, Marnie Wark, which gave me pause to think. Marnie Wark is a twenty-nine year old Adelaidien who is rapidly gaining recognition as one of the country's leading young contemporary artists. Wark says she has 'always wanted to be a painter.' She moved to Sydney and later Milan and has just returned to Adelaide to immerse herself in her art. Wark is single and free to enjoy the solitude of the creative process. Stella Bowen and Grace Crossington Smith would have been pleased with Wark, well, to a point. Wark says: 'Maybe my work defines me too much, but it makes me feel good. I feel all is right with the world when I am painting.' What does Wark mean? How can her art define her 'too much'? Does she work too hard? Is the fact that her art 'feels good' a flimsy justification for pursuing it? Does she feel guilty that art is the thing that fulfils her? Does a woman still feel selfish if personal pleasure motivates her? Is there pressure to feel defined by the conventional occupations of 'wife' and 'mother'? Is Wark's consuming

career as an artist preventing her from being a wife and mother? Does Marnie Wark, like Miss Holbrook, have to choose between relationships, children and art? In 2005, why can't a woman artist say: 'I love painting. It totally defines me. All is right in the world when I paint.' Wark has everything going for her: art that feels good to produce, the freedom to produce it and the success she probably deserves. Should she want more? In a society that values a balanced working and family life, perhaps it is politically incorrect to admit she's obsessed with one thing, her art. Perhaps she's also reluctant to blow her own trumpet. Better to play it cool, keep the attention lukewarm, be modest about accomplishments. In contemporary society, a woman artist's world can still be precarious even if it is not so cut off from passion any more.

In my novel, Miss Holbrook is reminiscent of Erika Kohut in Elfriede Jelinek's brilliant, disturbing *The Piano Teacher* (1983). Both characters are contained, cut off from passion, experiencing a very arid life. Miss Holbrook and Erika Kohut spend a lot of time looking out of the conservatory window during piano lessons, longing to escape but unable to do so because emotional and social containment paralyzes them. In *The Piano Teacher*, the inner and outer life of a talented and tormented woman, Erika Kohut, is chillingly explored. Erika is a former music prodigy in her late thirties, a teacher at the Vienna Conservatory, strict and rigid with her students, as well as herself. She is single, living with her domineering mother, sleeping in the same bed as her mother. Erika cannot feel nor respond to conventional expressions of tenderness and love and suffers the consequences of a life so thoroughly dedicated to control and perfection. Erika's sexual nature emerges as the monster nineteenth century society once feared. Erika finds her perverse sexuality difficult to repress and reverts to sadomasochistic rituals with one of her students, Walter Klemmer, who falls in love with her. Erika is at once repulsed by her own aging and femininity and has an inability to attain the life she so badly wants for herself. In the end, Erika's destructiveness and self-loathing leads inevitably to death as she thrusts a knife into her own breast. In far less catastrophic ways, Lizzy is controlled and perfected and polished. Her sexuality is contained. She's safe and sound in the eyes of society. Not confident enough to seek a life of her own, she's trained by her mother to become the subservient wife.

As for Lizzy's wedding, without thinking much about it, Lizzy wears a cream dress and makes cream the theme of her reception. Lizzy is a product of old ways of thinking and the complex aspirations of class that she's absorbed from Faye like a sponge. Lizzy, Erika Kohut and Miss Holbrook share a similar paralysis. Lizzy rationalises her way into marriage, believing that this is how things ought to be, her destiny, her lot. Passion has little to do with it. By this stage, Lizzy has been discouraged from pursuing what she really wants to the point of believing

her desires are inconsequential. A woman's self-sacrifice secures social acceptance. A man must be the centre of a woman's life and she is not secure without him. Nor is she amongst the 'cream of the crop' if she's not desired by a man who wishes to marry her. In the twenty-first century, a woman can still rise in social status according to her relationship with a man and his standing in the community (a doctor, lawyer, banker). Or, like childless Miss Holbrook, a woman can rise in status through hard work, talent and skill (an option rarely available to nineteenth century women or to women in the twenty-first century with children) if she doesn't hit the glass ceiling. To be held in good social standing is of utmost importance to Faye. Good social standing for her daughter reflects Faye's worth as a mother. It's only when Faye fully pursues a passion of her own (sewing) that the intensity of her ambitions (and her focus) shifts away from Lizzy.

In the nineteenth century, genteel women were typically alone (isolated) during the day with their music, embroidery or acceptable 'busywork' and often bored. Boredom was an indicator of social status for women's duty was to wait and women in well-to-do households could afford to do just that. Music was considered an appropriate indicator of 'social correctness.' By displaying their accomplishments in exalted company, women had 'almost their only opportunity to express gentility and taste in a positive way' (Russell, 87). Gentility did not permit the development of talent outside the home for pleasing family and friends was a woman's role, at the expense of self-development. A woman couldn't become absorbed in her studies; she wasn't permitted to prize music too highly or pursue it too earnestly for this could lead to serious condemnation. The general fear was that too much attention to music would release the potential sensuality of a woman. If released such sensuality would:

grow without bounds, converting women into monsters dangerous less to themselves than to men ... The general containment of female sexuality ... [was] accomplished by the establishment of an ideology of domesticity and by the social structures designed to institutionalise it (Kramer, 30).

Female sexuality was largely hidden, suppressed, denied and given few acceptable vehicles for expression. The 'genteel performance' ensured social standing and, therefore, respectability. Women were taught to be wary of their so-called monstrous passions, implying that there was much in the female nature that needed to be restrained. Restraint was thought to benefit society's standards because women were seen to be weaker and therefore more prone to fall prey to human foibles. It was believed that women were kept chaste through ignorance. Cut off from themselves and an interior life, what neuroses (hysteria) might develop? But being pale

and frail and insecure (many an unexplained illness developed) was upheld as unquestionably virtuous.

From an early age, Lizzy's desires are mocked by Faye. Insecure Lizzy is told to cultivate patience and wait (like her nineteenth century counterparts); women who don't please others are social outcasts. Lizzy must think the same way her mother does, not only to validate her mother's aspirations but to survive a stifling domination. Renowned clinical psychologist Dorothy Rowe has spoken about the need for children to survive in two ways: firstly, to survive physically and, secondly, to survive as a person with a sense of identity (ABCFM, February 3, 2005). When the latter is threatened the best defence is to shut down, separate, secret away the parts of oneself that fail to receive approval (represented by Lizzy's box of childhood memorabilia). Sometimes a healthy reaction to this process is to rebel. In *The Piano*, Ada refuses to speak. In *The Moon Garden*, Lizzy persists in playing the *Moonlight Sonata* to the chagrin of her mother and the disapproval of Mr Longland. This is a quiet rebellion, in keeping with a shy, sensitive, self-conscious girl whose confidence to express herself (without a piano) is undermined. The fear of God keeps Lizzy captive and music contains her (and ultimately sustains her). Unlike nineteenth century women, Lizzy is encouraged to pursue her musical skill (but only so far as it conforms to prescribed standards and meets institutionalised criteria). She moves into the public arena, in the cloistered community of a conservatory.

Just as Beethoven uses the term *Sonata quasi una fantasia* to depart from conventional form to explore other possibilities, *The Moon Garden*, too, escapes linearity through cyclical narratives that return time and again to an underlying ideology. The main character, Lizzy/Elizabeth/Lil, is caught in a kind of fantasy: a fairytale fantasy, a cultural fantasy, a romantic fantasy. Within the slow, dreamy fantasy that is her early life, there is an essential truth (like the truth embedded in a fairy tale) that Elizabeth unconsciously returns to over and over again by playing the first movement of the *Moonlight*, the Adagio. Kramer writes: 'the Adagio helps identify bourgeois life as romantic, helps counteract the potentially stultifying respectability of the drawing room and to establish conventional courtship as a locus of profound feeling and erotic intensity' (42). In Lizzy's somewhat stultified childhood in Part One of the novel, she clings to the Adagio for its profound feeling as well its future promise, beyond the conventions of a domestic ideology (the 'genteel performance') that threatens to hold her in tight control. This music kindles her desire to overthrow patriarchal constraints to pursue a more authentic self-expression: Waugh's 'being-for-herself'.

Canadian singer k.d. lang said in an interview with ABC's Andrew Denton (September 6th, 2004) that the listener of a song takes from it whatever they need at the time because a song works on numerous levels, some of which can never be fathomed. In *The Moon Garden*, the *Moonlight Sonata* was chosen to be the means of Elizabeth's liberation but other interpretations are possible. The reader has the opportunity to connect the novel and music in any number of ways, given the possibilities that become available when an alternative language is invoked.

Tempo I

Our heroine undoes the knots and ropes that have bound her to the train tracks and flees in the nick of time. The train rushes past, all steam and whistles and clamour. She's safe, but there are other women who are not. She wonders what to do about it. She gets her breath back and recalls her ordeal. She realises that there's a growing problem to confront as technology increases access to visual media and a seemingly unstoppable materialism is manacled to consumerism. How do women out run this careening, twenty-first century train?

The writer believes in the power of story, understands how potently books can shape thinking and, best of all, finds pleasure in writing. Her story, she knows, will be a cautionary tale about contemporary issues that, as plentiful research suggests, are likely to plague women for some time to come.

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