



*Eating Lolly*

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## **Abstract**

There is an overwhelming archive of literature written on so-called 'eating disorders' and the social and cultural contexts that shape these 'conditions'. Theories framed by psychiatry, feminism, psychoanalysis and sociology have each presented insights and specific understandings of the causes of the 'disorders' anorexia and bulimia nervosa and the 'type' of people they affect. Although such theories are often presented as objective 'truths', their meanings are constructed in a cultural context. They are often contradictory, frequently ambiguous and regularly paradoxical. Despite the wealth of research being done on 'eating disorders', we are still most likely to read particular and specific explanations that are mostly informed by the psycho-medical discourses, that are preoccupied with anorexia over other forms of eating distress and that neglect the thoughts, theories, language and voices of women with lived experience.

My research explores the opposing cultural constructions of anorexia and bulimia against women's personal narratives of life with bulimia. My specific interest in bulimia contests the focus on anorexia in the medical, academic and popular spheres. I address this imbalance, and speculate on why there is such a preoccupation with anorexia over other eating issues in our culture. I believe that this is not a coincidence, for there are deep seated, cultural and historical reasons why our culture demonstrates a fascination with, even admiration for, anorexia.

Research into the socio-cultural construction of 'eating disorders' provided a rich and complex resource for developing my novel: *Eating Lolly*. *Eating Lolly* follows the developing relationship between Mumma and her daughter, Lolly. It explores the mother-daughter bond, love, family and food. It deals with the experience of pregnancy and motherhood, representing developmental stages, through childhood, adolescence and the forging of identity as a woman in a western cultural context. I explore women's hunger, metaphors of cooking, eating, feeding and being fed. I examine our culture's perceived separation between mind and body. I consider the power of medical discourses in shaping how we think and feel about our health and well-being and our experience with illness. *Eating Lolly* is about female identity, the right to self-determination and the power of reclaiming story. It is a celebration of difference, of family, community and landscape and the impact of these factors on identity formation.

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

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Mumma arrived in Hillwater with her belly full of baby. Her father had found her a quiet place, surrounded by dark seas, old eucalypts, whispering grass, accessible only by ferry, morning, noon and evening—*Cheap real estate, Margaret. Really a very good investment for your Grandma's inheritance.* Her mother sat in the front of the car with her handbag on her lap, her father started unpacking the trailer and Mumma collapsed and cried until she was dizzy. Her father assured her this move was for the best.

*Privacy is paramount during this inauspicious time.* He wiped his brow with a handkerchief and pondered the dirty smear. Mumma choked and bubbled on tears. Her father examined her for a moment and blood rose up his neck, saturating his face.

*For God's sake Margaret! Get up out of the dirt. You're a woman now and there's no-one to blame but yourself.* He turned away and busied himself with unloading an old velvet armchair. Mumma fell silent. Her father was right. She was a woman and it was her own fault.

Dust swirled. The trailer was empty. Mumma stood in a pocket of sunlight, shoulders stooped, head bowed, pigeon-toed. She heard her father sneeze three times from inside the house. She shuffled around the car to the passenger side window, put her palm to the glass but her mother continued to stare straight ahead.

*That's it.* Her father blew his nose. *You must make the necessary adjustments to a solitary life. Take your tonic and I will be back by and by to check on your progress.* He got into the driver's seat and exchanged words with her mother.

Mumma watched her pass a paper bag to him.

He got back out of the car. *Your Mother wants you to have these.*

Mumma sat and sobbed on the doorstep for the rest of the day. The tide went out and came back in again. Wind pushed and pulled at trees and shivered over the water's surface. Men launched tinnies off the boat ramp and putted out to sea. A lost sheep bleated. Mumma watched and waited. She hoped to hear the drone of the Fairlane approaching, longed for her parents to come back for her. But no-one came. She was eighteen, six months pregnant and alone; really, truly alone for the first time in her life. A gull soared on a current of air and shat by her foot. Mumma wondered if this was the beginning or the end. She reached for the brown paper bag. She already knew what was inside; a batch of scones. They were tied up in a yellow tea-towel. She already knew, because on her last night as a girl, in her family home, the smell of baking had woken her just after midnight.

Rain came at dusk. The splats on stone surprised. Mumma remembered where she was and her throat tightened all over again. She opened the front door and went inside. A rat jumped from the kitchen sink and disappeared behind the oven. Mumma glanced over the forest of boxes stacked one on the other. She pulled back cardboard and squinted at the contents. Her precious things were jumbled with hand-me-downs; her porcelain ornaments wrapped in Grandma Collins' knitting bag, muslin nappies Aunt Nancy used with her boys were folded and placed between her mixing bowls, her old doll Miss Lucy was face down in the basinet from the church fête. There was flour in a tin canister, sugar in white ceramic, eggs wrapped in tissue and tied in a woolen hat. Books, clothes, bed linen, cutlery, crockery, potatoes, a portable black and white television set a patient had left her father in his will. Rain clouds rolled over the sea and blacked out the last of the light and Mumma worried about finding her gas lamp. In her mad scrabbling she found an old red blanket from home, bound herself tightly and curled into a corner of her bed.

The moving had disturbed the rats. They were active this night, busy rearranging themselves, scrabbling over Mumma's things, gnawing through floorboards, gouging wood with their teeth, scraping against the grain, squealing and squabbling, eating the house from the inside out, the outside in. Mumma sucked on her fingers and sobbed into her blanket. She squeezed her eyes shut, so tight her temples ached. She tried to think of happy things, of her bedroom back home with its billowing curtains and the white wicker pram full of toys, of the paddocks bouncing with bees and Spring lambs, of little Clive in his swimming trunks, of Cliff Richard, of sponge cake with cream, tinned pears set in jelly, lamingtons and cockles with pink icing. But the rats continued to wrestle and the fear overwhelmed.

It took four days for Mumma to stop crying and feel herself again. She was able to stomach more than porridge and honeycomb and on this clear morning she cooked French toast and potato cakes. Her father had said he would call before lunch this Sunday and Mumma expected him at morning tea time with a box of food and some scones for morning tea. The idea of buttering him a snack made her stomach churn and she decided to avoid his visit by taking a walk along the empty beach. She left a note on the front door telling him that food parcels were not required, that she was quite capable of riding her bicycle into town and fetching supplies. She also wrote that she had inquired at the hospital found a Doctor—a *Doctor Warren* and *no, he hasn't heard of you Father, so there will be no shaming and my getting on with all things independent will allow you to wash your hands of me and attend to your many pressing matters so I will not be needing you to take me to that clinic—dirty place for dirty girls, open out of hours—and you will still hold your head high, Father, in your surgery in town.* Mumma paused, placed an open palm on her belly. *As you said,*

*Father, it is my own fault I am now a woman. Many thankyou for arranging this house. I shall work to make it pretty and tidy. Say hello and tickles to my brothers and let little Clive know that last weekend I saw a seal. There was one last thing to say. Mumma clenched her teeth. Finally, she wrote: Please tell Mother that my oven is in good working order and I no longer require her scones. Your daughter, Margaret.*

Sometimes, at night, Mumma let herself remember the farm. It was not really a farm—more a property (an estate?)—and her father was certainly not a farmer, but his keeping a few sheep meant he was somewhat accepted into the farming community and during consultations over coughs and colds, flus, cuts and bruises, severed fingers, measles, mumps, viruses, back pain and infection he was able to feign enthusiasm for livestock and relate a few of his own anecdotes about sheep. The farming side was her mother's family. They were wheat farmers in the mid-north. Mumma had only been to visit on a handful of occasions. Something about Grandma and Grandpa Collins made her father anxious, so visits were few and far between.

Mumma's childhood was warm with baking. She was a good girl. She was Mother's Little Helper, The Wee Chef, an Apple Dumpling in a green pinny. Her days revolved around cooking with her mother. Baking together was as close as they ever got. Mother had a shelf of bosom that she could not get over, so she stood in her shadow, in her darkness. After kitchen duties Mumma played harvest with her brothers, Dennis and Clive. They stole corn on the cob and pails of wheat from the Nicholl's over the track. The three would sneak out of the house on a clear night and stare up at the pin-points of silver. Mumma gnawed on raw corn and yellow starch dried to her lips.



When Mumma was twelve she adopted a lamb that had been rejected by its mother. She found it up the back paddock too weak to bleat, too cold to clamber to its feet. The crows had been at work and one eye was a bloody, weeping mess, crusted with dirt and dandelion seeds. Mumma knew she saved the lamb with love. She cradled it against her chest and felt her heat bleed into the little creature. She shared her heart beat and encouraged a mutual rhythm. The lamb limbered with Mumma's warmth and nudged her for milk.

Dandy gave Mumma a purpose and her name. Clive and Dennis would bleat, 'Mu-mma ... Mu-mma ...' and so Margaret became Mumma. Out in the back paddock, Mumma would skip circles with her hair set free and her lamb in tow. She was Mumma, lover of all creatures great and small. Mumma. Dandy kneeled on her knobbly knees and sucked voraciously from a glass milk bottle. Mumma giggled as the lamb slobbered and foamed and bubbled on tepid formula. She knew that she fed Dandy love and she knew that she was the lamb's whole world. Nothing could need her as much as the dopey creature with one keyhole eye. She buried her face in Dandy's wool and soaked up lanolin. There was comfort in wool.

At fourteen Mumma spun a couple of lumpy balls of yarn on her mother's spinning wheel. She stayed up all night knitting herself a woollen hat.

Her father frowned and called her a tramp. He thought his daughter's relationship with the sheep was unhealthy. He said, *That animal is not to come near the front door again or it will be mutton chops. I have sterile instruments to consider, Margaret.*

Mumma went to stay at Nettie Nolan's for a night. They had to learn three pages of *Twelfth Night* to recite in English class. Mrs Nolan made chocolate pudding and fixed them hot milk because it was miserable and raining out. The next afternoon

after a triumphant recital, Mumma skipped out into the back paddock and called for Dandy. The sodden ground squelched and oozed underfoot and Mumma's shoes were soon too muddy for prancing. She trudged along the fence line, found the back gate open and scanned the hillside. She cupped her hands around her mouth, called out, again and again until her eyes smarted with the effort.

Mumma found Dandy drowned in the river. She floated on her side, bloated, wooden legs stiff, wool water-logged and grey. Her ribs had broken through flesh. Mumma collapsed on the river bank. When she came to it was pitch black night and her clothes were wet with dew.

After a week of winter rain Dandy had dissolved and headed out to sea. Mumma imagined that somewhere there was a tuft of wool caught on blackberry, dancing and pulling on the current.

Even now, some four years later, Mumma still dreamed up Dandy desperate, scabbling on the muddy banks of the river, thin legs thrashing, neat hooves hopeless, her full coat of wool an impossible weight, pulling her under, poor, sweet Dandy, snorting and gagging on mouthfuls of water. Mumma still saw the way death bloated the face and bleached the eyes. She missed the smell of lanolin, the comfort of wool.

The unpacking was almost done. Mumma had taken her time. It was a process of getting used to the inevitable. The old house was hollowed by rats, riddled with salt damp, but Mumma had dreams and they were stronger than any reinforcements a builder could make. She was going to dream in spite of her parents. She had decided that this was the beginning, but that didn't necessarily make things easier.

Mumma had made an appointment for her seventh morning on the island. She had felt quite proud of herself for achieving the bike ride, for finding the hospital and for making her inquiries in an even voice. She had worked things out for herself, filled in forms without her father's approval and plumped out a story at her discretion. She held the biro with confidence and simply made up the details she did not know. Under *Husband's Name* she wrote in her best cursive: *Deceased*.

*Oh dear,* said the secretary. *I am sorry.*

*Yes,* whispered Mumma. *But I must be strong. I have the baby to live for, after all.* The fibs made Mumma feel capable. In this new place she was able to make all the wrongs right. She was able to start making up her life.

*Margaret Wright?*

Doctor Warren was clean. Mumma guessed he hadn't seen much life outside the surgery. His skin was pale and slack and sort of soggy like puff pastry the day after cooking—sort of like her father's. Mumma smiled and forced her most animated face in the hope it would disguise the fear.

*This way Margaret.*

As Doctor Warren measured her belly Mumma got up the nerve. *Doctor? I was wondering if you could jot your findings into my medical record.*

He made a little huff and she noticed how much hair he had up his nose. *Of course that is regulation.*

*Oh no,* blinked Mumma. *I mean in my own personal medical record. It's a little book I have decorated to remember my progress.*

He pressed his fingers into her flesh and Mumma could feel her unborn child protest. *It's not the done thing. Your records are the property of the hospital.*

*Please? Mumma tried. It will help me communicate with my father. He is also a Doctor you see.*

Doctor Warren pulled her smock down over her belly and indicated she get off the bed. *I shall check the time at the end of the consultation. You understand I can't keep hospital business waiting.*

This time, it took Mumma almost an hour to cycle back home. The track seemed rougher and her bike had a habit of veering left when it hit a pothole of sand and Mumma's arms ached with the steering and her legs burned with the pedaling. She thought it was important to be fit and strong in preparation for the birth, but she hoped she hadn't overdone it. She wondered how much longer she would be able to make the trip to town in this way, before she was overbalanced with belly and consumed by the tiredness. She wondered what arrangements she could make with the hospital. As she neared what she believed to be the border of her three acres she was beside herself with hunger. She wished for raspberry cordial and a great slab of cinnamon tea cake, but she knew there was nothing so tasty awaiting her.

Mumma tore bread and ate jam by the spoonful. Content after a generous snack, she surrounded herself with her precious things, arranged her nick-knacks on shelves, tucked her old toys and Miss Lucy into her bed, ordered her silver cake forks on the kitchen bench. Amongst Mumma's precious things were an old pair of lace curtains from her dead Nanny's home. Occasionally Mumma would pull on a pair of white woolen tights, tuck her singlet into her underwear, wrap one curtain around her body fastening it under her left armpit and drape the other curtain over her head. She would gaze into her mirror, gaze right through that reflection of herself cloaked in yellowed

curtains and see instead some fifteen feet of white lace, six of silk, a generous spattering of pearls and sparkles, rosebuds, peach blossom and a rich fruit cake with marzipan icing so thick and white it dazzled.

Some days time dragged. Mumma busied herself making a folder for her important documents, taking great care with her cursive and a decorative border. She shuffled through her most special recipes: angel cake, golden sponge, curried eggs, scones, through birthday cards, letters, school books and a few odd tufts of Dandy's wool. There were Easter egg wrappers smoothed and stuck to cardboard, baby teeth in tissues and a battered medical textbook she had stolen from her father. There was a photograph of Clive and Dennis in their cricket whites and one of the whole family on the front verandah back home.

There was one other photograph. It did not belong in this collection. It was surely a bad memory. Mumma held it for some time, taking in the light and shade, the details of that moment. That ink black hair and those ocean eyes. She turned the photograph over. *My Love*—in lead pencil. She spat on her index finger and tried to rub out her handwriting. The words smudged and smeared and satisfied that it was now illegible, Mumma decided the photograph would no longer be a precious thing. In her bedroom, she ran her hands along the wall, found the join between two sheets of wall paper, ever so carefully slid a fingernail, then a butter knife to loosen the paper and worked the photograph in. Mumma stood back from the wall. It was obvious she had tampered. She fetched a hammer and a nail from the shed, banged it into the wall and hung up her little mirror, framed in pretty pretend gold. The black and white moment, her: smiling, with hair in plaits, him: captured in movement and somewhat blurred, became on that day a hidden thing.

Mumma worked hard to immerse herself in her important documents. They were a most excellent diversion. She shuffled and reshuffled, organised piles, smoothed corners, squashed silverfish, flicked rat shit. She glanced over her medical record that Doctor Warren had agreed to help her with. She checked the list of blood pressure, height, weight and girth measurements. She read the column which she had titled 'Doctor's Comments' and smiled to herself. According to Doctor Warren's scrawl, she was in good health, despite the lack of a husband.

Mumma had been alone for ten days. She marked it on the calendar and surrounded her scrawl with hand drawn love hearts and butterflies. She felt a flutter of happiness as she set to work in her kitchen. She separated four eggs, carefully tipping yolk from shell to shell, careful not to pierce the rich bulb of gold.

*Gently, Margaret, Mother used to say. Feather touch.*

Mumma dropped the fourth yolk into the bowl and felt movement inside.

*Grumbly tummy, she said. Are you empty?* There was another pang. Mumma looked down on herself, frowned, patted her belly and squeaked, *Oh. It's just you. Gently in there. Gently. Feather touch.*

She beat egg whites until her forearm burned. She added a suggestion of salt and around a cup of castor sugar. She beat until her skin oozed sweat, added golden syrup, the egg yolks and beat some more. Outside the sky paled and shags preened themselves in a dead tree. Mumma was glad for the thud of her own heart and the chinking of crockery. It filled the silence of the old place. She sifted the dry ingredients and worked lumps through with the back of a spoon. Cornflour dusted her bulging belly. Mumma smiled, sang and sweated. She heated vanilla pods, butter and milk and fought off the memory of home, the warm smell of her own mother's milky skin. The oven sighed heat and filled the small kitchen with a stink of burnt grease.

Mumma panted and puffed. Colour bled through her cheeks. She peeled off her shirt and her naked skin prickled in the open air. She wet her lips, divided the cake batter between two sandwich tins and slid the tins into the oven. She took the mixing bowl into the lounge room and climbed onto her favourite armchair. She scooped the sticky mixture with an index finger, licked with pointed tongue and got batter on her chin. The baby rolled inside her. *Gently baby-cake*, Mumma sang, and smeared her belly with sticky mess. *Feather touch sweet baby-cake*.

He had noticed comings and goings on the track to the old place for a week or so now. The first afternoon after a day out shooting he watched a smart looking Fairlane heading back along the track towards town, slow coasting with an empty trailer. A day later the tyre marks had been ridden over by a bicycle. He had been anxious to check things out all week, but he'd had stuff to do. Now, with his boots tightly laced, he strode through the scrub and sent birds flying. He was going for a look.

He was born and bred in the valley so when something happened around these parts he knew about it. He knew the big things and the small. He clocked the moment of ants, watching them move a dead beetle or moth, lifting logs, pots or rocks to check for the tiny white eggs. He knew when old Dulcie died and left the cottage with a bad smell. He had watched the men from town come in their flash Fords and dark suits and zip the withered body in black plastic. He knew when things happened well before the authorities were called in. He was the first to see the river burst its banks two winters ago. He was the one to spot the mother whale and her calf frolicking in shallow waters. As far as he knew, he was the only one who had seen Uncle Eric and Mr Walker down at the boat shed. He had found debris weathered by the sea: driftwood, buoys, perished rubber condoms, a severed foot still in a man's shoe. Back

home, in a corner of the shed, he had a collection of things; suggestions of other people's lives.

A kookaburra tossed its head back and laughed. The boy started, squinted at the eucalypt canopy and walked on. He lightened his step as he approached the house and was overwhelmed by a smell. It was a whiff of another time. He inhaled slowly.

His new neighbour was a woman and she was cooking.

The boy skulked around the house fingering the crumbling stonework. He could hear his breath passing through his nostrils and the creak of the tendons in his neck. He cupped his hands and peered through a small window. Boxes, crates, bags. An upturned basinet. A carton of eggs. A transistor radio. He held his breath and crept around to the kitchen window. The glass was foggy with steam. Two perfect cakes were cooling on wire racks on the draining board. He squinted. In the middle of the room, there was one velvet armchair. In it there was a sleeping woman swollen, he assumed, with pregnancy. She wore cotton slacks and a skin-coloured bra. Her belly was crusted with something. The boy gawked and swallowed. He had never seen anything like it.

Mumma had a mind that tick-ticked through day and night. In the velvet armchair, lulled by the sweet smell of cooling sponge cake, she slid in and out of sleep, flirted with dreams, painted pictures of an ideal life. Sun bleached Mumma's skies and blazed off white sand. She was barefoot on the edge of the earth, teasing the tide with her pink toes. She giggled and skipped like a sprite in her imagined body. Rain fell and split the sun. Light cleaved and dazzled. Mumma's world was wet-hot. She breathed in and a baby fell out of her with a great rush of fluid. She had opened and rained. Amniotic fluid, piss and blood. The baby was pickled in brine, its skin



withered, parched, purple. It gasped on the white sand, sticky with birth, pasted with seaweed, crusted in shell grit and crabs' claws. Mumma skipped away from the mess and found a pocket of yellow light free from rain. She was spinning, swathed in gold, baked in warmth. She spun and spun and her baby screamed. Mumma woke to the rats and a dark-sky dread.

The boy watched from a distance. The woman was setting rat traps around the house. She pinched a corner of cheese from the block in her left hand and took some time pressing and molding it to each trap. She frowned as she worked, she squinted and she pursed her lips. The boy watched with his mouth ajar and leaked a needle of drool. After all traps were set, the woman sat on her front door step sniffing her cheesy fingers and nibbling right from the yellow block.

Storm clouds rolled in and it became dark earlier than usual. The woman was a shadow at the door step. The boy waited until she went inside. The door banged. Lights came on in the house. He strained to see. She had something in her arms; something big, cumbersome. She struggled with it and waddled out of view. He held his breath and stepped towards the house. The woman kicked open the front door and electric light beamed from the kitchen. The boy stumbled back into the dark, dazzled by the glare. He blinked a billion stars and let his eyes readjust. It was a pumpkin. The woman had a pumpkin. She positioned it on the chopping block and took the axe in both hands.

Half an hour later the windows were fogged up with steam. The boy, numb in the arse and damp all over, smelt onions frying. He crept closer and skulked the perimeter of the house. Slugs slid on silver trails. Snails crunched under foot. There was no evidence of a man. No car in the shed, no empty beer bottles, no rifle by the

back door. There were pots in a row, a set of new gardening tools, a box of empty milk bottles and a pair of women's rubber boots. He knew they were women's because he had never seen a pair so small and dainty. He picked them up and felt inside. There was a woollen sock in each shoe. He smelt something musty, thought momentarily of his mother and ground his teeth. He put the rubber boots back on the door step and moved on. The woman had left the axe out and the handle was wet with dew. He picked it up, lent it against the house, collected scraps and chips of pumpkin and arranged them in a pile on the chopping block.

Mumma burped up pumpkin soup and farted hot air. She was glowing scarlet by the open fire, blinking at the ants that sizzled in the flames. Her unborn child weighed heavy on her bladder and she caught a whiff of her own piss. She felt damp and uncomfortable, but the smell was familiar and of some comfort. There was no-one to tell her change her underwear, to bath, to scrub her fingernails, to wash her clothes or air her bed linen. Father would be outraged. Mumma lay back in the chair and thought about dessert.

The boy stood at the washing line, breathing wet wool and detergent. There were no men's clothes, no slacks, strides or trousers, no big white singlets, long-johns or handkerchiefs. These clothes were for someone short, perhaps five foot. He fingered the cuffs of a pair of pants, put his hands up the sleeves of a hand knitted jumper, rubbed his face against a cotton spencer. His heart thumped so hard it knocked him off balance. He steadied himself by clinging to the line and pegs were sent pinging into the night. His skin tingled and steamed and he felt himself swell with heat. He

nuzzled his nose into the cup of a bra, ran a fingertip around the elasticised leg hole of a pair of briefs, fingered the corners of a white pillow slip.

The snap of a rat trap shattered his moment. He was exposed. A dirty boy with his face in a stranger's smalls. A dirty boy with his dick half cocked. He felt his buttocks burn as if he'd just been belted. He followed the desperate squeal of the rodent around the side of the woman's house. It was caught around the middle, scrabbling frantically, teeth bared, eyes bulging. He bent down for a better look. He took a tiny pink foot in his fingers and remembered the sting of leather on baby flesh. He pinched one of the rat's toes. It was the most delicate thing he had ever held. His fingernails cut like razors, no force required.

Ernest did not see and hear so well, but he felt the comings and goings of his son by the change in air. It was a dank draft that roused him this night. He was particularly stiff in his chair and he ached to relieve himself. *Boy! I need the pot.* The night air caught in his throat.

The boy had a headache. His father's voice resounded, rattled his bones, scrambled his brain. He took a gulp of air to gather himself and got the bucket from the bathroom.

*That felt like I was passing honey, I'd been waiting that long to go.* Ernest passed the bucket to his son. *Take a look at the colour.*

The boy took the bucket and kicked open the back door and muttered, *You don't drink enough water. If you drank more water, then it'd run clear.* He walked down the back slope, out into the night and tipped out the piss. He could hear his father shouting,

*Drink more water! Now there's some good advice for a man who relies on his son to toilet him. I drink more water and you'll be holding that bucket on the quart hour.*

In the moonlight a frown cut the boy's face in half. He knew his father could still get around all right. He'd seen him staggering around the house from the wood shed. He had seemed to be dancing, arms up, out and rounded at the elbows, feet: one, two, three shuffling a tight circle. The glass in the windows had rattled. He remembered his father dancing with a lovely lady in a pink dress. She wasn't his mother for long. She was a deserter. The hate wasn't so caustic these days. He guessed it was because of impending manhood. A man just had to get on with it. He picked up two mallee stumps for the fire and went back inside. He put the wood on the hearth, pushed his father closer to the heat and retired to his room. In the dark, on his bed, the boy thought about the woman with child. She made him hard. He had to stand up to tug his thing so as not to make the bed hit the wall.

The next morning the boy rowed out to the best spot for whiting. There was a break in the seaweed about twenty foot in diameter where the water was as blue as beautiful eyes and the sand whiter than white. He threaded two gents on a hook and let the weight of the sinker carry the bait down. By lunch time he had caught six decent fish; three for his father and three for the woman.

He found her out the back garden up to the elbows in mud. She was wearing a woolen hat pulled over her hair and ears and a man's coat with the sleeves cut to mid forearm. She was singing some kind of nursery rhyme, *Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man. Bake me a cake as fast as you can.* She stepped to the right in time with her song and with each step, stuck a sprig of rosemary in the earth. The boy lost

himself in the shape of her arse. Straight-legged and bent from the waist, she had two generous, smiling cheeks which dipped to the right as she moved. At the end of the row she stood up straight, wiped her hands on her trousers, slipped her fingers down the back of her pants and massaged the small of her back. The boy caught a glimpse of woman-flesh and remembered himself. No words came, so he coughed. She jumped, span around and faced him with her mouth gaping.

*You scared me*, she said and stabbed the ground between them with a garden fork. *I didn't hear you at all.*

He saw her up close for the first time. She did not look like a woman at all. She looked like a girl. He wished for the heat in his cheeks to subside. He managed to say, *Sorry, missus... Miss... I am your neighbour.* He picked up a fish with two fingers hooked in the gills. *I thought you might appreciate some fish.*

Mumma had to admit to never catching, cleaning or cooking a fish so the boy suggested they walk down to the beach with his filleting knife. She was happy to be walking and talking with someone—to this quiet young chap with his neighbourly gesture of fresh fish. She told him about her plans for her vegetable garden, edged with a rosemary hedge and with marjoram running down the middle. *I need wait until the ground has dried out a bit. It's awfully heavy with rain—too heavy for someone in my condition to be shoveling.*

The boy recognised an opening and suggested, *Perhaps your husband will have to assist.*

Mumma lied to her new neighbour. In the scrub, on the narrow path to the beach, she told him that her husband had died. She cooked up a story of his silken hair and slender fingers. She said, *When I buried him, I put my wedding ring on his*

*pointed nose. It fit perfectly. It was most tragic. I made angel cake for the funeral. The icing melted into the tongue.*

The boy toed the earth with his scuffed boot.

Mumma looked up at the sky and said, *I have moved here —to the country—in my grief. I shall be safe from things here.*

The boy eyed her contorted belly and felt things happen down the front of his strides. He kept one arm in front of himself and directed her gaze to the small boat shed, tucked in between a gnarled pair of melaleucas and a great bank of seaweed. *I have a small wooden boat in there, he said, and some basic fishing equipment.*

Mumma nodded enthusiastically and asked, *So are you a fisherman, then?*

He looked sideways at her, unsure whether she having a go or genuinely naive. *Well, no... He started for the shallows with his bucket of fish slopping at his side. I catch a feed for me and me father. He's not so able, these days.*

Mumma waddled beside him, buttoning her belly into her coat. *So what work do you do?*

He tipped bloody water into the sea and said, *Not work, work. Not stuff in a suit 'n' that. Not-stuff someone like you'd call work. I look after me Dad, fish, hunt, put up fences and do odd jobs for folk in town occasionally. I don't worry about what goes on over the hills or on the other end of this ocean.*

Mumma said, *I would have been a doctor like Daddy, had it not been for the gift of child. Doctors know things. I would have liked to know things.* Mumma watched the fish slime collect in the creases of his hands. She was fascinated by it all: the glass eye of the fish, the mustard shit oozing from its vent, the scars on his knuckles, the pink of his nails. She squatted awkwardly beside him and noticed how the down on his upper lip was thickening.

They arrived back at her door as the mist turned to drizzle. She thanked him for the fish, unbuttoned her coat and didn't consider asking him in. He stood two steps down from her, level with her drum of a gut. She folded her coat in her arms and asked, *So what's your name, Mister?* A crow cursed and Mumma missed what he said. It didn't matter. She liked it better this way. He was elusive, a stranger, a shadow. He looked at her with rain frosting his lashes, fish blood on his cheek. Her unborn child kicked and elbowed and Mumma tilted her head, *How old are you, Mister?*

He felt his heart whacking somewhere in his rib cage. She was waiting for him to speak and he knew words wouldn't come, just like the days back at school when the girls called him empty-head or insect-boy or brown-bum or king-of-the-ants. He had forgotten the question, but cleared his throat and said instead, *Well as your neighbour I can offer to service you at all or any times—seeing your husband is no longer of this world and can't help and you're close to birthin' and all.* He licked his lips and she smiled and thanked him and he decided he should be going as he promised he would hammer a few nails in his father's wheelchair to steady the side wobble. He turned and walked back down the track, arms hanging at his sides, bucket knocking at his right leg. *Mister*, the boy mouthed. She thinks I'm a *Mister*.

At dusk, Mumma checked her recipe books and decided on wrapping her fish fillets in parcels of foil with butter, pepper and fresh parsley. She set them side by side on the middle tray and sat cross legged in front of the oven window waiting for them to cook. She smiled through her reflection at the sight of those two silver parcels, so neatly tucked, folded and smoothed, sighing a wisp of steam. She could not recall a memory of eating fish. Perhaps she had once seen her mother eat sardines right from the tin, wrist crooked, with an elegant fork. Perhaps not. Grandma and

Grandpa Collins took regular doses of cod liver oil and one summer Grandma prepared a kedgereee with haddock, but Mumma was quite sure she had not eaten fresh fish, straight from the sea. She flicked the two parcels onto a plate and teased at the foil with a knife. With her eyes closed, she took a slow, deep breath of the smell; a suggestion of sea, a bite of pepper, the warmth of butter and love. Mumma ate quickly, sopped the juices with boiled potato, licked the last of it from her plate, her cutlery and from the discarded foil on the oven top. This melt-in-the-mouth, sweet sea treat was most definitely a precious thing.

Early the next day Mumma saw a flash of Mister on the track to the sea. She slipped on some shoes and trotted after him. He was dragging the boat towards the water. He had his face down. There was blood on his knuckles where the rope had chafed. Mumma said, *I came to say thank you for the fish. It was such a special present, all done up in silver. So delicious. So warm and sweet.*

Mister blinked twice. *It was just fish.*

Mumma let her head fall back with laughter, *Just fish!*

Mister eyed her for a moment and resumed pulling the boat.

She giggled, ambled after him and asked, *Are you going fishing now? What if the wind picks up? What if it rains? What if you capsize? Can you swim?*

Mister listened as he took off his boots, rolled up his strides and got the boat on the water.

She pointed to his hand and said, *You're bleeding.*

He sucked his wound said, *'Bye Missus Margaret* with blood-red teeth, got into the boat, found the seabed with an oar and pushed off towards the horizon.



Mumma watched him row for a minute or two. Water chimed. Hush, hush, she thought. He was a funny one with his formalities and frowns. He was a provider. She called, *Perhaps one day you could show me how to catch a fish.*

He rowed on; good, strong strokes, silver dripping from the old oars.

Mumma stood on tip-toe and waved, *Bye Mister. I'm glad to have a new friend.*

Mister swallowed and squinted at the shrinking figure on the shore. He wasn't sure by her big, open smile and raised eyebrows if she was serious or gaming with him.

At night, on her own, Mumma was not so brave as when she flirted with a stranger. At night, Mumma had bad memories which were only kept at bay by the writing of lists. By the gas lamp, in the velvet armchair, facing the open fire, Mumma wrote lists of her favourite foods. She wrote: *Mister's Fish (silver presents with butter love), Marshmallow bunnies rolled in toasted coconut, egg-nog with nutmeg, soft mints in powdered sugar (the blue and white porcelain pot, Grandma and Grandpa Collins'), lamb and mint jelly, damper and dripping, cream off the milk bottle top (tongue tip is best), orange custard with coconut (Dead Nanny's recipe), pasty slice (Aunt Nancy's), raw corn and moonlight (little Clive and Dennis).* She wrote until she was exhausted with remembering. There were a couple of favourites left but Mumma wasn't entirely sure that they would serve to block out the bad memories. Finally, she managed: *Mother's scones* and put her list away.

Mumma slept restlessly, uncomfortably. In her mind, she flicked frantically through pictures of childhood. She was skipping around and around the verandah with Miss Lucy tucked at the top of her skirt, she was helping Mother fold clean sheets in the afternoon, bouncing on her bed, belting noise out of the piano while

Father was out on business, watering Mother's pansies with bore water in a bread tin, tickling Clive until he screamed, moulding biscuit dough into love hearts. How could she have changed into a woman? Surely she was still a girl. Surely she would feel differently as a woman. She still felt the same as when she lived on the farm, she still longed to skip, she still sang to Miss Lucy. Perhaps Doctor Warren could explain, him being in the medical profession and all, as she could not ask Father and risk his shame. She could not ask Mother either. Things were different since the minutes behind the bathroom door when the blood came. She remembered she was naked but for a white singlet. Her mother hooked her up to a soft, white cotton towel and Mumma had giggled, *It's like Clive's nappy*. Her mother could not meet her daughter's eyes as she moved her cold fingers around Margaret's crotch. Mumma remembered a suggestion of sugar on the back of her mother's hand. She had wet a fingertip with spit, touched at the crystals and crunched on grainy sweetness. It was the day before her twelfth birthday and Mother was in the middle of making her a chocolate sponge.

The baby kicked as Mumma wet her pillow with tears. She bit into goose down, kicked her legs, beat her arms against her mattress and howled as though she was four again.

Half past five in the morning and the tears had dried. Mumma got up, wrapped herself in a blanket and headed for the kitchen.

By six o'clock the chuck steak was floured, sealed and steaming in the bottom of her biggest saucepan. Mumma added beef stock, tinned tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, ground pepper and three bay leaves. She switched the hot plate to low, drank a glass of milk and went for a bath.

The stew bubbled and sighed late into the morning. Mumma pottered about the house, her sadness somewhat soothed by the smell of cooking. She trimmed the tattered ends of her fraying rug, dusted her collection of ornaments, thumbed through her chest of precious things, looked over her trinkets, checked her stores of sugar, flour and cocoa. She spent some time piling dead moths in the corner of the kitchen window sill, feeling the movement of her unborn child, letting thoughts come and go with the rain. Sadness welled as she cut parsley. It twisted her guts as she spread bright yellow margarine on white bread. Mumma got a hold of herself, brushed and tied back her hair, put on a red jumper and slipped into her raincoat and rubber boots. She put the saucepan and bread into the washing basket, covered them with a big plastic bag and stepped outside into the weather.

It took Mumma twenty minutes to find Mister's house. It was a crumbling cottage, not unlike her own, nestled among old eucalyptus and rusted out car bodies. Mumma stood in the rain and thought the house looked terribly sad. Her arms ached with the weight of the food and her face burned in the cold. She edged closer. The baby pummelled. Mumma put the basket by the front door and knocked hard, four times. She waited for movement, for a shadow or a noise. She tried again, and again. No response. Mumma waddled around the house and found another door. She tried the handle and the door swung inwards and smacked the wall. She cleared her throat, *Hello?* She stepped inside and winced on the smell of urine. It was an odd looking room. There was a laundry tub and a table with chipped enamel plates and two stained mugs. There was a bucket, a fishing rod and a rusty rabbit trap by the door. Mumma was watching the rain roll off her coat onto the floor when a voice called out from the next room.

Ernest knew it was not the boy; he moved carefully and barely disturbed the air. Whoever this was brought in the wind and the rain. *Who's there? I've got a rifle.* He smelt sweetness, felt the floorboards shift underneath him and made out the squeaking of a girl.

*It's Margaret. I'm your new neighbour.*

Ernest slapped his hands on his wheels and stopped in his tracks. He spat in his palms, smoothed his hair and flattened his eyebrows. He brushed off his strides, buckled his belt and buttoned his shirt. He found her in the kitchen standing in a pool of water, holding a washing basket full of food. It was some time since he had seen a girl. He had forgotten how pink and plump they could be. She was smiling nervously at him, her nose red, her hair curling with the rain.

*She said, I met your son the other day and I thought you might like some stew. There's bread, too and melting moments for afters.*

Ernest struggled for words. He gestured to the table with his cane. *Put that basket down. The boy's gone to town for some kero. You can wait with me.* He watched her lower the basket carefully to the table, take off her rain coat and drape it over the back of a chair. As she moved he thought he recognized the bulge of her stomach but he couldn't be sure. She still looked like a babe herself—all soft and pale and peachy. He cleared his throat and watched her arrange the food. First she set down the bread, then a bowl of biscuits, then she took the big saucepan in both hands and placed it on the stove top.

She blinked furiously and asked, *Is this a wood oven?*

Ernest barked, *No electricity here. Place isn't really fit for ladies.*

Mumma hiccupped on a giggle, wet her lips and rocked on her heels. *Should I light it for you? I thought I could heat this up for lunch.* She lifted the lid of the pan and touched a drop of condensation with a fingertip.

The smell of stew reached Ernest's nostrils. It smelt rich and meaty, pungent with herbs. Ernest's stomach flipped. He said, *Wood's outside that door, to the right.*

Mumma squatted in front of the fire and fed kindling to the baby flames. She could hear Ernest wheezing behind her.

*The boy didn't tell me about you.*

*Oh?*

*No.*

*Perhaps he's a man of few words.*

*Speak up. Me ears are shot.*

*No mind. You know about me now.*

*Hmm... You got company in Dulcie's old place?*

*No.*

*Where're your folks?*

*On the mainland.* She patted her belly purposefully and smiled.

Ernest pointed a crooked finger. *Are you....?*

*Yes.*

*So where's your fella?*

Mumma put the last of the wood on the fire and closed the cast iron door. *With God.* She hugged herself around the middle. *I have this instead.*

Ernest raised his eyebrows and his dud eye turned circles. *You'll need another one. It's madness for a young lass in your condition to live alone in that place.*

Mumma tapped her fingers on the oven top, opened the door of the fire and gave two long blows to the flames. *Women's Liberation is happening in the cities, sir.*

*Ernest. It's Ernest.*

The boy had filled the gerry can with kero, bought four pints of milk, two loaves of bread and a strap of licorice for himself. He parked his dad's FJ in the shed, opened the car door and knew immediately that she was here. His dad hadn't cooked lunch for seven years or so and certainly wasn't capable of the complex smell the boy breathed as he stepped towards the house. It was almost unbearable to imagine the pregnant woman, Missus Margaret—Mumma, as she called herself—inside their house at the wonky table, listening to his dad's banter, watching his dad eye float, smelling his piss and his dirty old-bugger stench. The boy dithered in the doorway with his guts all a-flutter. What would he say to her? How would he speak to his dad in her company? Then the door opened on him and there she was in red wool, cheeks flushed, hair springing.

*Hello Mister. We wondered what you were up to out there. Come on in. I've made stew.* She took the bread and milk from him, bustled him over to the table and opened her nostrils. *Mmm... Someone's had licorice.*

The boy reeled from all the fuss. He caught his dad chuckling at him and suddenly found himself standing. *Thankyou for your efforts, Missus Margaret, but I've got things that need doing and can't afford the luxury of a sit-down lunch.* He pushed his chair under the table, grabbed a fistful of bread, a rabbit trap and a rifle and excused himself.

Mumma watched him stride off into the scrub.

Ernest was laughing. *My boy don't know women.*

The boy did not come home until well after dark. Ernest had expected as much and had managed to wheel his chair to the back door and piss on the porch. He felt the night blow in when the boy returned, wondered if he should attempt some kind of communication, but decided to let him be. Ernest fell asleep with his guts full of home cooked stew, a gurgling bowel and a smile on his face.

The boy stood in the kitchen holding the tilly lamp. Shadows stretched and bounced up the walls. He saw that the floor had been swept and the dishes had been washed and stacked. On the table there was buttered bread on a plate. The stew was still on the fire. He lifted the lid and dipped a finger. It was luke warm and very tasty. He took three bits of bread and the saucepan into his room and blew out the lamp.

The next Sunday morning Mumma slept late. She would have continued to doze well into the afternoon had it not been for the banging at the front door.

*Hello Father.*

*Hello Margaret.*

*I see you're in this particular Sunday.*

*I like to keep busy. Idle hands make dull minds and all, Father.*

Her father twitched. *I see.*

*Everything is well. Like I said in my note, you needn't visit.*

*Margaret, there is no other way of getting this to you.* He handed her an envelope.

She hated accepting money from her father's hand. It was difficult enough to find it slipped under the door. Mumma kept her eyes to the ground and said nothing.

Her father pulled in his chin and sighed, *It keeps your mother happy.*

*Will Dennis and Clive come to play?*

*I'm not sure that's appropriate, Margaret.*

Mumma stared at the shine on her father's shoes. There was black polish caked in the stitches.

*You have the television for company, Margaret. I doubt there are many young ladies out this way who can boast their own television set.*

Mumma bit her lip. The television had exploded with a blast of blue light the first time she plugged it in. Mumma wondered if the rats had gnawed through a cable. It now sat in the lounge room under a length of velvet, decorated with her favourite china tea set. Mumma felt her father's eyes run over her body. When she glanced up at him, she saw he frowned so hard his eyebrows joined.

*You will be getting close to your due date. Your Aunt Nancy has offered to stay with you and get you to the hospital when the time comes.*

Mumma took a shallow breath. *No thankyou, Father. I have a neighbour-friend who will drive me.*

*Is that so.* Her father mounted the stairs, checking his watch. *I have twenty minutes before the next ferry. I should examine you now—see if this Dr Warren is doing his job.*

Mumma's heart beat so quickly she thought she would faint. She took a big breath and pulled her dressing gown tightly around herself. *I'm quite sure he is, thank you Father. I'm quite sure he is.*

Mister could not look at her, he was that embarrassed. He squirmed in the sand, rearranged himself, clenched his legs together—anything to stop her noticing his thing.



*Come on Mister.* Mumma lay back, her hair fanning out like seaweed. *Touch it. You can feel it moving.* Mumma smoothed her hands over herself and smiled up into the sky. *I still can't believe I have a baby inside. A real baby. All small and sweet and pink and precious.* Her eyes scrolled after a puff of cloud. *A lot of the time I forget it's in there, all curled in a ball. It's more like I've eaten too much bread.* She turned her head in the sand to face him. *I always ate too much of my mother's bread. Great big chunks with lots of salty butter.* Her fingers wandered over her belly. *Here. Feel here. I think this's its head...* She poked and prodded and Mister kept his eyes averted. *Perhaps this is the spine...*

Mister stared out to sea and hoped for the moment to pass quickly and painlessly.

*The spine! Come on Mister! At least feel this and see if you think it's the spine.*

Mister wiped his forehead on his shirt sleeve and, still staring straight ahead, said, *It doesn't seem right to have you ask.*

Mumma sat up, sand raining from her hair to her shoulders. *I am used to a man's hands on me. My father is a doctor. You can touch me in the same way.* She reached out, took his hot hands in hers and pushed them into her belly. He held his breath and Mumma giggled. *It can't hurt you.* A wave hissed up the beach. *There!* Mumma exclaimed. *You just felt a tiny fist... or a foot... or an elbow. It's hard to tell. But this...* She slid his hands down. *I bet this arch is the spine.*

Mister took his hands back to steady himself. He licked the sweat from his upper lip and excused himself. He hot-footed it along the beach and into the scrub with his thing straining at the fly of his strides.

Ernest had offered his son's services at a reduced rate and apologised. *Forgive us, but we need bread too, Margaret.*

Mumma had agreed that there were some things that were more difficult for her to do, being with child and all and she had no problem parting with some of her father's money.

Mister came late the next morning to dig a hole in Mumma's backyard. The days were warming in expectation of spring and the sun brought him out in blotches of red. Mumma had hand-washed dead Nanny's old curtains and was hanging them out to dry. One had disintegrated in a spot in the middle. Mumma stuck her head through the hole and laughed, *Look at me, Mister. I'm a beautiful bride.*

He leant on the shovel and wondered how to reply. *I think this hole'll be deep enough for your lemon tree.*

Mumma laughed and laughed with her head stuck through the curtain, hanging there off the hills hoist like a lunatic. She was flushed in the face when she asked, *Will you drive me to hospital when it's time?*

Mister hit limestone and agreed.

Mumma had two false alarms before the real day came. The first happened when she was planting potatoes. She had almost covered a row with soil when the pangs came in a succession of waves. She sat down on the earth, slid a hand down the front of her pants and felt into herself. Her fingers came out clean. *Just like a knife tip in a cake,* she thought. Clouds passed and the cramp subsided. Mumma finished the row of spuds and went inside to make a bread and butter pudding.

The second was part real, part dream. Mumma was in a bath. The water was draining, spiralling and spinning—faster and faster. Mumma was struggling to get up

and out of the bath, but her feet were soapy and she slipped and skidded like a well oiled fish. She called out for help again and again, but no one came and she could not help but be pulled to the plug-hole with the remaining grey water and suds and scum. The plug hole sucked at her, gently at first, like in her young days teasing her front-bottom on the drain in the old claw foot bath back home, when Dennis was just a toddler and Clive not yet born, but then it sucked harder and harder still, until she could feel her skin tearing away from herself and she was screaming out with the pain and the helplessness. Mumma woke hearing the voice from a bad memory. He was behind glass, wet with tears and shouting at her. *Fuck your father, Muggie. Fuck him with his suit and his stethoscope. I'm all right my Muggie, I'm all right. Take my hand now and we'll be all right.* Mumma held her breath and willed the image away.

The day of birth was much less dramatic. Mumma had time to make a steak and kidney pie topped with mash to thank Ernest for the lend of his son and his car. When a contraction squeezed, she shut her eyes, gripped at the kitchen sink and fought the anxiety with an assortment of Cliff Richard's songs. The contractions were far enough apart for her to consider whipping up a batch of coconut macaroons to follow the pie, but then fear visited in the voice of her father and she decided it was best to get moving. She stuffed her nightwear into a bag, collected the steaming pie from the table, locked up the house and waddled off up the track to find Mister.

The nurse said, *Surely you're not the husband.*

Dr Warren said, *There is no husband* and hoicked Mumma onto a bed. Mister, with his arms limp at his sides and his head turning this way and that was always in the way. Dr Warren said, *You're the Armstrong boy, aren't you? Are you next of kin?*

Mister shrugged.

Dr Warren pushed through two swinging doors and said, *You can wait outside.*

Lola Belle Wright was born long after the sun sank below the horizon. There was no moon or stars. Just darkness. Nurses wore crisp white and went about their business. They stripped sheets, wrung towels, swabbed wounds, snipped, washed, wiped and weighed. They bound baby Lola in a cotton rug, lay her on her side in a crib and wheeled her away to the nursery. The baby bubbled and Mumma howled.

Mumma had cried herself into a dead sleep. She did not wake when the nurses checked her, when there was a cardiac arrest in the next room or when Mister snuck in moments before dawn. Her eyelids were still, fused shut with salt crystals and sleep when Mister hovered an inch above her face, smelling her skin and her spent breath, feeling the heat rising from her cheeks and the soft place where she had carried the baby.

Mumma was shaken awake before breakfast. The nurse pulled her up, tipped her forward, rearranged the pillows, pushed her back, unbuttoned her nightgown and placed the baby in her arms. *This one's ready to feed.* The nurse slipped a hand under Mumma's breast and worked the nipple towards the baby's mouth. Mumma was half asleep, still trembling with last night's effort, overwhelmed that this was really the little love who had been dancing inside her for the past months. She was unable to speak or to move and lay there while the nurse got the job done.

*This feeding business is harder than you think. It takes patience and practice and must be learned.*

Mumma's eyes smarted with all the staring.

Dr Warren made a phone call the morning after the birth and informed Dr Wright of the successful delivery of the child. He sat up very straight in his chair, tapped the base of his pen on the table top and said, *Dr Wright, I realise in our previous conversations you dismissed adoption. Is that still the case? Otherwise there is some urgency to get on to the necessary paper work.*

Dr Wright cleared his throat and snapped, *Margaret has made her bed and she will now lie in it. I warned her repeatedly about pursuing the encounters with that... man... repeatedly, Dr Warren. She must work things out for herself, now.*

Dr Warren agreed and recommended Margaret a stay of seven days until discharge on the 20th. *No doubt, Dr Wright, you agree that like all mothers, Margaret has some learning to do. The hospital staff will take care of that.*

Mumma was ravenous. No one was watching, so she forced the slices of beef into her mouth whole, she dug into the pile of mash potato with a dessert spoon, she sucked the mushy peas through pursed lips and she licked the gravy straight off the plate. The meal was luke warm and very ordinary, but she wasn't fussed. She rang the bell and asked for seconds. The nurse raised her eyebrows, said she'd see what she could do, then came back with a stale cheese sandwich. Mumma ate it crust first and felt comforted knowing it had not wound up as hospital waste. The salty squish of warm cheese reminded her of something. She washed down a mouthful with sweet tea. Spilt ink, shoe polish, brown paper—school lunches. Her mother made the most beautiful sandwiches. Thick, home baked bread with dripping, or jam, or cheese. Quite suddenly she was struck by the realisation that once her mother had given birth to her first child. A daughter. Margaret. Herself. Mumma plunged the spoon into the

bowl of custard and tried to imagine. The hospital hallways echoed. Mumma chewed on custard skin and looked out the window to the empty sky.

Mumma frowned at the tiny face, squashed and squeezed with yesterday's efforts, ran her fingers over the soft skull, feeling the bumps and ridges of bone, the squish of nose, the curl of ear, the wet warmth of gum. She pulled at the fine, dark hair and thought, *This is of your Daddy*. She held her breath and thought her thoughts quieter still, so as not to disturb those perfect, sealed eyelids. *Daddy is a hidden thing. It is better that way. Father warned he was unstable. We will do all right on dead Nanny's inheritance. We will skip on the sand and eat Mister's fish dripping with butter love. You will be my number one precious thing, my beautiful Lola Belle.* Mumma touched her lips to her child for the first time. The skin against her tongue reminded her of choux pastry. Mumma's arms felt weak with the weight of it all.

The nurse dropped the baby back into Mumma's arms and shook her head. *You'll have to keep trying. There was no movement on the scales. How long was she on the breast for?*

Mumma curled her tongue into the roof of her mouth and looked at the floor. She hoped she wouldn't erupt into tears. *Maybe ten minutes each side.*

The nurse undid the buttons on Mumma's nightgown and pulled out her right breast. *Let me see if you're doing it right.*

Mumma started to work her nipple into the tiny mouth.

*No, no no.* The nurse bent over her and pinched at her breast. *You need to wait for a wide open mouth, then get as much of this surrounding brown skin into her mouth —not just the nipple. Pinch, pinch, pinch. This surrounding brown skin too.*

*Otherwise you'll wind up very cracked and sore.* She teased a finger at the baby's cheek, waited for her lips to part, then pushed the tiny head into Mumma's breast. *See? See how she's taken in more than just the nipple?* The baby sucked twice and came away. *Try again. Don't let her muck about like this. You keep pushing her, Margaret. When you think she's done, ring your bell and I'll have her weighed again.*

The nurse checked her watch and strode out of the room and off down the corridor. Mumma clenched her teeth. *Put on a brave face,* she thought to herself as she looked down on the baby. Lola Belle was red-faced and cross-eyed, panting through her gaping mouth. *Come on, little one,* Mumma whispered, her lips trembling, her chin puckering. *You need a full tummy or else I'll be in big trouble.* She tried to do as the nurse had said. She tried and tried and tried again. Each time, baby Lola would suckle once or twice, let the nipple slide from her mouth, screw up her face and threaten to cry. Mumma felt a rising panic. It churned her stomach, seized her lungs and choked her throat. She suspected it was unreasonable, being in a hospital in the care of experts and all, but she was gripped by an overwhelming fear that her baby would die, that she would choke on her milk, right there in her arms. Her tears spilled and splatted onto the baby's forehead. *Come on, precious.* Lola blinked twice, sneezed, farted and quite suddenly took a mouthful of her mother. Her sucks were long and leisurely and her jaw made a clicking noise as she swallowed. Mumma felt the milk, hot inside her, drawn from deep within her breast. She dabbed her tears, smiled and watched her daughter with wide eyes.

After twenty minutes, Mumma rang the bell for the nurse. Lola was asleep, snuffling into her chest. The nurse pushed her glasses up her nose. *All done here?*

Mumma nodded.

*She attached all right, then?*

Mumma nodded again and beamed.

*Have you burped her?*

*Well, no. She fell asleep.*

*You have to burp her or she'll end up with terrible wind pains. Here...* The nurse took hold of Lola and arranged Mumma's hands. *Sit her up, lean her forward and support her under the chin. That's it. Now pat her firmly on the upper back.*

Mumma did as she was told. Nothing happened.

*Keep going.*

Mumma patted.

*Be firm.*

Mumma patted some more. Lola opened her eyes and burped, once, twice, three times then brought up a belly-full. Mumma gasped and bit on her lip. The nurse sighed and went for a tissue. *Oh dear, oh dear. And such rich, yellow colostrum, too. Pass her to me and I'll clean her up and have her weighed. She might have some left in her —enough for you to get a tick in your book, anyway. We'll see.*

Mumma watched the nurse leave with her baby and collapsed back onto the bed. Sadness engulfed her. She pushed her hand into her eye sockets. It was sticky with spilt milk sick.

Doctor Warren stood at Mumma's bedside, gripping a clipboard like armour against his chest. Mumma sat in her warm blood and stared right through his face to the stark white wall beyond. She had not seen much of him since the birth. It was the nursing sisters who attended to her when she rang the bell. He was speaking quickly, spit foaming at the corners of his tight, pink mouth. *All literature on the subject suggests it is quite normal to experience some slight depression around day three — 'the baby blues' some call it. I expect as a member of the fairer sex you are more or*



*less familiar with this irrationality of emotion. You'd be best to sport a smile and get on with it as your infant relies solely on you.* He paused and licked the spittle from his lips. *Now Margaret, slip your underwear down and I'll examine how well you're healing.* Mumma did as she was told. Doctor Warren dropped his clipboard on the end of the bed, rolled up his shirt sleeves, pushed and heaved at her left hip and rolled her onto her side. Mumma felt a gush of heat as he parted her buttocks. She wept hot blood, hot milk, hot tears.

*The wound doesn't look too bad. But the bleeding's still quite heavy, Margaret.* He let her fall back on the bed as he peeled off his rubber gloves. His messy brows were drawn into a frown. *You should be changing the pad more often. You've soaked right through onto the sheets. Have the nurses clean you up immediately.*

Mister asked why she was crying. Mumma folded her things and placed them into her bag. *Because it is so, so strange to have made a baby... and... and...* she bubbled on thick mucus *...because I am still a baby, myself.*

Mister looked out the window for something to do and Mumma wiped her face, blew her nose on a hanky, brushed her hair back and smoothed off her dress. She looked at Mister with his wet eyes still in his wooden face, straightened her jaw and said, *Your hair needs a cut. I'm handy with a pair of scissors.*

There was bustling down the hospital corridor. Mumma wrapped Lola in blankets with her back to Mister. Mister strained for his first squiz at a new-born, but Mumma was being secretive. She said, *Hush, hush my little Cornish pasty* and covered Lola's face with blanket. Mister took Mumma's bag as the bustling got louder and then there were hard leather shoes slapping linoleum and a voice that made

Mumma stand bolt upright. Mister smelt soap, disinfectant and fear and took two steps backwards. Mumma wheezed on hospital air.

*Hello Father.* She cradled her child hard against her chest. *This is my Lola.*

Her father's eyes refused to take in the child. *I have come to make sure everything is in order and to accompany you home.*

Mumma felt the blood weeping, warm between her legs. She said, *You should not have taken the time as my neighbour has agreed to drive me.* Her father glanced at Mister, moved next to him and breathed calmly.

*Well I am here now Margaret.*

Mumma looked at Mister, so lean and brittle next to her father, his dead leather boots caked with mud, strides threadbare at the knees, woolen jumper tucked and belted at his narrow waist, his back arched, shoulders stooped, head bowed to the floor. Mumma saw he was just a child like her and it made her tremble.

She whispered, *If it's all the same with you, Father, I will keep to my original plan.*

A trolley of surgical equipment rattled and rang as it was wheeled down the corridor. Three nurses passed and Doctor Warren stuck his head around the door.

*Is everything all right in here, Doctor Wright?*

Dr Wright clenched his teeth. *Just family matters, thankyou.*

Doctor Warren raised his eyebrows. *Ah. I see. If there is any difficulty perhaps Margaret would listen to me.*

Mumma wrapped herself tighter around her child. *No thankyou, Doctor Warren. It is a fact that my neighbour is at no inconvenience to take me home, living with Ernest but a short walk away from my cottage.*

Mister backed himself into the hospital wall. He had not been involved in a scene like this since his Dad was called to school to discuss his progress. Mumma's father took three steps forward and pushed an envelope into her hand. *I have set up an account in your name. Your allowance will be deposited directly.* He leant towards her and hissed, *Just remember you are kept, Margaret and with that may come some obligations.*

As he turned to leave Mumma cried, *Dead Nanny left that money for me. For me!*

With his face twitching and car keys twirling on his index finger Dr Wright left his daughter. As he turned the corner for the exit, she sobbed out, *Love and tickles to my brothers.*

Mister ground the gears into position and pulled up alongside the curb. Mumma's face was swollen with all the crying, but when she slid into the car she was smiling. She popped a finger in Lola's mouth and sniffed at the wind rushing in through the window. With her left hand she untied her hair and let the fresh air blow through to her scalp. A few strands blew against Mister's neck and tickled at his skin. He frowned and kept his eyes on the road. These were important passengers, after all. The daughter of a Doctor and his newborn grand-daughter.

*Why didn't you go in your father's car? The suspension would've been better and your baby wouldn't've got scrambled.*

A butterfly hit the windscreen and Mumma said, *I had made an arrangement with you.*

Mister tightened his fists around the steering wheel. *I wouldn't mess with that man.* Mumma cushioned Lola from the bounce as they hit the dirt track and wondered how to respond. Mister struck a pothole and Mumma felt the wounds open.

The silence made Mumma's skin prickle. She felt as though the house was holding its breath. In sleep, baby Lola was as pale and perfect as a wedding cake wrapped in marzipan, waxy as a blanched almond, downy as a ripening apricot. She breathed quickly and Mumma guessed she dreamed of feeding as her jaw suckled eagerly at an imagined nipple. Mumma's breasts ached and hot milk leaked through her clothes. It was a comfort that her body knew what to do. The milk was made despite her fear and confusion and desperation.

Mumma chewed her lip. Had Lola been sleeping too long? Should she wake her for a feed? Was she too hot? Too cold? Was she wrapped too tightly? Did her nappy need changing? What airborne bacteria was she inhaling? How quickly could they get to the hospital in an emergency? Mumma steadied herself against the cradle until the dizziness subsided. The afternoon sun sank lower in the sky, beaming through her Grandma's curtains, dressing her in dappled light and Mumma squinted at her patterned skin. For the past months she had become accustomed to being alone and had even enjoyed her solitude. Now, looking down on newborn Lola—exquisite creature with brushstroke features, the daughter she had so anticipated forging a life with—Mumma ached with loneliness. It was too much to bear. It threatened to engulf. She sunk her fingernails into the wooden bars of the cradle, squeezed her eyes shut for an instant and then, quite suddenly, breathed, *Bush biscuits! I haven't had my tea and bickies.* She released her grasp, sniffed the air above her daughter and finally left the room.

The sister at Mothers and Babies watched Lola Belle, draw her knees up to her chest, clench her fists and explode into tears. Mumma tried to keep talking but was unheard over the ruckus. She apologized twice but the sister was preoccupied.

*How often does she do this?*

Mumma swallowed. She wasn't sure what to say. She wondered what was the right answer.

*Looks to me like she's got colic.*

Mumma had to take a seat to gather herself. Finally, she said, *Is there a cure?*

The nurse laughed and boomed, *Oh, it's not a disease!*

*Is it inherited? Did I pass it on?*

*No Margaret. It's nothing like that. Some say it's just general gastric discomfort and others say it's a reaction to something in breast milk—something the mother has eaten. I tend to think it's most common in anxious mothers. Do you feel anxious, Margaret?*

Lola Belle was blood-red with all the screaming, Mumma looked down the barrel of her curled tongue into her throat and willed herself not to cry.

She squeaked, *No, sister. I really love my baby.*

Mister saw Mumma walking against the wind towards the point. He waved, called out. She flinched, her pace changed and she continued walking. Surely she had heard him. He trotted over her prints in the sand and called her name. It only occurred to him that she might not want company as he caught up to her. It was too late.

He said, *Hello Margaret* awkwardly, suddenly self-conscious at the loudness of his voice and stumbled over a mound of seaweed. She kept her face from him and feigned surprised.

*Oh! Mister! I didn't see you there.*

He hadn't had much to do with women, but he could tell she had been crying. He wished he hadn't run after her like some mangy mutt with a tattered tennis ball. He said, *Where is your baby?* for something to say and she looked shocked, like she had been stung by something. The wind blew her hair into her mouth and she spluttered, *Oh... Well... She's...* Her fingers fished for the loose strands. *She's been looked after... Someone's looking after her... At home... A nurse... A nurse came in a car.* Mister pushed his hands in his pockets, felt the waist band of his jeans irritate his skin and nodded. He looked out over the ocean, sniffed the air and said, *I better get going.* He turned and walked away from her. Sand blew, sizzled against his jeans and stung his bare ankles. He knew there was no nurse in a car. He would have seen the tracks.

Flour fed weavels. Cheese grew mold. Sausages went rancid. Butter turned bad. Custard curdled and fruit fermented. Mumma clenched her teeth and watched the sun rise with Lola tearing at her bloodied nipples. She inhaled through flared nostrils and decided it was time to wash her clothes. She looked down at her terry toweling dressing gown, at the smears and splatters and splodges staining her sleeves and was suddenly repulsed by the sour stink of her spoiled milk and by the bite of vomit. It was time to wash her clothes, change her sheets and go shopping.

Mumma grew into love. At first her feelings threatened to asphyxiate, they were that big and boundless and unpredictable. She teetered on the edge, wavered between adoration and desperation, had fantasies of kicking off her shoes and running on the sand—run, run, running away from the damp cottage, from her sad collection of things, run, run, running away from the red-faced, squalling infant. She was terrified of the baby dying and yet she frequently dreamt up a tiny cold corpse. She horrified herself with her imaginings. They made her burn with shame.

When she was feeling particularly insecure, Mumma learned to take Lola Belle into town. The walk made for quite an excursion and she learned to be well prepared with cut sandwiches, buttered scones, fruitcake and a big flask of cordial.

In town, pushing the navy pram with its big shiny-spoked wheels made her feel proud. When Lola grizzled in front of the other people on the footpath, Mumma would bend down and coo at her, offering her a finger to suckle, stroking her fine hair or kissing her forehead. She would say, *There, there, little dumpling* and feel pleased with herself. It was like being in primary school and acting out a little play. She was in the starring role —playing the mother —and her audience of strangers tilted their heads, clicked their tongues, smiled and appreciated the performance.

After some weeks, Mumma grew into a love that was reliable and started to feel good about things. Baby Lola had unfolded. Mumma watched her filling out and thought she was just like dough rising under a tea towel in the sun. Mumma thanked heavens the little love was a good feeder. The breast solved all problems. It kept Lola quiet, it soothed and lulled and Mumma fancied it was a warm and creamy message of love. It was a precious thing to feed. It felt nice, like a million moths let loose in her stomach, fluttering against her insides, tickling and shuddering, moving down. Mumma's own hunger was insatiable. She went through bottles of milk, through

loaves of bread and butter, through cartons of eggs and blocks of cheese. At eight weeks Lola was more predictable in her sleep habits. While she dozed in a pocket of sunlight, Mumma made gingerbread love hearts, just like the old days.

Mister had crumbs caught in the wisps of his beard. Mumma brushed his hair forward with her black comb and smelt a whiff of his private grease and the ginger on his breath. She took the scissors in hand and said, *Now keep still or your skin will catch.*

Mister looked up at the silver blades as they slid across his forehead. Hair rained, again and again. Mumma stood back. His brow was pale and baby-soft where his fringe had hung. She had a sudden urge to kiss that new skin the way she would kiss the pink soles of Lola's feet, but she picked up her comb instead. She cut carefully around the side of his head, blowing gently when the hair caught in the cup of his ear or at the collar of his shirt. She moved around to the back of his head and lost herself in the comb and stroke, comb and stroke. She asked, *Are you hungry? For more gingerbread?*

Mister shook his head and came out in goose bumps. Mumma had dredged up dandruff and dirt and sand and scabs. She snip, snipped away at his neck, running the blades across the ridge of spine, noticing the variation in skin tone, the splatterings of freckles and moles, the angry scars of pimples. She finished the job and brushed off her hands. *There. All done.*

Mister stood up and felt at his head. He thanked her for the trouble.

*It was a pleasure, Mister, but you'd better get on now. I have to get this hair cleaned up and feed my Lola.*

Mister's skin prickled. *It's been a while. Will I see the baby again one day?*



Mumma leant on the broom and said, *Next time.*

Baby Lola was lying in her basinet with her nappy off, kicking her legs, taking fistfuls of air and gurgling on spit. Mumma was bending over planting a row of tomato seedlings. Mister came round the corner and saw that generous arse. He said, *I came to give you these.*

Mumma turned and started at the two limp rabbits. She wiped her hands and swallowed. Blood dripped through blunt teeth. *I won't know what to do with them.*

Mister nodded and pulled a knife from his belt.

Mumma breathed, *This is my baby. She is Lola Belle. Say hello to our neighbour Mister. He drove us home from the hospital.*

Mister clenched his knife and eyed the puckered thing. He stood over the baby and blocked out the sun. A brilliant splat of rabbit blood hit Lola's forehead and ran a sticky course between her eyebrows, damming at the dip before nose, suspended by a moment and then separated by the tiny pulse of the baby's heartbeat. The bulb of rabbit blood had broken and bled into the baby's eyes. Baby Lola blink blinked and fell still.

Blood stained Lolly's world. Her eyes rolled red. It seemed as if the baby was weeping blood and Mumma fussed and dabbed with the corner of her sleeve. Meanwhile Mister hacked through an artery and the sweet metal smell hung low on the morning air.

Mumma smacked her greasy lips and chewed on bacon rind. She had a gut full of rabbit stew. Indigestion came in bursts and Mumma had to unzip her pants. She hoped the casserole hadn't left Mister and Ernest in the same state. Perhaps she would

soon be ready to eat with them again, to share her precious pink Lola with others. Mumma fixed herself a drink of bicarb to help with the wind and jotted down her self-prescribed medication in her record, just under yesterday's entry of vaseline on chafed nipples and stewed prunes (not necessarily a medication, but in that case taken to aid with the constipation). Mumma put away her important documents and went to check on the baby. In the centre of her white cot, Lola lay with her face to the ceiling. *Hello little love.* Mumma bent over the railing and kissed her with lunch on her lips. *You are sweet enough to eat.* She licked the tiny face and saw Lola's eyes roll. *You are my pudding. My dessert. My little lolly.* Mumma leant in close and peered right into those baby-blue eyes. *Lolly?* Mumma quavered. *Lolly, do you see me?* Lolly bubbled and popped her toes in her mouth. She formed a perfect, closed ring. No beginning, no end.

Mumma was sure Lolly was blind, despite Doctor Warren's assurance. He examined her again and again, according to Mumma's wishes, but each time lay his instruments back on the table and said,

*There is no medical evidence to suggest blindness or vision impairment. As far as I can make out she is fixing and following sufficiently —perhaps there is some laziness on the infant's part.*

Mumma made him note his findings in a little leather bound book she had bought to record Lolly's progress. Each time he wrote her weight and measurements, followed by: *Lola Belle Wright in fine health, despite mother's anxiety.* Mumma wondered if she should seek a second opinion, take a trip and seek a specialist in Adelaide. She asked Mister what he thought. Mister breathed and let the words come. *Time will tell,* he said and smiled at the development of his own abilities.

On the morning when Lola Belle ate her first spoon of farex, Mumma had invited Mister for breakfast. She sat him at the head of the table and presented a plate of bacon, French toast and grilled tomatoes. She hovered around him, topping up his tea, offering salt, pepper and a freshly pressed napkin and he ate nervously, his eyes shifting as she flitted behind him. He said, *Aren't you eating?*

She said, *I had porridge at six* and paused and then added, *Actually, I asked you over in the hope that you would help me with a favour.*

Mister washed a mouthful down with tea and knew after such a spread he was obliged to say yes.

*I was wondering if you could take some photographs of me feeding my Lola.*

Mister was relieved. He rubbed his chin and said, *I'm no expert with a camera.*

Mumma passed him an orange cut into four neat segments and smiled. *That's no matter. I'll show you.*

Mumma excused herself for a moment and squeezed a few squirts of breast milk into the bowl of farex. She stirred out the lumps and found the smell pleasant and familiar. She wondered if her mother had used the same brand when her brothers were young. She read the ingredients on the side of the packet. *Rosemary extract*, she mouthed. *Rosemary for remembrance. That's nice. Little Lola will remember this meal.*

Mumma arranged Lola in the armchair, propped and bolstered with pillows. She showed Mister what to do with the camera, positioned him just to her right and said, *Now you just shoot as things progress. There are twenty-four shots, so you shouldn't miss a thing.*

Mumma clicked her fingers to get Lola's attention and raised the first spoonful. Lolly went cross-eyed but Mumma was sure she was aware of the spoon as she started to whimper and reach. She proceeded to flail and flap, whacked the spoon and sent the farex splattering. Mister clicked on the moment, wound the film on and Mumma said, *Not yet, Mister. Wait until she's eating.* Mumma wiped the baby with a flannel and tried again. This time she got the spoon in the mouth. Lola seemed shocked. Her eyes bulged and her brow creased. She held the food on her tongue for a moment, then dribbled it over her bottom lip. Mumma caught the drips and Mister clicked again.

*Hold on!* Mumma said over her shoulder. *She hasn't swallowed yet.*

Mister sighed and sunk on his hip. *What's wrong with her?*

Mumma looked worried. She shoved another spoonful into her daughter's mouth, scraped her chin and persisted. *I don't know.*

Mister snuck a third shot and said, *What're you giving her? Maybe she doesn't like it.*

*Farex.* Mumma snapped. *It's rice cereal. It's what they prescribe.*

Mister shrugged and shot a couple more photographs. When he zoomed in on Mumma he could see she was sweating. It made the hair at her temples frizz.

*Come on little Lolly,* Mumma coaxed with a laden spoon. *Big open mouth.*

Lola put her head forward, closed her eyes, sneezed into the spoon and sent the cereal spraying. Mumma fussed with a tea towel and Mister kept snapping.

He looked up from behind the lens. *Look,* he pointed. *She's reckons that's funny.*

Mumma drew breath and beamed. *Take a photo now, Mister. Take a photo now!* She worked the spoon into the gummy smile and Mister finished off the film.

At eight months Lolly had teeth tearing through gum. She was hoarse from all the howling. When she cried out Mumma offered a rusk, vanilla icecream or a chicken bone, but Lolly soon grew tired of gnawing on gristle and cried for something else. Mumma offered frozen banana, but it was too cold and slippery for tiny hands. She rubbed Ernest's malt whisky into the angry gums and finally resorted to her own flesh. Lola chewed Mumma's nipples until they cracked and bled. Mumma thought of precious things to block out the pain. She watched her daughter's eyes rolling in her head, always moving, and she wondered if the child ever paused to see, ever offered a sign of sight. Mumma concentrated on sending a message through her blood to Lola's mouth. *This message tastes of love, little Lolly. Hold me in your eyes and see who I am.*

Months later when Lolly could crawl she would bump into things, tumble down stairs, slop through puddles, head butt walls. Mumma hovered and cleared a path, but Lolly was unpredictable. If Mumma moved a chair, Lolly would bump into the table, if she shoved aside the washing basket Lolly would back into the linen cupboard. Mumma worried that she had a problem with her eyes. She pulled at her lips. *Could she be blind?*

Doctor Warren agreed to see her. Again. *You know what my diagnosis will be, Margaret.*

Mumma pleaded into the phone. *But you haven't seen her since she's started crawling.*

Doctor Warren watched the child knock her way around his office. He leant back in his chair. *As I have assured you, Margaret, there is no medical evidence to support your theory that Lola is blind. She may have some laziness in her right eye, but these things tend to correct themselves. If anything, I believe her to be cunning. She has learned that the quickest way from A to B is in a straight line, despite the presence of obstacles and she has learnt that if practical, you will remove those obstacles, otherwise she will be picked up, coddled and fed.* Doctor Warren had had enough for today. He was running over time. He snatched Mumma's book and wrote: *No blindness. Mother needs to relinquish her grasp.*

Mumma read the entry over and over with her throat knotting. She would make scones when she got home. Scones smothered with butter.

*Never trust the white coats,* said Ernest, jiggling the baby on his knee. *You trust your woman's intuition, Margaret. That's your gift.*

Mumma smiled and watched Lola giggle and spew. Woman's intuition. Did she have that?

*If I had ever seen a Doctor about me legs I know what they would've said.* Ernest covered Lola's ears with his hands. *Get up and walk, you old bastard. I tell you what, Margaret. I don't want to walk. I'm tired of walking. After Jean shot through I spent twelve years raising my son. The day she left I wanted to stop moving right there and then. But I kept on. I kept on 'cause I knew one day he'd be fit to look after me. End of story.*

Mumma scooped Lola into her arms and hooked her basket onto her free arm. She said her goodbyes and made for home. *Never trust the white coats.* She was

confused. Doctors knew. Her father always knew when she was sick. He knew before she did. He knew when she was bleeding. He knew when the blood stopped. He knew that her engagement would amount to nothing as the man with the dark hair was unstable. Sick. In the head. The worst place to be sick. Simply the worst. Worse than being sick with women's private matters.

Mister ran up the path to her door. He was soaked to the skin as the weather had turned and chilled him blue. He said, *Sorry Missus Margie*. He had taken to calling her that. *I took a dumping out at sea. I didn't lose your fish, but*. He passed her the bucket and retreated into the rain.

Mumma yelled out, *Come inside and wait for it to pass. You'll get as sick as a dog in those wet clothes*. Water ran in rivers against his skin onto the kitchen floor. Cotton clung to muscle. He was growing under those clothes, Mumma noticed. She wondered if she could attribute it to her cooking. Their life was nothing but bread and butter before she came along.

*You would fit into my gardening clothes, Mister. They are folded on the chair by my bed. There is a towel on the dresser. Get dried off and I'll make us a snack.*

Mister nodded and found her room.

He had not been this far into her house before. Their exchanges had happened only in the kitchen or the garden. Mister liked the smell of a woman's room. He pulled off his wet socks and looked over all the ornaments and trinkets, delicate women's things. Useless. Different. Fascinating. He longed to get his hands in it all, to yank open the drawers and explore their contents, to pull back the blankets on the bed and find evidence of her sleeping, to touch her worn clothes, turn her underwear inside out, finger the seams where she had sweated, but she was waiting in the next

room with food. Mister rolled his wet strides down his legs, peeled his wet underpants from his buttocks. Naked from the waist down, he felt the woman's smell touch him, inflate him. It was the wrong time for this to be happening, right here in her room. He walked around the bed for the towel and there was the baby on the floor, examining his sock. Lola touched wet wool to her tongue, recoiled and looked up at him. Her baby-blue eyes were open and still. He imagined the whiteness of his private skin shocking and he lunged for the towel to cover himself.

Lola Belle, the dead man's child. She gave him the creeps with those wandering eyes. He understood Mumma's concern for her sight; she did bump into things and the way those eyeballs scrolled certainly was not normal. But sometimes, when he was alone with her, she seemed to be seeing him. It was like those paintings he'd learnt about a while back in school. Everywhere he went the eyes seemed to follow. He wondered about the dead man's ghost. Maybe it rested with the child. Perhaps it could read his thoughts. Perhaps it had noticed the way he loitered, the way he inhaled when Mumma was around. Perhaps it had seen him doubled over in the boat with his fist around his thing. Mister pondered the times before Mumma. There were feelings, yes, but nothing so desperate as now. The urges were so strong they could tear flesh and break bones. Lola flung his sock towards the door, screwed up her face and screamed out. Mister left the room thinking, *There she goes again, listening in on me.*

Mister had brewed a batch of stout in Mumma's back shed. The smell of yeast growing had been a comfort to her. He put three bottles in Mumma's freezer and said, *Give them half an hour. Then will you try it?*

Mumma agreed. The fruits of people's labour were precious things. It was a gift, like a jar of jam or preserves, a cake to commemorate a birthday, a handful of home



grown herbs, a basket of corn, a carton of brown eggs, a loaf of home cooked bread, a couple of fresh fish. She looked forward to the stout. Grandpa Collins used to brew beer and the smell of molasses was delicious. Mumma rinsed a milk bottle with boiling water and excused herself for a moment. She said, *The stout might flavour my milk and Lola will want custard before bed. I'll empty myself and be back shortly for a drink.*

Mister blinked after her and pondered what she had said. He had never heard of a woman milking herself and he had certainly never heard of custard made with human milk. He wondered if it was common practice. The thought made his throat constrict.

While Lola Belle slept, they sat on the front verandah looking down over the low scrub to the sea. Mister tilted a glass and poured Mumma the first stout. It was thick and dark and topped with a cream of golden foam. Mumma sipped and tasted. *Oh that's very good. Very good. A most excellent sweet brew.*

Mister picked up the second glass and glanced at her. She was so thankful for all he did, so encouraging and enthusiastic. It confused and embarrassed him. Mumma took two big gulps, paused for a breath and emptied her glass. *I've room for another,* she said. *Stout's ever so good for you.*

The sun sunk and flushed everything pink. The ocean dazzled. Two pelicans soared on the evening air and wrens tittered in the lavender bush. Mumma's eyes smarted with all the beauty. She rubbed her forearms, smoothing the fair hair and wondered if she were beautiful to Mister. At moments like this she felt beautiful, like she swelled and glowed with all the goodness and happiness in the world. She let her hair loose and combed it roughly with her hands. She said, *Do you want to stay for an early tea?*

In her kitchen Mumma was woozy on her feet. She burped and giggled as she filled a saucepan with potatoes and water and turned on the hotplate. She broke up half a loaf of bread, cut up some cheese and some pickled onions and went back outside.

*Mind the bread. It got burnt on the bottom. If I were rich the first thing I'd buy would be a good oven with a consistent element.*

Mister crunched on an onion. *You'd do all right on your Nan's inheritance. Can't you save up?*

Mumma picked at the bread. *I get by, but I couldn't afford a new oven. Not the one I want. The very latest.*

Mister looked out to sea and considered something. He took a sip of stout and said, *Surely your husband left you with some money.*

Mumma swallowed awkwardly, feeling the sharp edge of crust move down her throat. A moment passed. *Well, no. My husband had no money. He was going to be an artist and that takes time.* The truth hurt. Looking at his paintings hurt. She didn't understand the complexity of strokes and she knew she would never understand him.

Mister reached for the cheese. *I never knew no one who was an artist.*

The third bottle of stout was half empty. Mister and Mumma privately felt quite affected. Mumma had managed to distract herself from the bad memory by boiling and mashing potatoes, grilling chops and frying halved tomatoes. Mister had sat so long on the hard wood chair he had lost sensation in his legs. He wished he could stay all night here on Mumma's verandah, watching the night move over the land and ocean, knowing she was right inside, naked under her flannelette sheets.

*Here you go, Mister.* She slipped a plate of food under his nose. He examined the pile of white, whipped mash, a dob of butter melting on top, the neat lamb chops,

perfectly browned and sweating pink juice, the tomatoes soft red in their wrinkled skins, sprinkled with black pepper and thyme and dusted with salt. She had done it all for him. He watched her lick grease from her knife and the hunger rose from the pit of his guts sending him into such a spin that he had to grip the edge of the table to stop from toppling.

Mumma was dozy and relaxed from the stout and soothed by her belly-full of hot food. She chewed on a chop bone and felt a surge of happiness. *Do you like me, Mister?*

He stopped licking his fingers, wiped them on his pants and wondered if this was some kind of trick. *Yes.* He couldn't meet her eyes. He hesitated. *Do you like me?*

Mumma laughed with strings of meat on her tongue. *You know I like you. You are my only friend 'round these parts.*

*Am I too young?*

*For what?*

Mister took a gulp of stout for courage and sat forward in his seat. *Do I disrespect your passed husband?*

Mumma eyed him. *I don't know. Do you?*

Mister stood up and wavered on his numb legs. *I should probably get going—make sure Dad's all right.*

Mumma said, *It's rude to leave before pudding* and he found the seat of his chair with a thud.

So Mumma kissed Mister for the first time with greasy lips, smelling of chops, while a self-saucing lemon pudding cooked in a moderate oven. Mister had not kissed anyone before, but the alcohol dulled his self-consciousness and he received her lips, tongue, cheeks and chin with his mouth gaping and he kept his nervous hands pushed

firmly into his groin. Mumma breathed into his face, her cheeks flushed, her eyes half closed.

*So how old are you, Mister?*

Mister pulled at the crotch of his pants and squirmed in his seat.

*Sweet sixteen?* she giggled and went for him with her teeth. Inside the house baby Lola stirred. Mister pulled back and Mumma whispered, *She'll be all right.* The baby took two breaths and scream, scream, screamed.

There was shit everywhere. Mister had never seen so much. Mustard yellow shit, covering the baby's buttocks and thighs, oozing in the folds between her legs up onto her stomach. Mumma tossed the dirty nappy into a bucket and took Lola outside.

*There's nothing for this job but the hose.*

Mister followed after her retching on the smell, feeling the beginnings of a headache behind his eyes. Mumma said over her shoulder,

*The sun heats the hose up enough for the water not to be too much of a shock.*

Mister nodded, leant against the Hills hoist for support and watched her squirt shit off the screaming baby. He said,

*I really should get back. Me Dad'll need feeding and toileting.*

Mumma clicked her tongue and tilted her head. *But what about the pudding?*

Mister tightened his shoe laces, thought of that custard and said quickly, *I can't stomach another bite just now.*

Mumma watched his back disappear into the night. She rested Lola against her shins and sprayed the hose after him. *I want fish tomorrow, Mister.*

Mumma sat on the floor with Lola, feeding her custard with one hand and with the other scooping at her own dessert. She watched the little love's eyes wobble as she squelched her chubby fingers in her custard. Mumma ate two serves of pudding and

drew love hearts in the lemon sauce with the tip of her spoon. She was all warm and squishy with the memory of the kiss, *Just like with your Daddy*, she thought and tweaked the tiny toes in turn. *Except Mister is not unstable. He is as sound and solid and rock.* Lola hiccupped and burped up sick. *Keep your dinner in, little Lolly.* Mumma exposed Lola's silken skin and blew a wet raspberry. *Keep your dinner in your tummy, where it belongs.*

*You're spending a lot of time with Margaret.* Ernest was eating bread and butter and tea at the kitchen table. *She still paying you?*

Mister let the door bang behind him. *She cooked me chops.*

*Is that right?*

*And mash and tomatoes and pudding.*

*You been drinking?*

*No.*

*Now you listen to me. You keep your hands off her. You don't want to go getting involved with a woman with another man's baby.*

Mister lunged at his father suddenly. The old man recoiled. Mister grabbed at the tea cup and panted, *Shall I get you another cup?*

Ernest blinked slowly, then nodded. The air around his son was hot and salty.

Mister did not come around for some days. Mumma sifted flour and wondered what it meant. She cooked and buttered a batch of pikelets, put Lola in the pram and set off up the track. A willy wagtail hopped and fluttered alongside them, piping a shrill call and flashing its fan tail. Lola pulled herself up and put her face to the wind, her dark hair lifting and pulling towards the sea. She clapped her hands and bounced

on her bottom, reaching out for the bird song. Mumma was somewhere else, thinking of other things. She parked the pram outside Ernest's kitchen door, took the pikelets in one hand, swung Lola on her hip with the other and let herself in.

Ernest was standing on a chair, on the table, with his head and shoulders through a trapdoor into the ceiling. He was wearing pyjama shorts and Mumma looked at his pale, wasted legs for some moments. Eventually she called out and Ernest jumped in his skin and pulled his head down.

*Jesus Christ! How long have you been there?*

Mumma put the pikelets on the table. *Not long.* She shifted Lola on to her other hip and gave the leg of the chair a wobble.

Ernest swiped at her arm. *What're you doing, Missus! You want me to fall to my death?*

Mumma squinted up at him. *It's not very stable. You shouldn't be doing that. That's a job for a young man.*

Ernest squatted on the chair, lowered himself onto the table and slid to the floor. *Do you see a young man around here?*

Mumma pulled back the foil and took herself a pikelet. *He's not here?* Butter collected in the corners of her mouth.

*No.* Ernest sandwiched two pikelets together and forced them into his mouth. He struggled with the mouthful and said finally, *I thought he'd be with you.*

Baby Lola licked at her mother's mouth, whingeing and whining like a hungry puppy. Mumma pushed her away, preoccupied. She stared at Ernest for a moment, then asked, *Do you have any jam? These pikelets taste a little bland.*

They had sweet tea from the pot Ernest saved for best and they sipped in silence. Lola Belle crawled around the kitchen floor popping bits of stuff in her

mouth: crumbs, dirt, bark and fluff. Mumma let her be. She was just exploring, after all. Ernest said, *I shouldn't worry about the boy, Margaret. He had the rifle with him. Probably just gone out rabbiting.*

Mumma licked her index finger, dipped it in the sugar bowl and touched it to her tongue. *I would have thought he'd tell me first.*

Ernest exhaled, nostrils flaring. *And why's that?*

Mumma bit her tongue.

*Did he have work owing?*

Silence.

*Did you need something done around the house, Margaret?*

Mumma stared at the dirty timber floor where Lola picked at a nail. *No. We have become friends. That's all.*

Ernest ran his palm against his jaw. *Now see here, Missus. The boy is only seventeen and can't be taking up with a woman and child.*

Mumma gasped, doubled over herself and cried, *I am not a woman! I am not!*

Ernest was startled by the outburst, by the way she churned up the air. He caught a whiff of her. She smelt ripe like cheese, active like soured milk. He drummed his fists on his thighs and barked, *You are a married woman with a baby and to my knowledge a husband not yet cold in the grave.*

Mumma sprung to her feet, snatched her plate, tipped the remaining pikelets on the floor and scooped Lola under her arm. She shook her left hand at him, squealed, *There's no ring on this finger* yanked open the door and slammed it behind her.

Ernest let the air settle. He shook his head, muttered, *Out of control. All of them. Every one I've ever known. Out of control* and ate three pikelets off the floor.

Mister had been wandering the scrub for three days. He was weak, exhausted, delirious. Last night he had seen his mother lurking on the perimeter of light cast by his camp fire. He had sighted the vision in his rifle and woken with his gun loaded across his chest. Mister looked at the blood on his hands and felt something so strong it made his eyes smart. He had seven rabbits tied at the necks with a length of rope. The eighth was female and fat. He cut it open from vagina to sternum and there were six writhing kittens inside. He threw the whole carcass into the scrub, wiped his hands in the dirt and made for Mumma's house.

Mumma stood in the doorway with Lola hugging at her shins. The sun was behind Mister so all she could see was his silhouette in flat black. She could see that he had a bunch of dead rabbits and a rifle slung over his shoulder. She picked up Lola and tucked the child's head under her chin. Mister said, *I'm dirty. Will you let me clean?*

Lola sprung tears. Mumma stood aside and let him pass. He left the dead rabbits on the front door step and Mumma closed the door on the blood.

The bath water was pink. Mister lay with his eyes to the ceiling and counted spots of mould. He heard Mumma's footsteps at the door. She said, *Why did you run off?* and opened the door just a crack.

He wiped his nose on the back of his hand. *No reason. Just rabbiting. Thought you could do another casserole.*

Mumma opened the door and he sat up and covered himself.

She handed him a glass of stout and said, *I don't need seven rabbits for a casserole. It's a waste of life.*

He downed half a glass and burped. *So freeze them.*



He knew she was watching him. He could feel it. It made his skin hot despite the cooling bath water. He felt better in her company. She made his mind still and his body slack. But he was shy in his pale boy's skin, sprouting patches of wire hair and he certainly didn't want to shock her with his bent thing and his lop-sided balls. Mumma stepped closer.

*There is blood on your back.*

Mister twisted from side to side, straining to see.

*Here,* She rolled up the sleeves of her blouse and took the soap in hand. *Let me get at it.* She ran the edge of the soap across his ribs and along his spine, grating a wooden tune and leaving a slick of suds. She took the flannel from the basin, rinsed it in the bath water, wrung it and scrubbed him down. She cupped water in her hands and let it trickle over his neck and shoulders, down his back, his chest, his arms. Grey water dripped from his earlobes and elbows. Mumma stood up, knees and elbows clicking and pulled a towel from the door knob. She said, *You're cleansed now, Mister. Hop out before you're pickled.*

He followed her wrapped in the towel like a little boy, hair hanging in wet strings, fingers and toes wrinkled, eyes dark. She opened her wardrobe, shuffled clothes on hangers and found a roll neck jumper. *You can wear this.*

Mister slid his arms into her garment and pulled it over her head. Under wool it was dark. He could smell her at the armpits, feel where her breasts had been. He worked his head through the neck hole, found the afternoon light and her, gawking. His wet towel had fallen away to make a crescent at his feet. The jumper came only to his navel. Mumma blinked.

*I have not seen one of them before.*

Mister's penis stuck out on the horizontal. He bit at his lips and panted, *How did the seed get sown, then?*

She looked sideways and said, *So you know how babies are made.* Mumma sat on the bed, fanned her skirt and waited. Mister took several breaths and sat next to her. He took a fistful of her skirt, pawed clumsily at her hem and when she didn't protest he climbed on top of her. He lowered his weight ever so slowly and felt himself sink into her warmth. She could feel the quickening of his pulse shuddering through his body and the beginnings of a thrust in his pelvis. She said, *Ease up, Mister. Passion's all in the breathing and the stomach.* But a few blinks later he was gone from his face and the moment had happened all over her best nylon skirt.

Mumma knew she wouldn't see Mister for some days after that Sunday afternoon. She suspected that the event had become a bad memory for him and decided not to mention it again. The stuff came out of her best skirt with no fuss nor bother. There was no scrubbing like with the mulberry stains.

Mumma had ruined a good blouse and mottled Lola's scalp and forehead. The old tree was laden with mulberries and on a hot afternoon Mumma enjoyed working through the canopy with her arm threaded through the handle of a small bucket, shoo shooing the silvereyes away from the fruit. Lola crawled around the trunk in the shade, eating fallen berries, bugs and beetles, gnawing on wood and rock, touching her tongue to tufts of grass, bird shit and feathers. Sometimes Mumma let a mulberry go just above Lola's head. The blood-red splat of juice coursed down the child's brow.

One day amongst the mulberries, Mumma thought of him, her hidden thing. She wondered where he was, what he was doing, whether he would like this life here,

with her and his baby Lola Belle. Juice had stained her hands and spiralled her forearms. Mumma admired the rich red and thought it the colour of life itself. An artist would surely appreciate that. Mulberry juice, the blue ocean, yellow lemons, Lola's black hair. With her head in the sky, Mumma wished, just for a moment, he could see it all.

Mister was given a welder by Uncle Eric for the job done on his fence. Uncle Eric said that his shakes were too bad to use the welder any more, that Mister, being in the prime of youth, would put it to better use. He thanked Mister for the excellent job, for being such a good boy and squeezed him in close. Mister wondered if Uncle Eric had seen him lingering in the shadows down at the boat shed that clear day last Autumn. He wondered if Uncle Eric and Mr Walker met down there for business often, or if the things he had seen were an isolated incident. Mister knew that stuff was sick, that his father wouldn't hesitate with the rifle, but Mister couldn't help the hardness. Surely it was beyond his control. Mister concentrated on the memory of Missus Margie, put the welder on the back seat of the FJ and took off in a whirl of dust.

Mister developed a passion for metal work. After making a range of practical things—a gate, a small trailer, a barbecue plate complete with grill—he closed his eyes and thought about a gift for Margie. He felt a tickle on his forearm. When he opened his eyes he saw an ant.

*Insect Boy loves insects. Insect Boy is the King-of-the-ants.*

Mister squashed the creature into his skin and started work.

Mister took to drinking home brewed stout and welding steel ants. His overalls became dotted with burnt holes. He had a spattering of scars where sparks left their

mark. He lifted the scabs after a day or so with a ragged fingernail. Such pink, baby flesh made him agitated and aroused all at once.

The colony of steel ants grew and grew. Mister fastened them to the ceiling and along the rafters. He toyed with his tools and considered the queen.

On Christmas Eve Mumma cooked from dawn until dusk —a great effort with Lolly wiggling along the floor at her feet. Mumma was high on all the activity, drunk on the smells of baking. She had dough under her fingernails, flour dusting her skin, butter in her pores, sugar on her cheeks. Lola liked to sit by her ankles, grab at her calves and leave wet bite marks in her skin. *Don't eat your Mumma, little Lolly. Don't eat your Mumma. Here.* Mumma rolled raw biscuit dough into a ball and popped it in the child's mouth. *Mmm mmm. Sweet love.* Lola's hunger pleased Mumma. She would not have wanted a fussy baby that needed coaxing. Lolly tried everything. Anything. Mumma laughed as her daughter tested egg shell.

Mumma let Lola suckle even though she didn't appear truly hungry. It was Christmas Eve, warm and still and they lay on the bed in the darkness. Mumma had her nightie unbuttoned and Lola explored her, taking mouthfuls of the flesh at her hips and abdomen. Mumma closed her eyes and felt the pull of her skin. Since Lola's birth, she had grown and stretched. She was becoming pleasantly plump. Her increasing corpulence reminded her of her own mother, how her curves and rolls nicely filled out a frock. She made clothes come alive. Mumma remembered the apron strings tied between two great folds of flesh. She was a pudding hung in calico, a stick of fritz tied at the middle with white string, an Edam cheese ready for waxing. Under her clothes Mother's body was a hidden thing. Mumma could not remember seeing it naked. She assumed her father had at some stage, but after little Clive was

born and Mother's legs thickened to support the rising dough at her abdomen, Father moved into the spare room. He suggested support hose to hold herself together and speculated that she had some kind of condition—possibly some malfunctioning gland—but that area of medicine was of little interest to him.

*Perhaps, he had remarked one day as she fried him his eggs, You are too indulgent and mind that you don't over cook my yolks.*

On Christmas morning Mumma presented Lola with Miss Lucy, dressed in a handmade party dress and with a pink ribbon tied around her head. *She is your baby now as I have you. Merry Christmas, my little Lolly lick-stick.*

Lola bit the doll's plastic face, rolled her eyes this way and that and beamed.

*Now chop, chop. We need to get organised for Christmas dinner.*

Mumma sang Christmas carols as she bathed Lola in the laundry tub. Lola lapped at the dirty bath water and nibbled on soap. Mumma sang right through the knock at the door. Lola screamed out and slapped at the water. Mumma stopped her lathering. *What is it, Christmas crackling?*

The tap dripped twice: two perfect crystals of water. Silence.

*Are you hearing things, Roly-Poly Lola?* Mumma rinsed off her rosy daughter, bound her in a towel and grabbed the talcum powder. As she walked through the kitchen rub-a-dub-dubbing Lola, she saw a car reverse out of the driveway, turn and speed off in a whirl of pink dust. Mumma recognised it as the postmaster's vehicle and ran to the door calling after it. Surely it was not regulation to call on Christmas morning. She flung open the door and almost tumbled over the box on her front door step. There was a gift, a card sticky-taped on top. *URGENT DELIVERY: Margaret*

*Wright, North Coast Track via Hillwater Post Office, South Australia.* It was her mother's handwriting.

The box was full of Christmas treats: muscat, crackers, shortbread, hedgehog, rum balls, and white Christmas. Mumma ate a piece of her mother's melt-in-the-mouth Scottish shortbread and felt the sting of tears. She opened the card. *To Margaret and Child. Merry Christmas. From Mother (Grandmother).* She opened the gift. There was a dainty dress for Lola in pale green silk with yellow wattle flowers at the collar, complete with a matching bonnet. For herself there was an Indian blouse and an elastic-waisted skirt with embroidered red cherries at the hem line. Mumma put Lola on the floor, whipped off her nightie and pulled on the skirt. She spun and spun, laughing as the fabric fanned up around her waist, watching the red cherries blur and bleed with the speed. Lola blinked up at her dancing Mumma, drooling and smiling.

*Happy Christmas, Ernest.* Mumma handed over the beef jerky wrapped in red cellophane and the three pots of mulberry jam. She hoped he had forgotten their last run-in and that she could divert his memory with sweetness.

*Good God, Margaret. Did you make this preserve?*

Mumma puffed with pride and said, *I made all of it. Even the jerky.*

Ernest wrestled with the wrapping and said, *These teeth won't be any good for chewing, but I'll sure as Hell give it a sucking.* He thanked her and apologised that he had no gift in return.

*You will appreciate I don't get out much. But the boy was working on something in the shed. You go and check up on him and tell him to pull his finger out. I'm ready for the roast fowl.*

Mumma attended to herself outside of the shed. She shook out her hair, bit blood into her lips and pinched colour into her cheeks. She tucked in her new blouse and straightened her skirt. She smoothed the pad of her thumb over an embroidered cherry and smiled. *Merry Christmas, Mister.*

There was shuffling in the darkness. Metal clanged and dust rose.

*Wait outside, Margie. This is no place for a lady.*

Mumma took two steps back into the bright sun of mid-day. She swung her arms and felt the air move up her skirt, over her bare skin.

*Come along, Mister. The chook is done and your daddy is hungry.*

Mister came out of the shed with his hands behind his back. He was embarrassed. She could tell.

*Here.* He passed her an ant, welded with chicken-wire wings. *It's a queen.* And another. *This one's a worker.*

Mumma accepted the gifts with a curious smile.

Mister swallowed, *They are useless. But I made them. I've always liked ants.* He pulled something from his back pocket. *And this is for Lola.* He spun a rabbit skin hat on his fist. Mumma took it and smelt a stink of death.

Lola would not keep her fur hat on long enough for a photograph so Mumma put it on Miss Lucy and took a shot of her daughter by the doll. She took several shots of Ernest in front of the Christmas spread, one of father and son and one of Mister in the shirt she had made from the old paisley bed spread. She passed the camera to Ernest.

*Take one of Lolly and me.* She stood up straight and smiled.

Ernest waved his hand at Mister. *Go on, boy. You may as well get in on this too.*  
*Move in. Come on. Move in!*

Mister skulked into frame and stared at the lens. Mumma could feel his heat behind her. It made her weak at the knees.

On Christmas evening Ernest insisted on being wheeled down to the beach. Mumma asked him to walk alongside them, but he slurred that the whisky had buckled his legs and he was too tired even to consider the effort. Lola sat on Ernest's lap and dozed into his chest. Mister pushed the wheelchair along the bumpy track with Mumma singing softly at his side. They reached the beach after fifteen minutes and Mister was shining with sweat. The wheelchair hit the sand, instantly bogged and Ernest and Lola fell face forward.

Sunlight tickled the water. Ernest and Lola slept in the warm sand while Mumma followed Mister along the water's edge, swishing her skirt and swinging her hips. The water sparkled with a million stars of dying light, sea lice darted in the shallows, skipped on wet sand and the odd pebble rolled with the push-pull of tide. Mumma caught a whiff of spent alcohol on her breath.

*Mister?*

He looked over his shoulder at her. She was peachy at dusk. She pulled a hair from her mouth.

*I have a feeling for you.* She lifted her blouse, took his hand, and slid it against her stomach, down under the elastic waist of her skirt, under the cotton of her underwear to her secret place. *Moths. Right in here.* She worked his fingers up inside of herself and watched the blood come to his face.

Mister fell asleep Christmas night with her scent on his fingers. It was the sweet-sharp smell of piss, a suggestion of sweat, a private perfume of sea-salt: simultaneously offensive and intriguing, repulsive and arousing. He inhaled a long, slow, deep breath. She was intoxicating. She was making him crazy with her female



ways. He wanted her, quite desperately, quite painfully, all of the time. He did not see himself as entering into some kind of partnership, as forging a life together, making a family. He just wanted to be around her, to shadow her, to breathe her, to taste, smell and feel her.

Ernest was awake in the next room. He was thinking about his son. He had watched him all day with the woman and had seen that he was quite clearly sick with lust. Ernest counted on his fingers how many months until his son's eighteenth birthday. It was not many. Too few, in fact. It was unrealistic for him to deny his son the rights of manhood. If the inevitable was to happen, he wanted it to be legal and for his own needs to be accommodated. The truth was that Margaret was close by, close enough to attend to him with the odd steak 'n' kidney pie and bottle of whisky. His son would not only have his natural male urges satisfied, but he would still be around to look after the place. Ernest inhaled the night air and felt his skin prickle. It would not be easy to trust another woman.

Mumma sent a note to her mother via Aunt Nancy as she did not want to upset her father. She received no reply from Mother, but Aunt Nancy wrote to assure her that the letter was passed on and that she should appreciate how difficult the situation was. Mumma decided the hurt was to be a hidden thing and that she was grown up enough to share her beautiful Lola, if only through a selection of photographs with scant commentary. She sent a picture of Lola in the green silk dress with the matching bonnet shading her roaming eyes, her little fists holding chicken drumsticks, Miss Lucy alongside in the rabbit skin hat and wrote on the back in lead pencil: *Lola Belle on Christmas Day. 1969*. Mumma pictured her mother behind the locked bathroom door, pressing the photograph to her chest, weeping for the daughter she had lost and

the grand-daughter she would never know. It helped Mumma to believe that she was missed, helped with the hurt and the stomach aches and the cramps and the constipation. When she felt particularly blue Mumma pulled on the skirt her mother had sent her for Christmas and wrote in her record: *Cherry tonic for melancholy*. She knew it was a liberty, that the skirt was not a medication, but somehow it made her feel better.

\*

This was the day. Mister shaved the fluff from his jaw line, gargled salt water, dressed in his dad's only suit, folding the cuffs and sleeves, slicked his hair with a little vaseline and polished his shoes with dubbin. He woke Ernest at eight o'clock and hauled him into his wheelchair.

Ernest moaned, *What about breakfast?* and shoved his teeth in.

Mister focused hard on each task and was silent.

*Margaret got bread?*

Mister laced his dad's shoes and shrugged. He combed the old man's hair, put a handkerchief in his shirt pocket and opened the front door. Ernest clicked his fingers and said, *Before we go, there's a paper bag on my bed. It's something for your missus.* Minutes later they were on the track to Mumma's cottage. The wheelchair banged and rattled in the boot of the car. Ernest sucked on his dentures, hugged the parcel and grimaced.

*How long will you be out, boy?*

Mister sniffed and considered the question. *As long as it takes.*

Mumma soaked in the bath for almost half an hour, long enough for the water to go grey with soap scum. She lay back and let her ears fill with bath water. This was the right thing to do. She was sure. It would be good for Lolly to have a Father. Mumma rubbed the corner of the soap into her navel. She wished that things were slightly different. She wished that Mister had got the proposal right, had knelt, kissed her shins and feet, cupped her hands in his and whispered his love. Instead, there was a little blood on the sheets and Mumma had said, *If things are to continue this way you should probably consider me your wife*. She wished she had enough money for an ivory satin dress with pearl beading at the bodice, a French lace veil, cream gloves with mother-of-pearl buttons, heeled sandals, a bouquet of white rosebuds and daphne, a dainty frock for Lola, a dark suit for Mister, a church with real wooden pews, her brothers with lambs on leashes and a wedding cake made by her mother with thick marzipan icing and sugared violets.

Mumma dried herself and rubbed rose oil and glycerine into her skin, paying particular attention to her rough elbows and heels. She dabbed more scent behind her ears, between her breasts and at her ankles. Mumma had mended her best bra and bought herself a new pair of skin-coloured support hose, just like those her mother wore to keep herself together. She put her underwear on last to keep her stockings neat at the crotch. Outside the morning was blazing off the ocean. Bees hummed in the plumbago and birds tittered. Mumma zipped herself into pale yellow and thought she was as sunny as this new day; her wedding day.

She was waiting on the doorstep with Lola on her hip when Mister and Ernest drove up the driveway. Lola clutched at her bodice and nudged at her breasts. Mumma bit her lip. Mister got out of the car, lifted the wheelchair from the boot, opened the passenger door and waited for Ernest to slide and fall into his seat. The

wheelchair grated rock and whined as he pushed his dad towards the front door. Mumma could not meet Mister's eyes. Instead, she shifted Lola to her other hip and asked, *Are you sure you'll be all right with her, Ernest? Your legs look stiff this morning.*

Ernest turned to his son, smacked his hands away from the wheel chair and grinned. *Margie. I raised the boy on my own. It may be unnatural, but I am well equipped.*

Mumma did not look convinced. Ernest hauled himself to his feet and shuffled towards her swinging the brown paper bag at his side. *You got any bread 'n' butter, Margaret? I'll need something if I'm to watch over the baby.* He passed her the bag and said, *There was no time to have it cleaned. Now come on boy. Get that bloody wheelchair out of Margie's road. I won't be needing it today.*

Lola sat on the floor on the yellow dress still warm from Mumma's body and cried. She sucked on the collar, bubbled on snot, then vomited up her breakfast. Mumma clicked her tongue, smelt the sweet acid stink of sick and sighed through her nose.

*Lola, no messes. Not today.* The baby's howls sent her rolling backwards and she whacked her head against the floor. Her face flushed purple, she drew in a breath and screamed. Mumma knew she was not really hurt. She was just being difficult. She turned her back on the squalling child and stepped into the dress Ernest had given her; old, crumpled silk, yellowed in patches, moth-eaten here and there, smelling of dust and damp and sadness. She braced herself against Lola's racket, slipped her arms into another woman's dress and thought that this would be as good as she would ever get.

Ernest shuffled down the corridor and asked, *Are you decent?*

Mumma called him in. He stuck his head around the doorway and winced at Lola.

*Shall I take her off your hands?*

Mumma struggled with the writhing child, pushed her into his arms and yelled over the clamour.

*Give her to Mister. Then could you do me up?*

When he returned, she presented him with her back. Ernest took an eye-full of her bare skin, her bra straps, the top of stockings folded down over her underpants and went for the zipper.

*Breathe in*, he said. *Jean was a tiny woman*. The zip was rusty and needed a good forcing. Ernest caught her skin, drew blood and apologised, but Mumma was already crying.

Mister and Mumma sat in silence on the ferry in their wedding clothes. Mister sweated under his woolen suit and Mumma felt the seams of Jean's dress strain with her every breath. On the mainland, on the drive to Adelaide, Mumma tried to break the silence with a game of eye-spy, but Mister said it was best that he just concentrate on the road. In the city, they left the car just off King William Street and walked three blocks. It was a Thursday morning and city people were at work. A group of women smoked outside a grey building. A courier on a scooter wove through traffic. A man laughed into a public phone and taxi driver hit his horn. Women pushed prams with shopping bags looped over the handles. Mumma felt self conscious in her block-heeled shoes slipping at her ankles, in her silk frock crumpled and stained with someone else's disappointment and sorrow. She kept her gaze fixed on the air just in front of her and would not meet the eyes of the city folk. She was aware of brightly coloured clothing, of the occasional dyed feather, of glass beads, striped shirts and

frizzy hair styles. She smelt exhaust, burnt rubber and cigarette smoke and heard someone erupt into laughter. Mumma clamped her jaw shut and held the fistful of jonquils Ernest had picked her with an outstretched arm, keeping an eye on the slow, sticky ooze of sap from their severed stems. Mister stuffed his hands in his pockets and jangled loose coins. He paused outside a sandstone building, looked up and read carefully 'Births, Deaths and Marriages'.

*This is it*, he said gesturing with his head.

Mumma gathered up her dress and revealed a little leg, just like she thought a bride should. Her skin-tone support hose were sagging at the ankle.

Ernest sat in the sun kissing at the air and watched over the baby. She was lying on her blanket whining, her face red and sticky with mucus. She had continued to vomit long after Margaret had left. She up-chucked until she was empty, until she was just retching on spit and bubble. Ernest had calmly called Mrs Williams and checked that this was normal. He'd never had such a problem with the boy. He was a pale and placid infant. Mrs Williams was pleased to be giving advice. She said that if there was no fever, there was nothing to fret about, but keep the child out of the sun and keep up her fluids. Lola was not interested in her bottle, but after many attempts at pacification, Ernest discovered she was settled when laid on a nightgown of Margaret's with his finger stuck in her mouth.

Mister spoke his vows in front of a celebrant in a brown suit and a secretary acting as witness. The secretary interrupted with a succession of sneezes and indicated that the jonquils were to blame. Mumma covered the flowers with a closed fist and felt tears sting her eyes. She warbled, *I Margaret Anne Wright...*

The secretary sneezed again, let out a great sigh and excused herself.

The celebrant wound up proceedings after some minutes, wiped his hands on his thighs, switched on an overhead fan and said, *You're done. Congratulations.*

Mister's hair blew flat against his forehead as he took his bride's hand and pulled her towards the door. Mumma's shoes slipped on the carpet and she sprung tears all over again. In the foyer there was another couple waiting; he leaning against the wall in a pin-striped suit, her on the edge of a chair in a knitted dress, gnawing on her knuckles. Mumma saw the way the young woman's spine sagged. She thought it must be natural to feel this way.

Outside the daylight glared. Mister pulled Mumma through the crowd and asked, finally, *Why are you crying?*

Mumma skipped a crack in the concrete, considered the question momentarily and sniffed, *I forgot to make a cake.*

Mister stopped walking and blinked at her. His face was tightly pulled into a frown, a crooked crease running up his forehead. *I will buy a cake, if it will make my Margie smile.*

Mumma grinned and bared her teeth and he asked, *Where does one buy a cake?*

Ernest knocked the top off a bottle of stout, poured a little into a glass and lay on his belly next to Lola. He dipped a finger into the foamy head and fed the baby the thick, dark liquid drop by drop. Her eyes scrolled lazily as she suckled and her whimpers subsided. Ernest shook his head at her and wondered how his son would go fathering this troublesome child. He wondered what sort of husband he would be to Margaret. He couldn't help but wonder about his son fumbling with his new bride between the sheets. The thought excited and disturbed him. It had been such a long

time since he had lain with a woman. The years had left him twisted and stiff. He glanced across the lawn at his wheelchair and sculled stout straight from the bottle.

Mumma chose what she considered the most appropriate cake. It was a Victoria sandwich with royal icing. The woman serving behind the counter swapped the pirouetting figurine of a ballerina with a plastic bride and groom. Mumma examined the tiny couple and exclaimed, *Perfect. Just perfect.*

The cake was lowered into a white box and tied with a length of string. Mumma carried her precious cargo out to the car as Mister counted out his ten and twenty cent pieces. They still had over an hour of driving to go, but Mumma forgot about the stockings stuck to her skin with sweat and the weeping wounds at her heels. She drummed her finger tips on the lid of the box and smiled at the slow passing of view.

*Move in boy. Come on. It's legal now.* Ernest wobbled on his wasted pins and focused the camera.

Mister tossed his hair and rearranged his lips. He could smell himself turning under the layers of his dad's suit.

*For God's sake, smile. Your in-laws won't want a photo of you sullen as stone, will they Margaret?*

She shook her head and looked sad and Ernest hoped he hadn't said the wrong thing. *I'm sure they would've loved to've been here, but business is business. It must have been a very important trip. I bet that Father of yours is always flying about the country on important trips.*

Mumma nodded and Ernest thought he should probably stop yakking, before he made her cry. He took a succession of shots of his just married son standing stiff as a



board by his new wife, Margaret, a grubby baby slumped on her hip. *Your folks'll be real pleased for these shots.* Margaret was too big for Jean's dress, Ernest thought as he peered down the lens. She was busting out all over, probably from all that cooking. *Real proud.* Mumma hitched up her stockings and Ernest finished off the film.

Mumma and Mister's shoes, caked with fallen mulberries, were side by side at the front door. Lola lay and licked the squashed fruit from the tread on Mister's soles and whimpered to herself. She spent some time poking at the blood-red paste, sucking on small sticks and the skeletons of leaves, rolling small rocks over her gums, swallowing sand. Mumma wondered if Lola was looking for a trace of the city on Mister's sole, a hint of where he had taken her and what they had done. Under the mulberry paste she imagined Lolly revealing a small smear of sticky black. Lolly touched her tongue tip. Mumma had never taken her daughter to the city before. The taste seemed to make her wince.

Mumma's voice was shrill, a little hysterical. *Come along Lola Belle.* She scooped the baby off the floor. *I'll mush you up some cake, sweetie.*

Lola drooled purple and spat up a stick. Mumma was bare-foot, the dress she was married in gaping open at the back, sweat marking the silk at her armpits and between her breasts. Mister had removed his socks, jacket, waistcoat and tie, untucked and unbuttoned his shirt and was fumbling with another bottle of wine. Ernest, flushed in the face and smiling, had his dentures in one hand while he ate his cake. Mumma looked down on Lola.

*Look at that mess 'round your chops, sugar. Messy mulberries. As bright as blood.* She arranged Lola on Ernest's lap, took a dainty saucer in one hand, a knife in the other and piped, *I bet you'd like a piece of this. It's special. It's from the shops.*

She popped a piece of cake in her mouth, chewed it once or twice and delivered it into her daughter's mouth. Mister lifted his lip and looked away. Lola squinted and rubbed her eyes. Mumma said, *It's beautiful, isn't it. It's the first fancy cake you've ever seen and it's a wedding cake.* Lola let her mouthful dribble down her chin and reached for the plastic ornament in the centre of the cake. Mumma sighed and pulled it off. *I suppose you can have a play with this. Oh, look! They've got sweet icing on their shoes. Now you be careful. That's a precious thing, that is.*

Lola closed her eyes and shoved the plastic heads in her mouth.

Mumma finished another glass of wine and another piece of cake and admired her daughter sucking on a mouth full of plastic. Ernest looked at the kids. They were a married couple and he was most definitely—no denying it—an old man. He held his wine in the air and said, *A toast* and Mumma fussed and re-filled glasses panting, *Oh yes. A toast. A toast.*

For a few breaths they were suspended: Ernest slumped in his chair with his teeth on the arm rest, Mister slouching against the wall and Mumma at the kitchen table. She raised her glass until it caught the afternoon sun and burped. *A toast to that beautiful cake.*

Ernest jerked in his chair, knocked his dentures to the floor and looked to his son. Mister glanced sideways under that fringe of corn silk hair. Mumma took a good gulp of wine and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. *I think I've eaten too much.*

Ernest coughed on phlegm and barked, *A toast to the newly weds...*

Mumma managed to write 'Mulberry tonic for the wedding day jitters and for sleepy-byes' in her record before collapsing across the bed. Mister found her tangled in her nightgown with her chin slick with drool. It was after ten and dead-dark out. He

had taken his dad home and driven back slowly in second gear with his head out the window on the damp night. There were some feelings but he was unable to get at them, unable to think them through with words. He looked at his new wife for some time and noticed the roll of her eyeballs under her skin, the purple twist of veins, the flutter of lashes and the tiny twitches in the muscles of her brow. He wondered what she dreamed of. Was it him? Was it the child? Was it the dead man, sealed in cedar, weighed down with earth? Mumma let out a rasping breath and a small snore. Mister climbed onto the bed and spied her shadowed flesh through the join in her nightgown. He undid the top three buttons, folded back the soft cotton and let light settle across her chest. Her breasts drooped either side of her sternum, falling apart at her rib cage, sagging towards the mattress. His hand hovered above her pale nipple and over blue veins. He pondered the white ripples and indentations of her skin, scars, he speculated, from stretching her skin, out-growing herself. It was a surprise to see her body. The few times they had done it had been in the safety of darkness. He had always imagined women to be smooth and soft and supple, perfect like the fruit that makes it to market, but here was a splat of a woman before him, a splat of over-ripe fallen peach, bruised and blemished, bursting skin, misshapen. He took her right breast in both his hands and weighed the flesh. Mumma stirred and mumbled, *Gently, Mister.*

He drew back his hand, took a moment and turned off the light.

Mumma woke in the night in a hot panic. She did not know where she was. Her head spun. Her tongue was thick and dry. She was urgent with the bedclothes, thrashing against the sheets, searching for the edge of the bed and the cool of the floor. Her hands found Mister and she remembered. She tripped out of the bedroom and made it to the bathroom.

Mister wandered through the dark house and eventually found her sprawled on the bathroom floor. The smell of vomit made him cringe. He croaked, *Margaret? Margaret, are you all right?* He moved through moonlight and sent shadows scurrying. She gave a small sigh but her eyes did not open. She said, *Resting, Father.*

Mister squatted next to her, just making out the spattering of vomit over the bath. There was a small squeak. He jumped in his skin and found Lola lying in the corner of the room.

*Jesus Christ.* He gulped air. *Margaret, what's the baby doing there? Did you take her from her cot.*

Lola sucked on a flannel and shivered. Mister could make out those huge black eyes, the flat, white face and the wild tendrils of hair. He touched her and felt how cold the tiles had made her limbs.

*Margaret, this child is freezing.* Mumma did not move. *I'm putting her back in her cot.*

Mumma moaned. *No. Don't you touch my baby.*

Mister swallowed a mouthful of spit. *Margaret, this child is freezing.*

Mumma flung her arm across the floor. *Blankets. Get us some blankets.*

Mister stood for several minutes, chewing on his lip before leaving the room.

Grey dawn broke through the bathroom window. Mumma woke chilled to the bone, trembling against the cold tiles. The morning light ached and the world seemed to warp in and out of focus. Mumma took a lung full of air and whimpered. Slowly shapes became objects: the base of the toilet, the legs of the bath, water marks on the skirting boards, spider webs, tangles of hair, puffs of lint, fluff and dust. She squinted at her hand, white with cold and crooked into a claw. She heaved herself onto her elbow and saw that there was a blanket dumped over her feet. She sat up. Under the

blanket was her daughter, wrapped in a sheepskin and tied into one of Mister's jumpers. Mumma's throat constricted. She scooped the baby onto her lap, whispering her name over and over and rocked her until she woke. Lola frowned, stuffed a fist in her mouth and gnawed. Mumma squeezed her so hard she felt her skeleton move beneath her flesh. She glanced around the bathroom, seeing clearly for the first time. The spray of purple vomit against white porcelain shocked.

Mumma was busy with a tin bucket. Metal clanged and echoed, water slopped, trickled, dripped and gurgled and Mumma forced solids down the drain with her big toe. On hands and knees she scrubbed at the tiles with a stiff-haired brush, her muscles protesting the exertion, her face set with concentration. She sloshed a final bucket of water across the floor, doused the tiles with disinfectant, wiped the last of the purple stain away with the hem of her nightgown and sighed. Mumma was shrivelled and pale in her skin, her hair lank with grease, her nightgown wet and soiled. Lola was bundled in blankets in the corner of the room, sitting quietly, eyes to the ceiling. Mumma said, *I'm hungry*. She put the plug in the bath, turned the hot tap on as far as it would go, stripped herself and Lolly naked and said, *We'll take a bath and then I'll make porridge*.

Mister woke to the peeling of water. He stretched across the bed, sighed and stared at the ceiling. It was the first time he had woken in Mumma's bed, in her house in her company. She would make a pot of tea, fix him some breakfast and then he would get on with things. He really was a Mister, now. Mr Armstrong. Married to Mrs Armstrong. He had never really considered having a wife. He had never questioned a different life to that of his father's. But opportunity had presented itself. Lola squealed from the bathroom. Mister frowned. His stomach ached with hunger. He got out of bed, slipped on his strides, sculled a glass of water and tip-toed the

hallway. The bathroom door was ajar. Mister stood in the shadows of morning and spied. Mumma was in the bath with Lola. She had her legs apart, her knees raised out of the water and the baby against her belly. She lifted Lolly out of the water and then dunked her, suds and splashes sloshing up the sides of the bath. They were laughing. When Mumma laughed her breasts shuddered and the folds of flesh at her stomach contracted and released. She looked tired. Her eyes had sunk. But Mister thought she was beautiful. She had foam framing her face and sliding over her shoulders. Her cheeks were as plump and full as her daughter's. He imagined slipping into the bath with her and getting his fingers all over and inside her. He chewed a fingernail, swallowed and gently pushed the door open. Lola's buttocks slapped the water and a mouthful of bubbles slid down her chin. Her giggling subsided as she sensed him standing pigeon-toed in the doorway. Mumma jumped, pulled her legs together and covered herself with the baby. She said,

*Good morning , Mister.*

Water dripped. Lola winked. Mister shoved his hands in his pockets and said,  
*Smells like a hospital in here.*

Mumma stirred cream into his porridge and apologised for last night's mess. *It seems mulberry wine upsets my tummy,* she giggled.

He nodded into his breakfast and shuffled uncomfortably on his chair.

*But I'm as fit as a fiddle today...* She paused, dipped her chin and looked up at him through her eyelashes. *My husband.* Laughter bubbled through her mouthful of porridge and Lola banged her spoon on the table. Mister emptied his bowl and stood up.

*I best get going,* he said, eyes to the floor.

Mumma collected Lolly and trotted after him.

*But where are you going?*

He pulled on his boots. *To work.*

Mumma cocked her head. *What work?*

He shrugged his shoulders. *Work.* He went to kiss her and missed. Mumma smiled. He had porridge at the corner of his mouth.

She called, *See you at lunch time, Mister.*

Each day Mister strode purposely down the track and was swallowed up by the scrub and each day he wondered if she watched him. He felt watched. He was conscious of the movement of his legs, the contraction of his buttocks, the snaking of his spine. He grasped his canvas bag with his right hand and hooked the fingers of his left into the top of his pants. When he was sure he was out of sight, Mister dropped his bag and sat in the sand. Some days he would look through the melaleucas to the sea. Some days he would lie back under the sun and see blood-red through his eyelids. Today he was restless. He snapped twigs into small pieces and threw them into the air. He dug aimlessly in the sand. He took a sip from his water canister. Two magpies gawked. Mister's curses intrigued them.

Mumma did not wonder after her new husband. He had his own business. When the glass in the kitchen door rattled, she knew that he had left for the day and that she could hang up her dressing gown and kick off her slippers. Mumma cleaned the kitchen bare-foot, in her singlet, cotton undies and old striped pinnie. Lola lay in the cupboard and got her fingers in the flour. Mumma scrubbed grease from the meat tray and sang, *What do we cook today my little gourmande?*

Lola wet her fingers and painted herself with flour.

*We cook Mumma pie and Lola cakes and roast Mister, Mumma laughed. She got her fingernails under burnt fat and exclaimed, Hang on a minute! Roast Mister! Oh, no, no no. He's much too tough to roast. We shall have to boil him for several days.*

Lola squealed on cue and kicked her floured legs.

Not long after the wedding, Mister got work on a cray boat with the Thompson twins and their cousin Christopher. The work was long and hard and despite having known the twins since he was a kid, Mister was considered the new bloke and got lumbered with the shit jobs. His day started at five am, well before sign of sunrise. He would snatch the tin of food Mumma had prepared the night before, slip the keys to the FJ on his index finger and drive into town to the jetty. Mister would always arrive well before the Thompsons. He enjoyed the moments of quiet before they loaded up the tinny and headed out to *Lady Dream*, before the boys would start the engine, break the shifting tide and begin the days banter. They would hock phlegm into the white water, wrap a fist around a cigarette and have a go at Mister. They graduated from calling him Insect Boy, to Strongy, after Christopher noted that although he was an Armstrong, his biceps were as thin and pale as a girl's. They mocked his packed lunch, the neat darning at the elbows of his jumper and the patches on his jeans. They joked about his Missus, jibed about his being a father to another bloke's kid. Mister tilted his head to the wind and kept to himself. He worked solidly while they knocked the tops off long necks and reclined in the sun. He emptied the cray pots while the lads entertained themselves chucking Christopher's mongrel overboard. He became ropey and weathered and his eyelashes bleached. He hosed off the deck and wondered about buying his own boat and starting up business solo. He wet down the hessian



bags lumpy with crayfish and thought often about Margie, about how regardless of their marriage and their sharing a house he did not really know her any better. She was asleep when he left each morning, preoccupied with the baby and the dinner in the evening when he returned and then it was only a matter of hours until he would slip into sleep on the old red armchair. Sometimes he would wake to her watching him from the couch. Once she unzipped his strides and held him right there in the lounge room. Margie loved fresh crayfish. She said it made her amorous.

Mister worked on *Lady Dream* for almost three years, doing stints on Jack Frith's fishing trawler in the off seasons. When he had saved enough money to retire his dad's Holden and buy himself a secondhand diesel ute, he chucked in the sea bound life and accepted a contract with the National Parks and Wildlife fencing the perimeter of the reserve on the North Western side of the island. His working hours were much more civilized. He was home for breakfast and awake well after dinner. He was home for weekends. It was a shock for Mumma to have him around again. They seemed to bump into one another in the passage, narrowly miss each other in the lounge room, trip over one another in the bathroom. Mister spread his tools on the kitchen floor while fixing the hinges on the cupboard doors and Mumma stubbed a toe on his hammer and had a nail go through the sole of her slipper. Lolly, well padded with three years of life, hung about the hem of Mumma's skirt, whimpering and whistling through a blocked nose, her face tipped up at Mister, her perpetually crossed eyes blinking, squinting, straining to focus.

Now the kitchen cupboards were so hard to open that Mumma had to use both hands and get the weight of her bottom behind her. She heaved and yanked and when the door finally relented she was sent stumbling backwards across the sticky linoleum

floor. In this way, she had tripped up Lolly so many times that the child had nearly learned not to linger at her mother's calves. Mumma peered into the depths of the cupboard.

*What do you feel like for lunch, pork dumpling?*

Lolly crawled through Mumma's legs and into the cupboard, backing over a packet of glace cherries as she made herself comfortable.

*I could make cheese scones, or fried kidney, or bacon sandwiches. There's still some crayfish in the freezer. I could make mornay with cheese up top. You like mornay with cheese up top.*

*Cornflecks*, Lolly offered.

*Yes. Cornflakes. Mornay with cornflakes up top, too.*

Mumma only made mornay for the two of them. The one time she had made it for Mister he complained that it was baby mush. Lolly considered something for a moment, climbed out of the cupboard and said, *I want to cook googie eggs and honey.*

Mumma rinsed her hands, shrugged her shoulders and said, *OK sugar.*

Lola reached for Mumma, pleading, *Baby bird, Mumma. Let's play baby bird.*

Mumma had a mouthful of coddled egg, sweetened with honey. She looked at her daughter with her chubby arms extended, her fingers grabbing at the air between them.

*Baby bird. Baby bird.*

Mumma tucked her fists in her armpits, flapped her elbow-wings, chirp chirped through her mouthful and descended on Lola. The child closed her eyes, let her head fall back and opened her mouth. Mumma dribbled egg yolk onto her daughter's tongue. Lola bounced in her chair and peeped for more.

*No, Lolly. The rest is for me. You made this for me. Remember?*

Lola popped her thumb in her mouth, gnawed and drooled. Mumma mopped the egg slop with bread. It was not an unpleasant taste—unusual, but Mumma was used to Lola's creations. She was trying out the language of food, learning to express herself.

*I like my egg and honey, little peeper. What does egg and honey mean?*

Mumma licked her sticky fingers, eyebrows raised at her daughter. Lola kicked her legs under the table and head lolling, eyes scrolling, said,

*Honey sticks up the hurts and googie egg is for baby birds.*

Mumma stacked their plates and brushed crumb onto the floor. *Is that right?*

*You can teach me something new for dinner, make a surprise for Mister.*

Mister had spent this Saturday wandering the bay, head down, hands in his pockets. The water hissed at him, the seagulls mocked, a black swan chased him from her nest. He dropped a decent salmon trout, snagged and broke his line, was outsmarted by a blue crab. Mister had been thinking. The contract with the Parks was almost over and it didn't appear there would be any work on the island for at least the next four months. He didn't want to go back to the sea on someone else's boat. It looked as though the only option would be to take to the mainland and accept the fencing contract up North. It was a big job. It would mean some time away from Margie. But Mister knew he had to work things out, get things straight or he would end up alone and crippled by life, just like his dad. He watched the sun sink towards the horizon. His stomach moaned as he headed for home.

Lola was in the garden as Mister ambled up the track. She had her eyes closed and was holding a fistful of grass. Mister said, *What are you doing?*

Grass squeaked and leaked a fresh and pleasant smell. Lola tugged at a tuft. *Picking spinach because I'm making the dinner.*

Mister curled his lip. *That's not spinach. That's grass. The spinach is in the back garden.*

Green bled onto the child's hands. She stuffed a few thick blades into her mouth and didn't open her eyes. Mister moved closer, stomped his big leather boots on the lawn in front of Lola, clenched his teeth and said, *You hear me? That is grass. Sheep eat grass. Humans eat spinach and the spinach is in the vegetable garden where it belongs.*

Lola separated the grass into two bunches, one for each hand, spun on her heels and skipped away.

Mister slammed the kitchen door behind him and tossed his bag across the floor. He took a stout from the fridge, knocked the top off on the sideboard and drank straight from the bottle. Mumma came in from the bedroom. She was plaiting her hair. *What's wrong, grumpy guts?*

Mister pulled his lips from the beer bottle with a long, wet whistle. He said, *I'm not a baby* and the stout spewed foam onto the kitchen floor.

Mumma giggled and took the bottle from him. She emptied it into two glasses and smiled, *Drink it quickly or it'll be flat in two shakes.*

Mister skulled and eyed her over the rim of his glass. The part in her hair was crooked and one of her plaits was much thicker than the other. She was watching him with her head on an angle and twisting side to side from the waist. She said, *I have a secret for you.*

Lola's feet pattered down the hallway. Mumma, now distracted, licked her lips and said, *Later*.

Lola handed Mumma two bunches of grass and Mumma smiled.

Mister slammed his glass on the sink. *What did I tell you! That's grass, not spinach! I know you can see well enough to make out the difference between grass and spinach.*

Lola blinked up at Mumma and beamed. Mumma said, *Thankyou cupcake. When do you want to start cooking?*

Lola stuck a finger up her nose and said, *I'll just see if Miss Lucy is awake.* Lola waddled off and Mumma tossed the grass out the kitchen window. She looked over her shoulder at Mister,

*Pick us some spinach, will you.*

Mister sulked and Mumma ignored him. He whittled a stick with his pocket knife and let the curls of wood fall onto the kitchen floor. He opened another bottle of stout and drank it quickly before she could request a glass.

Holding Miss Lucy by the leg, Lola stood on a chair and gave orders. She said, *Bacon in rounds* and Mumma snipped the fat with her best dress-making scissors. She said, *Sultana eyes, spinach grass, tomato smiles, spaghetti hair, rice and cream for sand, toast arms, cheese for Mumma's bosoms.*

Mister whittled and wished he was alone with his Margie. He watched her kiss the crumbs from Lola's mouth, suck the cream from the child's fat fingers, nudge her nose into her daughter's neck. He wished it was him that she fussed over, doted on, kissed better. He was the one with the weight of responsibility on his shoulders, after all.

Lola turned towards him, squealed, *Mister!* and tossed a chunk of cheese in his general direction. Mister's reflexes were dulled by alcohol and the cheddar hit him on the mouth. Lolly seemed to bite away a smile and Mumma said, *Whoopsa daisy.*

Mister blinked at the yellow cube of cheese at his feet. He would never understand Lola, the dead man's child.

Lola pointed at the bacon characters with swollen sultana eyes, tomato mush mouths and soggy toast limbs drowning in spinach. She dipped her finger in creamed rice, wiggled it in spaghetti hair and said, *This one's Mister, this one's me* and peeling a lump of melted cheese bosom from the third character said *and this one's Mumma.*

Mumma shook her head and sighed, *It's a work of art, little Lolly. A work of art—isn't it, Mister?*

Mister sniffed and tossed his hair. He thought it was a waste of good food, that she was a child and needed to learn her place. He mumbled, *I hope it's edible.*

Mumma bit her tongue. She thought it was healthy. She was never permitted to experiment. Once, when Mother was away at Aunty Nancy's for the weekend, Margaret tried her own version of a Jubilee Cake. She took it from the oven too soon, iced it while it was too hot and hid the sticky mess under her bed. Sweet syrup melted into the carpet and attracted the ants. Father inquired after the smell of baking and Margaret assured him it was just a slice of raisin bread caught in the toaster. Margaret threw open the windows of the kitchen and her bedroom. She dripped drops of rosewater around her bed. But moments after her Mother arrived home, removed her hat and gloves, she had her nose to the air.

*What cake did you cook for the men, Margaret?*

Margaret knew Mother would find the carpet under her bed caked with icing and she knew she would get the belt for fibbing, but she burned red and lied nonetheless.

Mister was sitting up in bed, propped up with pillows, knees raised, reading a woman's magazine that Mrs Walker had given him to pass on to Margie. He read a short story—a love story—he flipped through a pattern for warm woolly mittens, an article of new cuts of beef, advertisements for hair tonic, French perfume and slimmers' jelly. Mumma bumped the bedroom door open with her rump and raised two steaming mugs.

*Hot milk and whisky?*

Mister nodded, sat up straight and tapped a blunt finger at the glossy page of the magazine.

*Says here that five minutes a day stretching and twisting your trunk will trim your waist.*

Mumma blew on her milk and grinned. *Your waist needs no trimming, Mister.*

He snorted air through his nose and turned the page. *There's a recipe here for chicken pie.* He held the magazine up to her. *Look. They've served it with tiny potatoes.*

Mumma sipped her milk and slid into bed. *Lolly isn't happy about eating chicken since you killed old Bertha.*

*She had gone off the lay. There was no point in feeding her. She was no use to us any more.*

*Lolly loved her.*

*She's probably gone off chicken 'cause that old boiler was as tough as buggery.  
I'll dress one of the pullets tomorrow and you can make pie.*

Mumma chewed on milk skin and said, *Why do you read that rubbish, anyway?*

Mister pretended to concentrate on something, held the page in close and pulled his brows into a slight frown.

*Does Mrs Walker stock any medical magazines? First aid? Home health? Nutrition? Cookery? I wonder.*

Mister followed the print with his index finger and nodded at something. Mumma glanced over his shoulder at the article on women's under garments. *I wonder what Mrs Walker would say if she knew all the magazines she passed on for me were keeping you entertained.* Mumma tittered to herself and elbowed him in the ribs. *You'll be stitching your own socks soon.*

Mister's lips twitched and Mumma fell silent. She finished her milk in one gulp and breathed,

*Now, about that secret.*

Mister lay on his back watching shadows move across the ceiling. He did not dare move until he was sure Mumma was asleep. When her lips fell apart and her breath rasped slowly through her teeth, he edged ever so carefully out of the bed, out of the room, down the passage and out of the house. The breeze was cold off the sea. Somewhere in the darkness the shed door grated and banged and a hawk cried out. Mister's bare feet ached on the wet lawn, but the cold was necessary to clear away the fog. He crossed his arms, strained to see in the darkness and took several steps away from the house into the night. His feet found the end of the lawn, the patch of sand, the row of smooth granite rocks. He made out the edges of the track and began to



walk, his soles tender against points of stones, shattered shells and weathered splinters. He quickened his pace to a brisk walk, began to trot, sped to a jog and then sprinted into the black, arms stretched ahead of himself. He reached his dad's house in ten minutes, face burning, nose running, steaming in the cold air.

*Dad?*

Ernest grunted, puckered his face and licked his lips.

*Dad!* Mister put a hand tentatively on the old man's shoulder and squeezed.

Ernest puffed breath through his slack lips and wheezed.

*Jesus, boy! What is it? What time is it?*

Mister sat back on the floor and stared into nothing. He swallowed awkwardly and finally said, *Margaret is expecting.*

Ernest jabbed a thumb in his eye socket. *Jesus. Is that all. Well it's been a long time coming, but no doubt Margaret's had her reasons.*

Mister wondered what he meant. He could feel his eyes smarting and was glad for the blanket of dark.

Ernest cleared his throat, chewed on phlegm and barked, *What's the matter with you, boy! Why are you here telling me this in the dead of night?*

Mister stood too quickly, felt the room spin and whispered, *I'll see you later.* He stumbled on his numb feet, stubbed his toes on the foot of his dad's bed and fell into the wall. As he found the way out he heard Ernest mutter, *Jesus Christ, boy. Pull yourself together.*

On Sunday morning, Mumma and Lolly found Mister down at the beach. He was prising shellfish from the rocks and hurling them into the sea.

*You missed Sunday breakfast. I made egg and bacon pie.*

Mister frowned out to sea and Mumma looked over her shoulder at Lolly, busy in the beds of dried seaweed.

*Are you upset about the baby?* She watched a crab sidle out from under a rock.  
*Mister?*

He took some moments to find his voice. *I'm surprised.*

Mumma sat down next to him and touched the water with the sole of her sandal.  
*How can you be surprised?* She poked him gently in the belly. *You know what happens when a man sticks it in a woman!*

Mister flinched and spoke quickly. *I thought there were no more babies in you. It's been years with no sign of another. Years.*

Mumma shook her head and giggled. *But I had the coil put in when we were married. We didn't want another baby while Lolly was still little.*

Mister stared at the blade of his knife. He looked confused. Mumma took his hand.

*I had the coil removed three months ago. I thought it was time, seeing as your work had brought you back to me.*

Mister pulled his hand away and flipped his knife shut. *My work is almost over. The next job's on the mainland.*

Mister came back to the house at lunchtime and put the last slice of egg and bacon pie under the grill. He looked out the kitchen window to the overcast sky. He felt uncomfortable, agitated and he banged a fork against the sideboard, faster and faster until his forearm ached. When he stopped, he could hear Margie crying from the bedroom. He shuffled up the corridor and found her face down across the bed. He approached slowly.

*Margie?*

She stopped crying and held her breath. Mister was unsure what he was going to say.

*We could buy a caravan. You and Lola could come with me.*

Mumma turned her face to him. She was red and swollen with tears. She said,

*What's that smell? Something's burning.*

Mister punched the air and went for the oven cursing.

Mumma tip-toed around Lolly's room and looked at the old cot, filled with Lolly's toys. In no time it would be time to empty it out, free the cot up for the baby. Lolly threw back an arm, sighed and opened her eyes until they were two dark slits in her face. Mumma said, *Hello sweets. Did you have a nice nap?*

Lolly rubbed her eyes, her mouth gaping.

*My little pip, I have something to ask.* Mumma smoothed the heavy curtains, drawn on the morning. *How would you like to go away with Mister, live in a house with wheels?*

Lolly frowned. Mumma found the join in the drapes and pulled back the fabric. Quite suddenly, Lolly was swimming in colour: bright, blinding colour. She squealed and screwed up her face. Mumma put her palm to the child's forehead.

*Shhh. It's all right. It's just the sunshine.*

Lolly flushed pink-hot in the morning sunlight and smelt of sleep.

*Lola Belle,* Mumma leant down and licked her little Lolly. She was salty-sweet and sizzled the tip of Mumma's tongue. *It's all right. It was just a silly idea. How about pikelets? Pancakes? Porridge?*

Lolly squeaked and stretched. With sun on her face the child saw yellow, apparently for the first time. She blinked and said, *The colour of warm*. She squinted in the glare, pointed to Mumma's yellow nightgown and said again, *The colour of warm*.

Mumma saw with shock the blue stillness of her daughter's eyes and wondered what it meant.

Lolly threw back her blankets, clasped at her crotch and yawned, *Poached eggs. I want googs*.

Mumma splashed a dash of cider vinegar and squeezed lemon into a pan. She added a couple of cups of water and set the liquid to boil. Lolly was at her side. Mumma looked down at the top of her head, at the crooked part, the suggestion of scalp, at the matted tangle of hair. Mumma recalled a bad memory always when she least expected. Steam rose in whirls. Mumma breathed the bite of vinegar. The man was in the empty bath, naked, his face drained of blood, his skin pimpled with goose bumps, his hair greasy and tangled. He was calling Mumma's name and crying. The man bathed in his own despair and Mumma could not stand it. She was the one who was pregnant, after all. Father had warned her that man was unstable. Mumma cracked two eggs and occupied herself.

Lolly took the fork off Mumma and burst the egg yolk. Mumma looked on, incredulous. Gold bled over vegemite toast and Lolly looked up at Mumma.

*The colour of warm.*

Mumma felt her fingers quake. She leant in close. *What do you see?*

Lolly stuck her fingers in the egg yolk and beamed. *The colour of warm.*

Mumma panted, *Yellow. The colour of warm is yellow.* She scooped her daughter into her arms and squeezed her against her chest. Lola Belle had seen. Properly. Mumma carried her through the kitchen. She picked up an apple and said,

*Red and sweet. The colour of love.* She opened the fridge, lifted a milk bottle and exclaimed, *Creamy white. The colour of bone.* She scraped butter with a fingernail, laughed, *The colour of warm. Yellow butter love* and stuck her greasy digit in Lola's mouth.

Mumma bounced Lolly on her hip and waited on the verandah for Mister to arrive home. When his car pulled into the driveway, she kissed her daughter, stepped down off the verandah and stood in his path. She said,

*There has been a development.*

Mister gripped at his lunch tin and ground his teeth.

She said, *It appears my Lola can see.*

Mister looked at the child and was shocked to see her eyes uncrossed and staring directly into his.

Mumma grinned. *She has been like this all day, seeing everything clearly for the first time. We've had a hoot. An absolute hoot!*

Mister kicked the ground and ran his thumb around his tin lunch box. *Have you decided about the caravan?*

Mumma rubbed her cheek against Lolly. *Oh, that. We've decided we'll stay here. This really is an exciting development and it's best everything's kept stable. Besides, you said it's only a few months.*

Mister nodded, opened his lunch box and emptied his crusts onto the lawn.

In just a week Mister had left for the mainland. Mumma gave him a new pair of boots and a bottle of rum out of her own money. She made him a batch of cheese scones, two chicken sandwiches, a banana loaf and a *Book of Kisses* filled with her drawings and some of his favourite recipes. She suspected he'd catch rabbits up North, so her rabbit casserole was the first she transcribed. She knew the bulk of his cooking would be in a camp oven over a fire, so she also included ideas for roasts, stews, dampers, breads and buns. Mister had seemed embarrassed flipping through the *Book of Kisses*, skimming her crude drawings in lurid texta colour and the affectionate messages surrounded by pink love hearts and yellow flowers, but he thanked her and kissed her firmly on the mouth the morning he left.

The next day Mumma had an antenatal appointment at the hospital. She had not slept well on her first night alone in the big bed and she had woken feeling nauseous. She had not suffered morning sickness with Lola Belle and the queasiness surprised her. She sipped iced water and half-heartedly chewed on dry toast while she prepared Lolly's breakfast.

*Now eat up, Lola. I have to go to town today and you're going to play at Ernest's, so start chewing—quick sticks.* Lolly jabbed her tinned spaghetti with her fork and Mumma dry retched.

If it wasn't for his bad eyesight Ernest would have been sure she was eating dirt. He called out, *Miss Lola! What are you up to?*

She waddled up to him and dumped a handful of dirt on his lap.

He said, *So you can see properly now, can you?*

She cocked her head at him, kissed at his old hands and said, *My eyes got better.*

*So what do you see?*

She looked around and pointed at things. *Bird, bird, bird, plover. Gum tree.*

*Gum tree.*

*Ocean, little boat, warm.* She paused to scratch at a scar on his knuckles. *Hurt.*

He said, *That doesn't hurt.*

She looked at his face, climbed onto his lap, pulled at his jowls and nodded, *That hurts.*

Up close he could see mud in the corners of her mouth and mashed between her teeth. She was a strange sort of kid.

Ernest relaxed on the front lawn, slumped on an upturned crate, warmed by mid-morning sun, soothed by the familiar waft of decomposing seaweed. He smiled a gummy grin and saw a butterfly die mid-flight. He looked at Lola.

*Did you see that?*

She nodded, her cheeks wobbling.

He said, *What was it?*

Lola slid off his lap to the floor and pinched the insect between two fingers. *Blutterfly.*

Ernest thought for a moment or two. *How do you know it's a butterfly. Surely you've hardly seen one before today.*

She tilted her head from left to right, brushed the creature's wings against her nostrils and put it in her mouth. She chewed with pursed lips, bubbles of spit foaming and popping. *Blutterfly.*

Ernest frowned, shook a crooked finger at her and snapped, *You don't eat butterflies, you silly girl.*

Mumma was later than expected. She bought Ernest a bag of salted peanuts and a couple of beers just in case he was grumpy. He licked his falsies and laughed. *Jesus, Margie. Nuts are a bloody challenge with a mouth full of plastic.*

Mumma shrugged and asked, *Was Lolly good?*

Ernest squinted at the child and paused. *Good—yes.* He took a breath. *She's a funny kid.*

Mumma crossed her arms. *How so?*

*Don't get me wrong, I don't know girls.* He rearranged himself on the crate. *She just seems to get everything in her mouth. She ate a butterfly, some gum leaves, rabbit shit—a chunk of bloody rust off the old rainwater tank! She'll poison herself with all that crap. It wears me out watching after her, getting me fingers in her gob to clean her out every few minutes. Surely she should have grown out of that by now.* He looked up at Mumma and saw the twisted expression on her face. *Course—like I said—I don't know girls.*

Mumma sharpened her coloured pencils, got herself a stack of milk arrowroot biscuits and took out her Medical Record. She flipped through the last few entries. Some three years ago it was mulberry wine for her wedding day nerves. That seemed simultaneously like the distant past and as if it were only yesterday. The lapses between entries were often weeks, if not months and Mumma was cross at herself for the neglect. In varying colours, she had noted: *chicken liver with cream sauce—to increase milk supply, vaseline—for chapped nipples, jam pudding—to even nerves, vaseline—for chapped nipples, lamingtons—for a lonely heart, steamed eucalyptus—for Little Lolly's stuffy nose, stewed prunes—for constipation, vaseline—for chapped nipples, corned beef and spiced dumplings—for strength, rusks soaked in brandy—for bub's breaking gums, antiseptic cream—for bleeding nipples.* Mumma rubbed her



eyes, bit into a biscuit and thumbed through a page or two. She had recorded Lolly's first solid meal —*Farex and Mumma's milk*. For some weeks she had documented her daughter's developing taste. Lolly ate custards heartily. She loved rice pudding. She gobbled down minced chicken in white sauce. Broccoli gave her wind. Too much mashed pumpkin and cheese gave her brilliant orange diarrhoea. Mumma finished two more biscuits and turned the page. She recalled the day she finally committed her fears of Lolly's blindness to paper. She had written only, *Lola Belle's eyes wonky. Mulberry wine for sleep*. She overlooked Dr Warren's hurtful scrawl, picked up her most brilliant red pencil and began a new page. *Love for Little Lolly! Her eyes uncrossed last Wednesday and she requested poached eggs!* Mumma finished her biscuits and drew a row of cupcakes with pink icing under her entry. Finally, she wrote: *milk arrowroots for queasy tummy. Dr Warren says the new baby is as big as a thumbnail—just seven weeks old.*

Mumma decided not to tell Lola about the baby until she was certain everything was all right. In the meantime she set herself the task of preparing her daughter by dropping hints, telling stories and by baking multi-coloured marble cakes. Now that Lolly saw straight, she delighted in colour, but it took her some time to realise that mixing red, blue, green and yellow food colouring into the icing sugar resulted in an ugly khaki and that she would be best to leave this job to Mumma. Lolly wanted everything rainbow coloured. Mumma, struggling to keep up with her animated daughter, depleted by morning sickness and the demands of pregnancy on her exhausted body, tried to explain that life was not always awash with colour, that sometimes it was the shade of rotten eggs—grey.

Lolly watched Mumma step into the steaming water. She marvelled at how big and white Mumma's thighs were and how her woolly opened as her legs parted. Lolly pointed and said,

*Anyhow. Why does the wool grow there?*

Mumma pulled her mouth into a coy smile and giggled, *It just does. It will happen to you when you're bigger.*

Lolly tilted her head and considered something. *Is your vee-gee shy?*

Mumma laughed and said, *Maybe.*

Lolly chased the soap along the bottom of the bath and Mumma watched. This was especially nice at the end of another day. Her daughter was plump and pink and glistening clean—good enough to eat. Mumma slid back in the bath and said, *Once upon a time there was a beautiful girl called Lola Belle with long, long hair the colour of treacle and skin as sweet and smooth as cream on the tongue. Lola Belle had amazing adventures in the wilderness and on the sea. One day she flew to the magic beach on the back of her favourite pelican. They flew over the tops of trees and she yelled out to the other birds and the planes and the helicopters and the clouds in the sky, 'Hello everyone! I am The Amazing Lola Belle and this is my pelican, Peter Pumpkin Pie.' They flew over a little village and all the Mummas came outside with their washing baskets to catch the eggs Peter Pumpkin Pie dropped from his pouch. People pointed and exclaimed, 'Why, that's The Amazing Lola Belle! What on earth could she be up to today!' Lola Belle dug her fingers in Peter's feathers and they flew and flew until they came to the magic beach. Peter swooped onto the shore and opened his beak. Inside were a million strawberries which Lola collected into her skirt. Peter flew away and Lola waved and while she was waving she tripped up and*

*all the strawberries rolled on the sand. 'Oh no!' she said. But it didn't matter because the sand wasn't sand at all. It was sugar! Sweet, white, delicious sugar!*

Lolly splashed in the bath water and squealed, *Sugar! Was the beach really made of sugar? What did Mazing Lola do?*

Mumma sat up and leant in towards her daughter. *She dipped her strawberries in it, of course and she filled her up her pockets and her undies.*

Lolly's eyes were as big as big. Her mouth hung open and her tongue flicked in and out.

*And then, just as the amazing Lola was whistling for Peter the Pelican to come and collect her, she discovered a tiny baby on a bed of marshmallow. The baby was the sweetest thing she had ever seen—sweeter than a whole load of sugar—and Lola said, 'Little baby, I will love you forever and we will be the best of friends' and she promptly popped the bundle of joy onto Peter's back and home they flew.*

Lolly splashed the bath water, filled her lungs with air and breathed, *I wish, wish wish I was Mazing Lola!*

Mumma smiled, sat forward and pressed Lolly's nose. *You know, in a couple of weeks Mister will be home. Then I will tell you about a surprise.*

Mumma held Lola's hands over her belly. *What do you feel in there, sweet potato?*

Lola poked a digit and said, *Lumpy plum pudding with nuts and ten cent pieces.*

Mumma asked, *Anything else?*

Lola pulled her hands away, scratched her cheek and said, *Nup.*

Mumma lifted the child onto the kitchen bench and popped a dried apricot into her mouth. *How would you like a little friend to play with? A little brother or sister?*

Lola chewed slowly and frowned. Her eyeballs shuddered, rolled back behind their lids and she said, *Nup.*

Mumma frowned, prised Lola's eyes open and said, *That's too bad sugar, 'cause there's a baby in my tummy.*

Lola's mouth gaped and sweet apricot oozed.

Lola had many questions about the baby. How did it get in there? Why couldn't she see it? What was its name? What was it made of? Mumma made rice pudding with sultanas and they sat on the verandah balancing the steaming bowls on their laps, faces tipped to the slow scudding clouds. Mumma blew on a spoonful and smoothed it with tentative lips.

*The baby is made of everything. She lifted her bowl. Of rice, cream, sugar and vanilla pods. Of sultanas, of eggs, milk, honey, flour, lamb chops, roast potato, lamingtons and chicken casserole.*

Lola mashed her pudding with the back of the spoon and blinked as Mumma spoke. For just a moment, clouds parted and white light dazzled. Lola's brow creased in thought.

She hesitated and asked, *Is the baby made of sunshine?*

Mumma nodded and set to licking her bowl clean.

*Of salty sea and seals?*

*Sea, but not seals.*

*Why not seals?*

Mumma bit her bottom lip and considered the sky. *Because I don't eat seals.*

*You don't eat sea or sun.*

*I swim in the sea. I eat fish from the sea. I like the sea. I breathe sun. It warms me up.*

*Am I made of sun?*

*Yes, my little sunflower seed. You are made of lots of sun. Sun and cheese. I made you with a lot of cheese.*

Lola put her bowl down and considered her forearm.

Mumma said, *The cheese made you big and strong.*

A pair of ibis flew over and whipped up the afternoon air. Mumma admired the blood-red feathers at the pit of their wings. Lola squinted after the birds, her baby teeth exposed. She chewed the insides of her cheeks and said,

*Will the baby be made of me?*

Mumma sighed and leaned back on her elbows. *It will be like you. It will be your brother or your sister.*

*Will it be made of Mister?*

*Yes. It will be made of Mister and me and pudding and cake and eggs and bacon and sun and rain and sea and salt.*

Mumma closed her eyes and listened to Lola fidgeting next to her.

*How did the baby get in your tummy?*

*Mister helped put it in there. He fertilised one of my eggs.*

Lola thought for a moment or two and asked, *What does the baby taste like?*

Mumma dozed, thinking of her bellyful of sweet, creamed rice. She could hear the moan and gurgle of her guts, the breeze in the shell of her ear, the tittering of wrens, the hush of the sea. She had grown tired of talking. Lola waited for more words. When no more words came, she said, *I want googs for tea. Googs and honey.*

Mumma skipped passed Mister, hitched her skirt, let her undies fall to her ankles and sat on the toilet. The chime and tinkle of her urine made her just a touch embarrassed in front of him. She tapped her toes on the cold tiles and sucked her bottom lip. Mister was unaffected. He was bare-chested and busy at the mirror with a sudsy flannel and a brand new razor. Mumma watched the movement of his shoulder blades as he soaped his face and giggled. *Is there really enough hair to shave?*

Mister caught a glimpse of her in the mirror dabbing at herself with toilet paper and felt the blood come to his cheeks. He ran the tap to avoid answering and fussed with the head of the razor. The blades were shiny and sharp against the pad of his thumb. He said,

*What did Lola say about the baby?*

Mumma flushed the toilet and smoothed out her skirt. *She was not overjoyed.*

*She'll get used to it.*

Mumma elbowed him aside and rinsed her hands at the basin. She looked at him with his dripping soap-sud beard and asked, *Are you used to it?*

Mister looked down as he ran his thumb nail between the two razor blades and said, *Yes Margaret.*

Mumma's eyes were wide and wet in the darkness. *Tell me more about what you saw up North.*

Mister rearranged his arms behind his head. Tufts of hair sprouted from his armpits, fluffy from his evening bath. Mumma blew on them and he flinched.

*The country goes on and on. It's flat. A bit of salt bush to break the sameness.*

Mumma blinked. *Sounds yucky.*

Mister sighed. *No. It's all right. But it's not home.*

*Where's home?*

Mister swallowed. *Here.*

Mumma buried her face in his armpit and screwed her nose deep into the cavity.

She said,

*I can feel the baby moving these days.*

Mister closed his eyes and whispered, *What's it like?*

She took his hands and placed them on her slightly rounded belly. *Like bubbles popping and wings flapping. Like I'm going to do a pop-off—but not really the same.*

They shared a moment of silence. A cricket started up outside their window.

*Margie... When I was away, I thought about the baby a lot.*

Mumma rested her left ear on his chest and listened to air filling his lungs. She said, *Did it make you happy?*

Eventually he answered. *It made me scared.*

Mumma belted peanuts in a bread bag with an empty beer bottle. She paused, patted her belly and giggled to Lola,

*We might wake the baby.*

Mumma spoke often of the baby. Lola noticed. She clung to Mumma's shins and strained for tears. Mumma told her that she was the big girl now and she was the special baby helper and special baby helpers did not cry, not unless they were hurt very, very badly. Mumma melted sugar and added the crushed nuts. Peanut brittle was a special treat because it used such a lot of Mumma's sugar store. She poured the toffee into a 'L' shape.

*L for my little lolly, Lola.*

Lola could barely wait for the toffee to cool. She whinged and whined so much Mumma had to turn up the radio as a distraction. After fifteen minutes Mumma could stand the pleading no more and thrust the golden 'L' at Lola.

*If you burn your tongue it's your own fault.*

Lola sucked and stared up at Mumma through her eyelashes. Her cheeks were dappled with heat and puffed with air, her lips sticky with sugar, pouting and down turned. Mumma was irritated by the thud of her daughter's heels as she moped around the kitchen after her. She was sick of the sulks and the sighs and suddenly exclaimed, *Snap out of it Lola Belle or I shall whip that sugar suck away before you can say 'butternut pumpkin'!*

Lola sprang tears and Mumma snatched the peanut brittle away.

*I warned you. Sulky girls do not get sweets. Now shoo! Go out into the garden and amuse yourself.*

Mumma watched Lola as she wandered around the garden. She had a stick in her hand and she whipped the backs of her legs like she would a horse. Mumma frowned. Why did she do that? Mumma smoothed her palms over her belly and gasped as Lola took the stick in both hands and whacked herself over the head. Mumma went to rap at the window but she wanted to see what Lola would do next. A plover flew overhead and caught the child's attention. Her face tipped to the sky, squinting at the bird, Lola hit her head one last time and then put the butt of the stick in her mouth. Mumma shook her head. She wondered what was wrong with the child. She closed her eyes and let her forehead rest against the cold glass of the window. Had she done something wrong? Had she been too snappy? Had she fed Lola something which had upset her stomach, made her dizzy in the head? Mumma squeezed her eyelids tighter still and could not help but think of all the hidden things,



of her mother and father, of Clive and Dennis and Dandy and, of course, of Lola's real Daddy with his soft, cool fingers, milky skin and blue-black eyes. Mumma shook her head again, shook those heavy thoughts right out of her ears. Perhaps Lola was deficient in something, some vitamin or mineral. Dr Warren had proved no help when it came to her fears regarding Lolly's development. The last time she had consulted him, he had said that Mumma's anxiety was the main problem in the child's life, that she, Mumma, was quite clearly neurotic and recommended she read a key text by three eminent psychologists from the United States of America. Mumma had never looked the book up. She had gone home and written in her medical record, *Lola Belle—just fine. Ribena for vitamin C and fluororide tablets for healthy teeth.* She watched Lolly drop the stick, pull the trowel from the herb bed and proceed to lick it. She remembered what Ernest had said about Lolly eating droppings, dirt, leaves and rust, about the risk of her getting poisoned. Perhaps she should take the child to Adelaide to see some sort of specialist. Mumma started. Quite suddenly there was a flash of memory. Her mother use to feed her aspirin crushed into a teaspoon of honey. She remembered the sweet fizz and felt somewhat soothed.

Mumma wrote to her mother sitting at the kitchen table while an apple cake baked and a cup of tea went cold. When she paused to consider a word or a turn of phrase, she decorated the edge of the writing paper with swirls and smiling faces and star fish and seagulls. It was not since last summer that she had written. Her mother always sent gifts at Christmas and birthdays and Mumma always replied. She missed her brothers, the farm and the warm-milk smell of her mother, but she made it clear that she was forging a life alone. The fact that she had been removed from the family home, taken across the Southern Ocean to a crumbling cottage on an island would

always make her guts churn. She had decided that no amount of hedgehog or caramel toffee or coconut ice could make up for it.

Mumma inhaled the sweet cinnamon of baking apple cake. *Dear Mother...* She sketched a pelican with a ribbon of seaweed hanging from its mouth. *Sorry for not writing sooner. As usual, I have been busy with your grand-daughter. She is three, you will remember, and quite lovely.* Mumma tapped the end of the pen against her teeth and wondered if her mother would ever be persuaded to visit. *I have more news to share. My husband has given me another baby and it is presently in my tummy. Maybe when the sweet pea is born you could come to visit and bring Clive and Dennis, but maybe Father could not do without you.* Mumma paused, cocked her head at her drawings and smiled. They looked ever so funny. She hoped Mother would like them. *Maybe you could post me a recipe or two. At the moment I like things with buttermilk. Happy wishes from Margaret.*

Mister was afraid of the pictures Mumma showed him in the battered medical textbook. She licked her thumb and turned the pages too enthusiastically. Couldn't she see she was damaging the paper? Mister concentrated on the movement of pages, on the layout of text, on stains and signs of age, on dog-eared corners and the nibbles of silverfish. He nodded automatically and imagined the sea in his ears—anything but hear her excitement for anatomy and anything but see those gruesome pictures.

*See Mister?* Mumma balanced the book on its spine. *First the bastula. It's called that until it implants in the squishy old womb. Then this is the zygote. What a funny little chap he is! And this one. This one's at six weeks. Look here! Isn't it just like a little lizard. See? The tail? Here you can see the fingers and toes. Here the eyes. Fancy all that happening inside my tummy. Fancy that, Mister and you made it*

*all happen with your little white tadpoles.* Mumma stuck out her chin and beamed. Her face seemed redder and fatter than ever before and Mister wondered if she would ever stop swelling. Her changing body made him anxious. It was not quite like before, with Lola. This was different. Mumma seemed huge.

Over the months Mumma continued to grow and grow until she was double, maybe triple the size of Mister. He wondered if his body would ever catch up. The women folk in town often took it upon themselves to comment on his physique. *Oh!* They would exclaim. *I see you're still as thin as a twig. Doesn't that wife of yours feed you?* They would offer to pass on recipes, gesture towards the bakery or the butcher, poke at his ribs with their arthritic fingers. They would say things like, *You should see my Michael. He's as big as a house next to you!* One day a woman stopped him and said, *I hear you're to be a father.* Mister nodded and watched storm water disappear down a drain. *Why!* the woman clucked *Aren't you just the man about town!* She pulled back her lips and bared her yellow teeth in a wide, smug smile. Mister took to bowing his head and examining his boots, the cracks in the curb, squashed cigarette butts, fallen leaves, hoping for the familiarity of ants. He crossed the road when he recognized someone, learnt the art of avoidance, but he felt the insecurity gnawing away at his guts.

Mister dropped a bundle of magazines onto the kitchen table and said, *From Mrs Walker.*

Mumma was chewing the gristle from last night's leg of lamb. She was glossy around the chops. She scraped bone and said, *You know they don't interest me.*

Mister opened the fridge and drank milk straight from the bottle. *Well, Mrs Walker said there's some stuff on getting one's figure back after birthin.*

Mumma slammed the bone down on the sink making dirty cutlery chime. *I am eating for two, Mister. It's a medical fact. You seem to say nothing but nasties about me being too fat.*

Mister looked at the floor. He had a moustache of milk.

Mumma's voice quavered. *Am I really so horrible?*

Mister looked up at her, at her red face slick with lamb-fat, at her chin sinking into the folds of flesh at her throat. Her wet eyes caught the light and Mister focused on her frizz of hair. He said, *It's my birthday today. I'm twenty.*

Mumma did it with Mister for a birthday treat. She had gone off doing it since the early days, when simply the sight of him in his patched up jeans with his thin fingers hooked in the gills of a fish would flip her stomach. She sat up on top of him with her pink nightie hitched around her hips. She had gone to take it off, but Mister grabbed hold of the hem. He had called her pretty and screwed his eyes shut. Mumma's back ached with all the rocking. She looked down on her bulging belly and wondered if the tip of Mister's thing nudged their unborn child. She tittered to herself. What an awful shock that would be. Mister bucked, the bed squeaked and Mumma thought of sugar mice.

Lolly woke to a noise in the night. She heard something scamper across the floor. It crawled over the toys under her bed, toppled over a pile of wooden blocks, set free a bag of marbles. She listened with her eyes wide, chewed at her fingers and bit at her nails as it found her box of secrets. She heard the rustle of wax paper, the metallic crackle of foil, the tearing of cardboard. Cornflakes crunched, nuts cracked and eggs broke. Lola hugged herself and held onto a lung-full of breath. There was

more pattering across the floor, more clatter amongst the marbles and then a piercing squeal. Lola exhaled through her open mouth. It was rats. She fumbled for her bedside light and finding the switch she saw two rats run from under her bed to the old fireplace. Lola put her lamp on the floor and slid under the bed. The rats had made a mess. They had spilled her secrets everywhere. Lola was still woozy with sleep. Her fingers were clumsy with torn paper and foil, she tried to get things back in their packets and boxes but it was all too hard. There was only one thing to do. Lola swept the mess into a pile with the side of her hand, lay down on her stomach with her chin on the floor, opened her mouth, slid forward and ate. She was about half way through the pile when her bedroom light came on. She stopped chewing and waited. Mumma was big with baby but she could make herself as light as a feather on Lola's floorboards.

*Lola Belle what are you up to?*

Lola spat her half-chewed mouthful into her hand and wished some words would come. She felt Mumma's cold hands slide around her ankles and in a flash she was dragged out from under the bed. She clambered to her feet and pulled her pyjama top down to cover her exposed midriff. The chewed food was wet and warm in her right hand.

*What are you doing under the bed in the middle of the night?*

Lola frowned, put her clenched fist behind her back and said, *Rats under there.*

*Big ones.*

Mumma sighed, *What's in your hand?*

*Nothing.*

*What's in your hand?*

Lola bit her teeth together and closed her eyes.

Mumma stepped towards her shaking her head, *You're being such a naughty girl these days.* She took Lola's hand, prised it open with her pink fingernails and clicked her tongue.

*What is this?*

Lola ground her teeth.

*What were you eating under your bed like a sly, slippery snake?*

Lola let the chewed food fall, wiped her hand on her pyjama pants and said, *Secrets.*

Mumma frowned. *No secrets in this house, Lola Belle. No secrets. No wonder there are rats.* She gestured to Lola's bed. *Go back to sleep and tomorrow you can clean up this mess.*

Lola climbed up into her bed and wiggled under the blankets. She was worried that her secrets had been spilled and afraid of Mumma's anger. The love stopped when Mumma was angry. *Mumma, can you tell me a story? I like Mazing Lola Belle and the beach made of sugar.*

Mumma gathered her forehead like ripples in sand and shook her head slowly. *Not now, Lolly. It's too late. The baby needs me to rest.* She turned off the bedside lamp, flicked the light switch and left the room. Lola lay back in the dark and her eyes rolled in their struggle to focus. She tried to think up the pictures of Mumma's story, to see the beautiful Lola scooping warm sugar-sand in her hands, to see her set her treacle hair free and run into the ocean after the dolphins, but all she saw was shadows. She was empty of pictures without Mumma. It hurt to be empty. Lolly heard the rats under the floor boards. She thought of her secrets and listened for them gurgling in her guts. Eventually the sounds of digestion lulled her back to sleep.

Mumma was knitting a cardigan in the softest yellow wool. The garment was so tiny, so small and lovely it made her eyes smart. The baby would be a precious thing, just like Lola Belle was, wrapped in wool, with a love heart for lips and a sugar jube for a nose. The knitting needles clickety-clacked and Mumma felt a rush of happiness. This was how things should be: Mister in his chair stooped over a book, Lola moulding sausages out of red play dough, the baby resting easy on the squish of her insides.

*What's under here? What's hiding?*

Mumma looked up. Lola had her head under the length of velvet, looking up at the old television set. On top, Mumma's best tea set shuddered and one of the little cups fell off its saucer.

*Careful, Lolly. You'll break something.*

Lola pulled her head out and blinked at Mumma. *What is that? Is it a window?*

Mumma shook her head.

*Is it a mirror?*

*No. It's a television.*

Lola cocked her head and frowned.

Mumma stopped knitting mid-row, struck that Lolly would never have seen television before. Not television. Not even a movie on the big screen.

*Can I play with it?*

*It's broken.*

Lola kicked her legs and crossed her arms. *Will Mister fix it?*

Mumma freed a length of wool and started knitting again. *No. It needs to go to a special shop to get fixed—probably to Adelaide.* Perhaps they should have the television fixed. It would be educational for Lola and would keep her occupied while

Mumma was busy with the new baby. Lola bounced on her bottom for Mumma's attention. She huffed and puffed and scowled. After some time she went back to her play dough. She squashed her sausages, mashed them together, shaped the dough into a cube and held it up for observation.

*It's a television.*

Mumma took a look. *That's nice.*

*You can't play with it.* Mumma raised her eyebrows and went back to her knitting. Lola bit off a chunk of the dough, chewed for a while and then spat the mess onto the floor.

Just days from the date Dr Warren had predicted for the baby's birth, Mumma could not get out of bed. Mister stuck his head around the bedroom door. He was frowning. He said,

*Is there no breakfast today?*

Mumma was watching the slow movement of cobwebs, hanging like dusty nets from the ceiling. She thought they looked like strands of hair pulling and pushing and fanning under water. It was a long time since she had been swimming.

Mister licked his lips. *Margaret?*

Mumma flared her nostrils and exhaled. *Surely you can manage to make toast.*

*Well, yes. I just wondered if you were cooking today.*

Mumma felt herself sink further into the mattress. She had a burning feeling in her guts. She wanted a cup of sweet tea. *Is Lolly up?*

*No.*

*I suppose you're heading out.*

*Yes. After I've had toast.*



*What about the baby?*

Mister swallowed.

*What if it comes today?*

Mister's hands scratched nervously at his thighs.

*Will it come today?*

*I don't know. I'm not a doctor, Mister.*

*Shall I stay near-by, then?*

*Yes.*

*Shall I try for some fish?*

Mumma shrugged. Mister looked at her swollen feet sticking out from under the bed clothes. Her pink soles looked tender.

*I might try for some fish.*

Lola found Mumma asleep in the middle of the big bed. She was on her back, belly up, legs straight, arms bent and spread like a baby bird without feathers. Lola climbed up next to her and put her hand above Mumma's mouth. Her breath was hot and made Lolly's hand moist. Mumma smelt nice. Warm. A bit stinky, but familiar stinky. Mumma looked nice. Big and round and red. A ripe tomato or a baked potato in sauce. Lolly lifted Mumma's nightie and rested her head on her tummy. Mumma moaned but did not wake up. Lolly slid a finger under the elastic of Mumma's undies. They had pressed white ridges into her skin. She ran her fingertip over the marks and pushed her ear deeper into Mumma's flesh. There was no sound today. No gurgling. There was no movement. Usually the baby pushed back at Lola. Mumma said that the little one was trying to get to know her, to play with her. Not today. Lolly wondered if

it had already come out while Mumma was sleeping. She sat up and looked around. There was no baby.

Flour exploded into a mixing bowl and dusted Lolly in white. She smashed two eggs against china, sucked thick albumen from her fingers, splashed milk and a generous dash of vanilla essence and poured a mountain of sugar. She sat on the kitchen floor with the bowl in between her legs and stirred the mixture with a big wooden spoon. She drew circles in the runny dough with the spoon—two circles, twice around the bowl—then plunged her fingers in, right up to the knuckle. Lolly licked and slurped and nodded to herself. The mixture tasted milky and sweet and warm with vanilla. She lifted the bowl onto the kitchen bench and a little batter slopped over the edge down the front of her pyjamas onto the floor. She dragged a chair to the bench, climbed up and turned the front right hotplate on. She put a frypan on the stove, dropped a dob of butter and watched it slowly melt. She had seen Mumma do this many, many times. Mumma took the pan in her right hand and tipped it so the butter danced around and around, leaving a tail of yellow. Lolly did not try this. The pan was too heavy and it was too hard to manoeuvre herself sitting up on the kitchen bench amongst the canisters, utensils and tea cups. The butter melted, bubbled, hissed and then browned and Lolly, frowning to herself that the pan should be hot, kissed a spoonful of batter and then dribbled it in a spiral until it closed in on itself. Again, she scooped and spooned, kissed and dribbled. She cocked her head and considered the proportion, then took the bowl in both hands and poured. The mixture bubbled in the pan with a halo of burnt butter. It did not look quite the same as when Mumma made pikelets, but that did not worry Lolly. These were her own, special recipe. These were drop scones with love. Lolly sucked the batter off the front of her pyjamas and hummed through her pursed lips. She sang, *Yummy, Mummy, yummy,*

*lots of love in my tummy*, bounced on the sideboard and watched the bubbles in the batter swell and pop. *When the bubbles pop, it's time to slop*. That's what Mumma always said. Lolly took the spatula in both hands and worked it under the edge. A little smoke puffed out. Lolly bit her lips and worked the spatula. Steam was hot on her forearms and the pikelet was huge with all the love she had added. She tilted the pikelet but it was too heavy for her to flip and it folded over onto itself. Lolly kicked her legs and grunted. She pulled the two sides apart and tried to flip it again. This time it flopped over the side of the pan and raw mixture bled and burnt against the hot element. Lolly pushed and pulled and got the pikelet back in the pan. It was torn down the middle and the underside was patterned by rings of black, but Lolly smiled. For a short while she watched it rise. Then she climbed down off the bench, opened a tin of golden syrup, scooped a tablespoon of butter and up-ended the fry-pan onto a plate. It was a very big pikelet—the biggest she had ever seen. It did not want to come out of the pan and Lolly had to whack with a spoon until it broke away. She dropped the dollop of butter, drizzled the syrup and beamed. Her heart fluttered in her tummy and her cheeks flushed. She had made Mumma breakfast.

Lolly had to rest twice on the way to Mumma's bedroom, the pikelet was that heavy. She put the plate on the floor, gulped on air and continued her shuffle. Her fingers were sticky and itchy and her arms ached with all the weight. She put the plate on the pillow next to Mumma's face and climbed up after it. She got golden syrup on the sheets, but she did not fuss. Mumma was in a deep sleep with her mouth wide open. There was a gum of white saliva at the corner of her mouth and her lips were withered and cracked. Lolly dipped a finger in melted butter and soothed the chapping. Mumma woke with a start and the pikelet slid off its plate. She licked her

lips and rubbed her eyes while Lolly peeled the breakfast off the bedclothes and returned it to the plate.

*Morning love, Mumma,* Lolly grinned, radiating red with all her efforts.  
*Morning love.*

Mumma blinked at her daughter and forced a smile. She did not feel right or good. She felt heavy as failed pastry. A dead weight. Indigestible. The morning smelled burnt.

*Good morning, Lolly. Why don't you play outside. I need more dream time.*

Lolly wiggled closer on her haunches. She was shaking her head. *But I've made you breakfast—morning love.* Lolly took the plate in both hands and rested it on Mumma's chest, right under her nose. *It's the biggest drop scone with a hundred cups of love and a hundred cups of butter and sweet.*

Mumma looked down her nose at the great rubbery thing, burnt, torn, lumpy, swimming in butter and syrup and oozing raw batter. She looked up at Lolly, her first baby, her sweet pea, her sugar cake, her little dumpling. The child sat inside her mashed potato skin with her greasy cheeks glowing. Mumma saw the flour in her hair, the batter on her pyjamas and the stumps of teeth set low in her pink gums when she widened her smile. Today Mumma thought love smelled like burnt milk. It made tears come.

*Oh Lolly. It's ever so nice of you to make me breakfast, but I'm not very hungry. This baby takes up a lot of room in my tummy.*

Lolly's face fell, her heavy cheeks hanging slack at her jaw. Mumma did not have room for her love. She was full with baby. Lolly put her sticky fingers in her mouth and gnawed her nails with her back teeth.

Mumma heaved herself up, closed her eyes and said, *Just a little taste, then. To make you happy, my pumpkin pie.* She tore a strip off the pikelet. It was so thick the middle was raw. She put it in her mouth and her stomach knotted. It was too slippery with butter, too sweet, too cloying. She moved it around her mouth and stretched her lips into a smile.

*Lovely, Lolly. How about you get Mumma a drink of water. There's a good girl.*

Lolly sprang off the bed and bounced down the hallway. Mumma spat the pikelet into her hand and shoved it under her pillow. She ripped the remaining part in two and put one half under the bedclothes. She did not care about grease on her pillow or sticky syrup on the sheets. She was preoccupied with the pain. Lolly came back with her glass of water. Mumma said, *You can have the rest. I'm full as a goog. Take it outside and find Mister. Tell him it's time for a drive.*

Lolly skipped out of the room filling her cheeks. Mumma lay back on cold pikelet and felt the pain seize her.

On the way to the hospital, Mister dropped Lola off at his dad's place. She cried and pleaded but he did not want her hanging around him while he paced the sterile hospital linoleum. He had a churning in his guts which felt like the beginnings of the trots. He needed a beer, or something. Something to stop the tremors. Margie was sat beside him gripping at the seat, her face contorted with the pain. He remembered the last trip to the hospital, when she was ready to drop her Lola Belle. Things were different then. More simple. The love was less messy. Mister was risking it going so fast on the dirt, but he didn't want the baby coming too soon, messing the cabin of his ute. Dust rose and swirled and enveloped them like they were in a tunnel. Mumma

started to cry. Her face was red. Her hair was wet. Mister concentrated on the road. He gripped the wheel and said,

*There, there, my Margie. Not long now.*

They turned a corner and found the bitumen.

Mister fell asleep across three chairs. He had paced and waited, paced and checked the clock for many hours. A front had passed. Day had gone. The night was clear and sharp. He woke cold and sore. He was hungry. He approached a nurse and asked after his wife. She said, *You may go in. It's perfectly all right to go in. In fact it's hospital policy* but he held up his hand and said, *No I can't. I can't go in.* He sat back down and stared at his knees. It was difficult being a man in his boy's body. His legs wanted to run him outside into the darkness, along the road, down the track, through the scrub and out to the sea.

Mumma experienced the birth as if it were part dream, part fantasy. Things looked different, colours dulled and blurred, shapes not clearly distinguished. Objects moved when they should not have. Tables floated. Nurses melted into walls. Mumma was aware of the sweet smell of blood. She felt painted and sticky with it. She moved her arm and believed she was swimming in it. She thought of the mulberry tree back home, of stained hands, dead ants, jam bubbling on the stove, of prunes stewed in port, of the limp rabbits on the front door step messy with gun shot. There was hurried talking, clanging metal, a man yelling, buzzing, beeping, throbbing pulse, the roar of the ocean. There were bright lights burning and spinning skies. There was the silent tearing of flesh, the gush and splatter of fluid hitting the floor. Mumma heard someone say, *So Blue... So very blue...* over and over. She thought that her new baby

must have ocean eyes like its daddy, Robin; glassy, blue eyes, mirroring the sky on that day in December. Twelve noon. A man at the end of the train line. A man with a sketch pad and a sauce sandwich. White bread. Gold butter. Home-made rich, red tomato sauce. She smelt sweet vinegar and paint. If it was a girl they had made, she would be Lola-Belle. Mumma wanted to ask if it was a girl but no sound would come. Blue eyes. Baby blue. *So very blue.* Mumma imagined Robin was smiling. He had his lips at her ear. *Our baby Belle. I'll paint her in yellow.*

Mister fell through the hospital doors and was slapped in the face by the night. It was a bitter cold that burned and stung and numbed and shocked. It was a worry not to feel his legs, not to feel the tense and strength of his thighs. He felt as though he had been severed at the waist, as if he had dissolved into air. He stumbled into the dark and was shocked by the pain of his cold feet, his toes rubbing raw against leather, his ankle bones grinding with each wobbly step into the nothing-night. He walked through the white cloud of his breath and stopped. He turned slowly and looked back over his shoulder at the hospital, at its white light, its squares and angle, corners and points. He blinked at all that new concrete and steel and knew that somewhere inside was a woman who was his wife—a woman emptied of his dead child.

Mister had smelt blood many times, but the hospital smelt only of disinfectant. He coughed and retched and started to run. He ran like he could run right off the edge of the earth. It would be easier than what would come next. The thing that gnawed the most was not the death, not the loss, but the relief.

Back in the hospital there was little sign of a new day. The curtains were drawn. Mister leant against a wall and stared at the floor. Such a swirling of blue-grey. He

was vaguely aware of being dizzy. He knew he should be tired and he most definitely should be hungry as many hours had passed since he had eaten. He wondered if Margie had packed any sandwiches. He had a sudden hunger for cold lamb on white bread. It was a hunger that connected to something from the past—a moment with his dad out on Butler’s property. Lunchtime. Sun high. Ernest had pulled two great sandwiches from his bag, *Compliments of Mrs Butler*. Mister remembered the moment as the first time he had eaten food made by a woman. They unwrapped the foil and within the parcels were thick slices of homemade bread spread with dripping and generous chunks of cold roast lamb. Mister recalled his dad nodding, tearing off a mouthful and saying, *Now that’s a man’s sandwich*. There was an extended pause while they chewed until Ernest said, *Your mother made a good sandwich*.

Mister wondered if he had heard right. He had never really considered the idea that he had a mother. He said, *What did she put on them?*

Ernest squinted at the view, *Metwurst, cheese, mustard and onion*.

A sheep trotted past, shitting a dotted trail.

*What was she called?*

*Jean*.

Ernest rocked back and forth a few times, wiped his mouth, rubbed his eyes, turned his face from his son. Mister felt uneasy, embarrassed. His legs twitched. He wanted to finish eating and get back to work. It was better to be standing with the wind in his ears, handing nails to his father when he clicked his big, rough fingers. He took another bite of his sandwich, chewed twice and discovered something foreign in his mouthful. He stopped chewing and spat into his hands. His dad looked at him, frowning and Mister said,

*It’s a stick*.



Ernest snatched the sandwich from him and snapped, *It's not a bloody stick. It's rosemary. It flavours the meat. Now pick up the nails and stop being such a bloody girl.*

Mister stood up with his face burning. His father snatched the sandwich off him and forced it into his own mouth.

The pain of hunger was acute. Mister felt weak, broken. He should not have run all that way on an empty stomach. He had run through the night to his dad's house, but was unable to go inside. It was too much to deliver those words. The Doctor had made him blush.

*The infant did not make it. The infant has passed away. I am sorry for your loss.*

Mister had said, *Oh* and pursed his lips. He watched the Doctor raise his eyebrows at a nurse, check his watch, spin on the block heels of his black leather shoes and leave. The nurse asked Mister if he wanted a cup of sweet tea. He shook his head. He wanted to ask what happened but the nurse was old enough to be his mother and it just didn't seem right.

Mister blinked himself back into his body. He rubbed his eyes and the hospital room sharpened in his vision. A nurse was in front of him. She was talking. She said, *Did you hear me? Mrs Armstrong is ready to see you.*

He focused on the movement of her mouth.

*Your wife.*

It took a lot to get his legs to move. They had stiffened into tree trunk and rooted him to the spot.

*Come on now. This is a difficult time for her.*

Mister shuffled on dead legs through the space the nurse had drawn in the curtains. He heard her rubber soles squelch on linoleum as she left the room.

Margaret pulled herself up on her elbows. She was as pale as milk and her lips were split. Mister could not look at her face. The air was too thick between them. He felt his thighs tense, his calves contract, his buttocks clench. He looked at the neck line of the surgical gown she was wearing, concentrated on focussing. White cotton. Hospital issue. Safe. When she spoke, her voice was strained through the rigid tendons in her neck. She said, *It was probably the cord. She was probably strangled in the umbilical cord.*

Mister nodded and stared hard at those neat stitches. He was thankful for her sensible explanation.

*I will stay in here for ten days. I am in recovery. You should collect Lola Belle from Ernest and tell her the news. Perhaps you will inquire about fixing the television set.*

Mister nodded again. His throat had seized so tight it was difficult to breathe. He rested a hand on the bulge of her foot under the hospital blanket, squeezed her toes so hard he wondered about breaking bone. Somewhere a phone rang. Mister waved his hand to indicate he was leaving and ran his hand along the curtains to find the join in the fabric. His hands were stained against hospital white and he watched the fumbling of his thin fingers, sun-baked, scarred and scratched, so stiff and clumsy, scrabbling, pulling, desperately searching for an out, yanking, then ripping the curtains from the rod. Margaret turned her head away from him. A nurse came briskly. Mister tripped up on the yards of fabric, slipped again, found his feet, ran out of the room, along the corridor, down the stairs and out through the sliding doors into a cold dawn.

Mumma had been sedated. She slept with her mouth gaping while the cleaner mopped around her bed with pine disinfectant. Mumma had become disturbed. Doctor Warren had shaken his head and flicked air bubbles out of a syringe with a forefinger. She had woken from night terrors, raving about baby blue, about beautiful Robin and about burnt custard. She had sat bolt upright, seized Doctor Warren by the arms and screamed over the death of Lola Belle. He had stiffened like a board, frowning at her claw-like fingers and explained that it was not Lola Belle who had died. It was her second child. The legitimate one. Lola Belle was alive and supervised. Margaret's eyes stared right through his face and she sobbed that her father was right; the child would be trouble. She was sure to get the strap for this. Dr Warren swallowed and decided it best she was sedated before she said something she would regret. He measured the dose, swabbed a spot on her upper arm and injected enough sedative to knock her out for eight hours—long enough, he predicted, for the confusion to dissipate.

While Margaret slept, Doctor Warren phoned Doctor Wright and delivered the news.

*I'm afraid she was quite hysterical. Her fever was high, she was ranting and raving—quite nonsensical. She has been sedated and I think I will prescribe something to keep her quiet over the ensuing weeks. Does that meet with your approval Dr Wright?*

There was a long silence.

*Dr Wright? Hello?* Doctor Warren tapped the phone with his pen. Had the line gone dead? He listened for a few moments and heard the drawing of breath.

*Yes. Excuse me. I'm here. I was just... momentarily... preoccupied. Thank you for phoning Doctor Warren.*

There was a click and Doctor Wright hung up.

Lolly said, *Ernest made me bread and butter and sugar.*

Mister nodded and kept his eyes on the road.

*I had it for breakfast and for lunch and for tea and also for afters. It was a long time I stayed there.*

*Four nights.*

*'Cause Mumma was sick.*

*Yes.*

*I didn't like it.*

*Well, we're going home now.*

*Is Mumma there?*

*No.*

*Is the baby?*

*No.*

*Is it still dead?*

*Yes. Mister felt crook. It will always be dead, Lola. Dead things stay dead.*

*Mumma's not dead.*

*No.*

*Are you Daddy, like in the stories?*

Mister swallowed. *What stories?*

*Are you my daddy?*

*Do you want me to be?*

Lolly shrugged. *OK. Can I have icecream?*

Mister glanced over at her, her little legs crossed underneath her, her hands clasped neatly in her lap. The tightness of his throat scared him. He took a big breath, reached across and patted her on the head.

*I'll see what I can do.*

Lolly ran straight into Mumma's bedroom and leapt up on her side of the bed. She nuzzled the sheets and smelt for Mumma. There was a stink—a sort of sweetness and a whiff of grease and something else. Lolly found the pikelet stuck to the bedclothes. It was bad. It made stains on Mumma's best sheets. Lolly screwed up her nose, licked at the congealed mess, gagged on the taste and realised what she had done. She had made the new baby dead with all that butter love. She had done it. Fear hollowed her guts. She peeled the old pikelet from the sheets and hid them down the front of her pants. She ran through the house, out over the lawn and into the scrub. In panic, she panted and dug a hole in the sand, her hands moving furiously, breaking roots, scraping stone. She looked behind her, to the left, to the right, checking that no one spied on her—naughty Lolly, bad Lolly going straight to Hell. She pulled the pikelet from her pants, dropped it in the hole and kicked at the sand until it was completely covered.

Mister called out from the kitchen, his voice breaking. *Lola?*

She rubbed her face into her blanket and licked at the salty snot.

*Lola, I've run your bath. You get in while I go tie up the boat.*

He knew she was in her room. He had been watching her through her window, wondering what sense she was making of all this, wondering if she was as sad as she looked.

*Lola? You hear me?*

There was movement from her room, her foot steps heavy on the floorboards.  
*OK.*

The boat rose and dipped on the swell, slapping the sea, exploding air. Mister watched the swirling of cloud, the rock and tilt of the horizon and felt the whole world spinning in motion. He had never really noted the extent of his powerlessness. All he need do was lie back against the grain, let the stagnant water seep into his skin and be disappeared out at sea. There was not much to him. The gulls would take his eyes. The sun would take his skin. Wind blew his tears sideways across his temples and into his hair and the land withdrew from view. His sight blurred on blue-grey, thoughts lulled into oceanic gurgles and tears dried to a suggestion of salt. He let himself drift for some minutes until he remembered Lola in the bath.

Lolly had sat in the bath until the suds melted into scum and goose bumps had prickled her skin. She called out to Mister, again and again, but he did not come. Mumma used to stay with her when she was in the bath, dipping the flannel into the water and wringing it out over her head, back and shoulders. Mumma used to make a fist, scoop suds and offer Lolly a foamy icecream and Lolly used to lick the bubbles spitting and spluttering when the soap bit into her tongue. Mumma would rub-a-dub-dubb her until she was buffed pink, until her hair stood up in matted spikes. She would roll the towel into a sausage horse and Lolly straddled brown Trixie, trotting

on the spot until her front bottom was dry. Mumma would bite the tip of her nose and say, *Mmmm. Cherry.* Or, *Mmmm. Raspberry tart.* That was before the baby was big. Before the baby was big and dead. Lolly wondered about what dead felt like. Probably cold. As cold and shivery as she was, sitting in the grey water. There was no Mumma and no Mister. Lolly clambered out of the bath and slipped up on the tiles. She was not hurt. Not physically. She sobbed into brown Trixie until she was empty. Then she put on her favourite sun dress, her old jeans and her red rubber boots, went outside, pulled back the tangle of jasmine and squeezed under the house.

Mumma woke in a haze. She felt exhausted, drained of energy and as heavy as wood. For some moments she did not remember where she was or what had happened. She wavered on the edge of sleep, her eyes flickering in and out of focus, the memory of blood shocking, then fading, shocking then fading. When her eyes finally opened, she looked straight into the face of her mother.

*My baby died.*

Her mother put her knuckles on the bed and nodded. *I know. I'm terribly sorry, Margie.*

Mumma supposed she was dreaming. She had not heard her mother speak like that before.

*I have brought you some rice pudding and a bunch of sultana grapes straight from the vine. You need your strength. There is still Lola Belle and your husband to think of.*

Mumma sunk deeper into the bed. Lola Belle. Little Lolly lick stick. *What day is it?*

Her mother stuck a spoon in the rice pudding and said, *It is Sunday and we are going home.*

Margaret sat up and winced on the pain of torn flesh and seized muscle. *To the farm? We're going home to the farm?* Clive and Dennis would be stringy teenagers now. Her mother held a spoon of pudding at Margaret's lips and said,

*No. I have come to stay at your house for a little while. Just until you are well. Your father is being attended by Aunt Nancy.*

Margaret took a mouthful of sweet, sticky pudding and felt tears spring to her eyes. *Am I ill?*

Her mother continued to feed her, scraping the ooze of cream from the corner of her mouth.

*You will suffer with this.* She pointed the spoon at Margaret's head, tapping the silver gently against her daughter's temple. *You will suffer.*

After two hours of desperate rowing Mister hit rock. He jumped into waist-deep, churning water and dragged the boat to the shallows. He guessed he must be a couple of miles away from home as he started to walk. The boat was heavy and difficult to pull. It bounced, slid and jumped over the waves, yanking his arm from the socket in his shoulder. Mister was hot with blood. What if Lolly had drowned in the bath? What if she had stood, slipped, whacked her head and fallen, face down into the water? It would be too much for Margie to bear and she would go dumb with all the loss. Mister felt sick with the exertion, dehydrated, weak, numbed. His stomach churned with confusion and contracted with fear. He felt something cold and grey swell inside him, fill the tubes in his guts, course through his blood stream to the tips of his fingers, the ends of his toes, tingle the hair follicles on his scalp. Curious gulls



hovered overhead, casting black fluid shadows. Mister realised it was the first time he had been out in the boat and not caught a fish. It struck him that only days ago a couple of good whiting would have made Margie better. A few days ago he would have felt proud, walking up the driveway with his thumbs hooked in blood red gills, walking into his reflection in the kitchen door, knowing she was behind the glass, smiling to herself, reaching for the butter and the foil, anticipating an impromptu taste of fresh fish. The bottom of the boat gouged sand and rope tore and burned the skin of Mister's hands. He paused and looked back on the distance he had walked. Salt spray misted the view. He had never let himself drift before. Never. It was too dangerous. He felt his guts flip and collapse and had to drop his pants and shit in the shallows. He washed himself in the surf, fastened his pants, dug his heels into wet sand, leapt out of his skin and sprinted into the wind. It would take all his strength to out-run this fear.

Lolly woke with the thundering of feet on the floorboards above her. Wood creaked, dust rained, cobwebs shuddered, rats scooted down their holes and fleas jumped. Lolly chewed the puffed sleeve of her sun dress and frowned into the darkness. There were voices. They were dull from travelling through wood. Lolly sat up on her knees with her ear tipped to the floor. She heard the kettle being filled and set on the stove and she heard Mumma say,

*Perhaps they're at Ernest's or perhaps they've gone into town to collect the television.*

The other voice was as quiet as a whisper. Lolly wondered if the dead baby had got fixed and had come home with Mumma. That would be a miracle because dead things stay dead. Lolly remembered old Bertha when Mister snapped her neck. She

tried to stay alive, kicking her yellow legs and bending her claws, but soon she went sloppy and dirt stuck to her eyes. Lolly pulled her rubber boots on and crawled along the dirt towards the front of the house. Her weight collapsed rat holes and she sunk into damp earth. There were egg shells, chop bones and pumpkin skins and the smell of the rodents' nests made her snort through her nostrils.

*Margaret, sit down.* Her mother pushed firmly aside, took the kettle and poured it over the tea leaves. She sorted through the refrigerator, opened cupboard doors, lifted the lids on canisters and said,

*Flour. Where is your store of flour?*

Mumma went to stand and was abruptly seated by a raised hand. She swallowed. *Flour is in the big tin next to the spices. In that third overhead cupboard.*

Her mother took the tin from the top shelf and checked for weevils. Satisfied, she glanced over at her daughter. *I shall have to go into town to the shops. You will need the best nourishment during your recovery.*

Mumma looked at the floor. She did not feel much like eating, but perhaps it would be the only way to fill the enormous emptiness in her belly. In the hospital shower she was unable to look down on herself, on her stretched dough flesh. She wondered if she would see some kind of sign of the child she had carried, some kind of imprint, the impression of a clenched fist, the bump made by a tiny knee, a swelling where the head had rested, a bruise where a heel had kicked. Mumma's eyes welled and overflowed. Her mother passed her a mug of tea and had to look away. *Drink your tea, Margaret. It is nice and sweet. It will get your blood sugar up.*

Mumma's arms buckled, the hot liquid spilled, the mug fell from her hands and hit the floor. Mrs Wright gasped and peeled wet fabric from her daughter's legs.

*Quickly, Margaret. Get these wet pants off or you'll be scalded.*

Mumma was as floppy as a rag doll. She sobbed, *I ruined it. I ruined it.*

Mrs Wright, busy with a cloth, frowned, *It's just a cup of tea. No harm done. The cup didn't even break. Come on. Let's get you into bed.* She hauled Mumma onto her feet. How heavy, cumbersome and unfamiliar her daughter's body felt in her arms.

With Margaret sleeping in a freshly made bed, Mrs Wright got the filthy sheets soaking and took the liberty of preparing some food. She made a chicken soup, a batch of scones and then set to frying herself two rashers of bacon. When she turned from the cook-top to locate a plate, she realised with a start that there was a child watching her. Mrs Wright couldn't help but yelp and clap a hand over her open mouth. Lola drew back against the kitchen wall and sucked in her lips. Soup bubbled and bacon popped and hissed in the pan.

*You must be Lola Belle.*

Lolly stared.

*Where on earth did you spring from?* Mrs Wright wrung her hands together. *I am your grandmother.* She stepped closer and extended her right hand. *Pleased to meet you.*

Lolly looked from the shiny pink palm to her grandmother's face. Mrs Wright withdrew her hand. *I have come to look after your mother. She will need a lot of rest.*

Lolly blinked and looked at the floor. *I want bacon too.*

It was just after sunset when Mister staggered up the driveway. Galahs were squabbling over a roost, splitting silence with their screeching. The house was in the shadow of approaching night. Mister paused in his tracks and wondered what he

would find inside. Lola Belle, drowned in the bath. Lola Belle, skull cracked open on the bathroom tiles. Lola Belle, electrocuted by the toaster. He lugged himself up the front steps, across the verandah and through the front door. He smelt cooking and frowned. He put his hands on the door jamb to steady himself and shuffled towards the corridor. Light spilled from Lola's bedroom. Mister inhaled slowly, then let his head smack against the wall as his breath escaped. He opened his eyes, collected himself and turned the corner into the child's room.

*You're a drowned rat!* Lolly exclaimed, pulling her thumb from her mouth. Mister looked from the child, blushed pink in new pyjamas, to the woman perched on the edge of the bed. She crossed her thick legs and blinked at him. He had never seen so much woman, such mounds of flesh, straining behind her clothes, a range of rolling hills in brown polyester. She pursed her lips and said, *I am Margaret's mother, Mrs Wright. I have come to take care of things.*

Lolly sat up on her knees and beamed, *It's my Gramma. She made soup with chicken and scones. You can have scones with soup as well as with jam.*

Mister cleared his throat and rasped. *Are you all right, Lola?*

Mrs Wright snapped, *She's fine, now.*

Lolly grinned and bounced on her bum.

*Is my wife all right?*

Mrs Wright picked lint from her lap and shrugged. *I brought her home.*

*She's here? But it's not been ten days. It's only been four.*

*She's in bed. As a Doctor's wife I can see to a patient as well as a trained nurse. They let her home on this condition, so I can't permit you to rouse her.*

Mister kneeled at the bed side and watched Mumma sleep. In the low light he could make out the way her face had been changed. Her jaw was tight, her eyes sunken, her brow creased. She opened her eyes and surprised him. He gasped. *I thought you were asleep.*

Her eyes moved to the ceiling. *You left Lolly alone.*

There was a long silence. Mister did not know what to say.

*She was scared. She thought you'd left.* Mumma rolled over and put her back between them. Mister sat on the floor and heard the sobbing bubble up from her stomach. He pulled a blanket from the wardrobe and went outside into the night.

Lolly took Gramma down to the sea. She wrapped her fingers as far as they would stretch around Gramma's hand and pulled her along the sandy path. Gramma huffed and puffed and wheezed and fanned away the flies. She panted, *Easy, Miss. I'm not as fast as you.*

Lolly stopped, wiggled her toes into the warm sand and smiled. *You're as big as Miss Clarke's cow.*

Gramma glared. *That's very rude, Lola. Very rude.*

Lolly tilted her head and frowned. *Cows are my favourite.*

Gramma considered this for a moment and said, *Who is Miss Clarke?*

Lolly snapped a branch from an acacia and whipped the flies on her back. *The teacher at school. Dilly makes milk all warm and bubbly. There was an earwig in the bucket once, though.*

Gramma took Lola's hand and squeezed gently. *You know that your baby sister died?*

Lolly looked at the mountain of hair piled on Gramma's head. She wrapped her hands around her throat and squeaked, *The ropes got her*. As the blood flushed her cheeks, Lolly spun in the sand and skipped away towards the beach. Gramma was stunned. She shook her head so vigorously some of her hair sprung loose.

While Gramma dozed in the sand, Lola Belle admired her generous figure. She was a sand dune in her own right, part of the undulation of the foreshore. She was covered with a scattering of sand, a sprinkling of shell grit, by curls of dried seaweed and the crushed shell of urchins. Lolly spread Gramma's hair out. It was blue, black, grey, kinked and wiry to touch. Lolly twisted the hair around her fingers, prickled the blunt ends against her palm and sucked it into a point. Gramma tasted different. Sharp like medicine and harsh like soap. Lolly wiped her tongue on the sleeve of her cardigan and ran off down the beach.

*Ernest said your name was little Gracie*. Lolly rocked her imagined sister and stroked her soft, pink forehead. *Is that your name? Little Gracie?* Lolly pinched the air with two fingers. *Here is some sweet cake with sugar dust, baby Grace. Open up your baby mouth. Num, num, num. Nice cake.* Clouds parted and the sun dazzled. Lolly squinted up the beach at Gramma. She had woken up and was fixing her hair. Lolly let Grace evaporate on a gust of sea breeze. She kicked up the sand and yelled, *Gramma, I'm hungry. Can we make cake?*

After just minutes in the kitchen together, Gramma had taken the wooden spoon to the back of Lolly's hand. The rapping was not hard, but Lolly was shocked dumb.

*That is what happens when you don't listen. I said not to touch. Now, for the third time, go and wash your hands. Scrub under the nails until there is no dirt. Dirt carries germs and germs make you sick. Go!*

Lolly forced her fist into her mouth and looked up at Gramma as she struggled to tie an apron around her girth. She swiftly opened cupboard after cupboard, shuffling packages, rattling canisters, unscrewing jars and sniffing at the contents. She found a white, ceramic mixing bowl, set it alongside the sifter, put her hands on her hips and gazed out the window.

Lolly pulled her fist from her mouth. Drool leaked and dripped. Why wouldn't Gramma let her help? She was a good helper. She could make pikelets all by herself. Lolly's jaw went slack. The pikelets. Maybe Gramma knew about the pikelets. Ernest said Mumma's ropes made baby Gracie dead, but Lolly wondered. Lolly was fluttery with fear. When Gramma's back was turned, she grabbed a fistful of sugar, scooped butter in her fingers and ran outside.

A week passed and Gramma had the kitchen re-organised. She had swapped, switched and shifted things, she had disinfected, decontaminated, sterilised, sanitised, sorted. Lolly watched her jiggle and wobble as she scrubbed and rubbed, scoured, mopped, swabbed. She kept the bin at her side as she went through the cupboards, checking use by dates of food, examining the rust on baking trays, the chips and chinks in china. She painted the kitchen cupboards hospital white and lined them with adhesive plastic. She bought new Tupperware containers with labels on the front: tea, coffee, sugar, flour, baking soda, salt and for the remaining ingredients she made her own stickers in her best hand writing, kept neat and ordered by use of ruler and lead pencil. Lolly was allowed to watch, but not help. A kitchen had to be systematic and hygienic and children were not capable of that. Lolly sulked and sucked on her cuffs. She wondered if Mumma would be broken forever.

Mumma sank further and further into herself. She felt she had withered into a shadow, retreated to a dark place somewhere below her rib cage. She learned what it was like to be inside herself, to be dark and quiet and safe. She understood that to enter the world would be a terrible shock. She did not blame Grace for the hanging, she blamed herself. If she were more capable, more knowledgable, more adult she may have saved her baby. She was a failed mother. Look at Lolly with her strange ways, her delayed development, her lazy eyes, her sneaking and cheating and stealing. She had watched her daughter eat herself through four years, sucking at the breast, at blankets and her baby clothes, chewing on toys, grazing the carpet, biting at furniture, swallowing dirt, crunching up shells, gnawing sticks, grinding sand. This was not teething. This was something else. Dr Warren called it oral fixation, said she'd grow out of it, but Mumma had seen her tear pages from books and swallow the paper. Mumma wasn't so sure.

Mumma was aware of movement in the kitchen, the hammering of water pipes, the smell of disinfectant. She heard the car come and go, the front door creak and slam. She was aware of her mother chastising Lolly, giving her the discipline she, Mumma, was not capable of, shaping her into a normal girl, teaching her what was proper, what was right. It was easy to believe she was not needed. She rolled over, rubbed her face into the stale sheets and sunk into sleep.

*Mrs Wright? I'm going into town to pick up the television. Do you need anything?* Mister tapped sand from his boots on the front door step. He could hear movement inside and straightened up when Mrs Wright came to the front door with her handbag hanging from the crook in her elbow.

*I'll come with you. I don't know what I need until I see it sitting on the shelf.*



Mister tucked his shirt into his jeans and said, *Apologies about the state of my vehicle, Missus. It's not used to carrying ladies.*

Mrs Wright scoffed, *If it's fit for my Margaret I'm sure I'll manage.*

Mister bit his lip. It was a while since he had considered his Margie a lady.

Mrs Wright filled the passenger seat and spilled over onto the hand break. Mister had an awkward few moments fiddling under her right buttock to release the lever. She looked the other way and grinned to herself and he was glad that she did not notice his flushed face and moustache of sweat. The car started with a roar and Mister was careful not to spin the wheels as he reversed. He was thankful for the business of driving and the noise of the tyres on dirt. There was no need for him to speak. He was otherwise occupied.

*So what do you do with yourself?*

Mister asked her to repeat herself to buy him some time.

*Your occupation?*

*Varies. I've done a stint on Thompson's cray boat. Fishing in the off season.*

*Done a bit of fencing. Odd jobs. Farming stuff. Help me old man.*

Mrs Wright raised her eyebrows.

*We get by.*

*What are your aspirations?*

Mister squinted at the road.

*Your hopes for yourself and family?*

Mister wondered about the question, about what it meant. He wound down the window to cool his burning face.

*I hope the television's fixed. It'll make things a lot easier for Margie—keep Lola out of her hair.* He suspected it was the wrong answer, but he did not know what

else to say. He felt suffocated by the silence that followed and decided suddenly to call in on his dad.

Mrs Wright dabbed at her forehead as Mister walked towards the ramshackle farm house. The place was in a state of disrepair. Mrs Wright thought it shameful to let farming land go to waste. She looked over the rusted car bodies, the sheets of galvanised iron amongst the dry grass, the tangles of wire, up-ended forty-four gallon drums, odd lengths of wood, machinery so weathered it was returning to earth, scatterings of bleached bones and tumbleweeds of old newspaper and wondered what sort of family she had become connected to through Margaret. She watched the front door slowly open, saw Mister pulling at something, the door banging back against his buttocks as he struggled, heard some kind of commotion, someone yelling and realised it was an elderly man in a makeshift wheelchair. Mister got the chair free of the doorway and let it thump, thump down two steps onto the cracked earth. The old man was looking up at Mister, smacking at his hands and shouting. Mister took his hands off the chair, held them palms up and stepped back. The old man took some time hauling himself to his feet. He steadied himself, went to move, fell back in the chair and snapped at Mister when he tried to help. Mrs Wright watched this happen again and again until she could not help but smile. Eventually the old man made it to the car, closely tailed by Mister and the rickety wheelchair. He stuck his hand through the open passenger window and said, *Ernest. Your daughter's father-in-law.*

Mrs Wright shook his bony hand and said, *You needn't have walked on my account.*

Ernest struggled to get into the cabin next to her. *There's still a bit of kick in me yet. I'll know I'm in trouble when I can't put on a show for a lady.*

Mrs Wright raised her eyebrows and Ernest heaved and hauled himself up onto the seat, his bare legs squeaking and farting over vinyl, his bones pressing into her flesh. Mister lifted his wheelchair into the back of the ute and Ernest chuckled, *It's rare occasion that the boy takes me into town. You must be a frightening woman, Mrs Wright.*

She clamped her legs together, aware of his wet warm against her, looked down on the bulges her round knees made under her skirt and half smiled.

In town, Mister parked the vehicle outside Walker's, set Ernest's chair on the footpath and announced, *I won't be long—a few minutes—and then I'll wait in the car.* He gestured to a sandstone building across the street. *That there's the general store, Mrs Wright. You should find all you need.*

Ernest let himself slip from the car to his chair and Mrs Wright was relieved to stretch herself. She patted her hair, hooked her handbag further up her arm and shuffled along the seat towards Ernest. *What will you do with yourself? Do you require anything from the store?*

He smiled. *Probably. Inevitably.*

She tried several holds on the car door before she was able to step down. She didn't appreciate seeming so ungainly in Ernest's company and hoped he had not caught a glimpse up her skirt as she disembarked. *Do you need my help?*

Ernest thought for a moment. He felt too old to be embarrassed. He pointed to the handles of his chair and said, *You're as kind as your daughter.*

Mrs Wright was content in the pokey store with its old fashioned wares. It reminded her of the stores of her childhood, the shop in Jamestown, where her mother would ask for two pounds of flour and the gentleman behind the counter would smooth his moustache and oblige with a wink and a smile. She must have been about

four. She remembered the sugar cubes he passed out to children. He called her little miss. Mrs Wright hadn't thought of that for many years. Now, back home, her shopping was done in a modern supermarket with polished linoleum floors, fluorescent lights, exotic canned goods and specials in every aisle. There was music and messages over the loud speaker and staff in white slacks and green aprons with their names embroidered on their shirts. She could buy an ironing board, candles, cotton, socks and fresh vegetables all in the one building. It was efficient and convenient. But this store with its naked light bulbs, dusty window displays peppered with dead blowflies and ants, the rattle and hum of the old refrigerator and the stone walls crumbling with salt damp had a charm that made her feel young again. She put a basket on Ernest's lap and looked over the first set of shelves. Flour, baking soda, yeast, raw sugar, white sugar, icing sugar, vanilla essence, jelly crystals, junket tablets, currants, mixed peel, glace cherries.

Ernest shifted under the weight of the basket and said, *Now I know why you brought me. I'm not much of a pack horse, mind. I'll snap under this weight.*

Mrs Wright took the basket from his lap, emptied the contents onto the counter and wheeled Ernest to another set of shelves. She pondered over jars of herbs and spices, chose curry powder, white pepper, chicken salt and onion flakes, English mustard, cider vinegar and sweet spiced gherkins, tinned beetroot, mushy peas, spaghetti and camp pie. Again and again the basket was filled and emptied. The attendant wrapped the perishables in newspaper and breathed through a smile. Ernest shook his head and curled his lip at how much Doctors must earn. Mrs Wright put four rat traps, a bottle of lemon cordial and a flagon of cooking sherry on the counter, brushed dust from her bosom. *That will be all thank you.* She took a cheque book from her handbag and asked, *To whom do I make this out?*

The scrawny boy put the last box in the back of the ute, accepted a handful of change from Mrs Wright and skipped back across the road. Ernest slumped further into his skin and Mrs Wright slammed the boot shut.

*It appears your son is not yet back. I have to call in on the butcher and then perhaps you would like a lemon squash at the hotel.*

Ernest cocked his head at her. *It's well after nine. I'll have a pint.* He pointed down the street. *Pub's that way.*

Mrs Wright sipped her squash and watched Ernest gulp his beer and gesture to the barman for another. He reminded her of her father. Withered and leathery, folds of tanned skin radiating from the corners of his eyes. He licked the froth from his top lip.

*So how's young Margie holding up?*

Mrs Wright straightened her back and rearranged herself on the stool. As *expected*. She drew in the condensation on her glass with an index finger and felt suddenly uncomfortable. She wondered what her husband would be doing. Saturday morning. Reading the paper. Nancy fussing after him with cups of tea and yeast bun with apple and custard, sweeping up his crumbs, collecting his plate, putting on a load of his washing. Mrs Wright finished her squash, took a deep breath and asked for a shandy. She saw Ernest grin and nod to himself.

*Do you have a daughter?*

Ernest shook his head.

*Another son?*

*No.* He paused and drummed a fist on his right knee. *No, Jean left when the boy was too small to remember.*

Mrs Wright considered this. She imagined her husband, alone with a young Margaret and the boys. It would have never happened. Nancy would have taken on the children. She sipped her shandy and eyed Ernest differently over the rim of her glass.

*It must have been difficult rearing a child alone over here.*

Ernest tossed his head. *The boy as good as brought himself up.* He paused, emptied his glass and counted a pile of change onto the bar. *I was... not very capable. It was a rude shock to be without Jean.*

Mrs Wright held a hand up to the barman and indicated to Ernest's stack of silver coins. *Was it a surprise to you—that she was unhappy in marriage?*

She saw the bunching of grey muscles in Ernest jaw and wondered whether she was probing into dangerous territory.

*It was.* A lengthy pause. Breath rattled in his chest. *She danced with me about the kitchen the night before she left. She had such delicate ankles.* He remembered her like a bird: fine of bone and light as dove's down.

Mrs Wright wondered at the scandal of it all in this small town on this remote island surrounded by its dark seas. Being a doctor's wife, she was more than accustomed to considering scandal. *My reputation, Nada. My reputation. It is of optimum importance for the success of the practice.* She guessed her son-in-law was somewhat younger than Margaret—perhaps eighteen, perhaps twenty. That would make it the fifties when the woman—Ernest's Jean—had fled.

*What did you tell people?*

Ernest looked her square in the face and frowned. *That my wife left me.*

Mrs Wright lowered her eyes, scratched at the nape of her neck and blushed. *Of course.*

The awkward moment was diverted by the barman setting a beer in front of Ernest and fumbling with the coins. Ernest sighed slowly, took his last beer in both hands, drank quickly, belched foam and set the empty on the bar. *What did you tell people when Margie was evaporated from your family home?*

The car ride home was hot with quiet and alcohol. Ernest dozed with his head bumping against the window, his brow gathered in an untidy pleat. Mrs Wright stared straight ahead and felt the sweat sting her eyes. She was awestruck with thought: simultaneously concerned that she had offended Ernest, indignant that he had questioned her actions with Margaret, angry that he had assumed she agreed with her daughter's ostracism, ashamed she was so unfamiliar with speaking her mind, so without words to her voice. She imagined her husband's reaction to Ernest. He would find the man insignificant, uncouth, *a casualty of life*. Mrs Wright had been encouraged to accept such judgements as truth. As a farmer's daughter, it had been bred into her to strive for something better, to strive for breeding, despite being most at home amongst folks pursuing a simple, self sufficient life, folks who made the best of what they had. Mrs Wright's eyes smarted at they hit the dirt road. She closed her eyes for privacy and wondered about Jean.

Lolly sat up on her knees, her face pale, her eyes wide, her mouth gaping at the hiss and crackle of the television set. Mister was fiddling with an unruly aerial, cursing under his breath as the flighty picture came and went with an explosion of noise. After some time pacing an arc in front of the great box, raising and lowering and twisting the wire, arranging and rearranging the antennae, he arrived at a fair enough picture and sound that was not too interrupted by static. He stepped back next to Lolly and listened to a few moments of the program.

*Are you ready children?*

Lolly put her palms on the screen.

*Are you ready to go to topsy-turvy, inside-out, upside-down, magical, far away, fantasy land?*

*Where?* Lolly looked to Mister. *Where is it?*

*Fantasy land.* Mister tried to brush the child's hair from her eyes. *It's where everyone's having a good time and everyone's happy and everything's all right.*

She nodded, looked back to the television.

*It's probably a fair bit better than here.*

Mrs Wright took a plate of cold meat and pickles in to her daughter. She cleared a space on the bedside table, set the lunch down and lowered herself onto the edge of the bed. Her weight made Mumma roll towards her and open her eyes.

*You must eat something, Margaret. You'll waste away.*

Mumma blinked and lay still.

*I met Ernest today. He is an entertaining fellow. He sends his regards. I thought perhaps I'd take a casserole around to him. A man of his age should not be skin and bones—not yet.*

Mumma nodded and let her eyes fall closed. Mrs Wright looked over her. She was in quite a state, tangled amongst the sour sheets, her hair lank and greasy, her skin dull.

*Margaret, you must get out of bed soon. You need a wash and a decent, sit-down meal. I know it seems a terrible tragedy, but life will go on with or without you.*

She saw Margaret's lip tremble and she knew she'd been too hard on her, but she was motivated by a deep, ancestral fear. Her mother's bloodline. The madness.



Mrs Wright made a simple casserole, set it in a box, wrapped the cooking sherry in one of her old cardigans, hid it under her arm and asked Mister for the car keys. He slipped his fingers reluctantly into his pockets and suggested he take her, but Mrs Wright would have none of it.

*I am more than capable of managing a vehicle. In fact I have many more years experience on the roads than your good self.*

Mister passed her the keys. He could not meet her eyes when she thanked him.

The smell of dust, salt, exhaust and steaming casserole was a comfort. Mrs Wright rested her right elbow out the window as she drove, feeling the sun bite into her forearm and the breeze tickle up her sleeve. She had some degree of trouble engaging third gear, but grinned over the steering wheel nonetheless. She noted that she felt very happy out here on her own. The dense scrub push-pulled in the wind, tossing wrens and honey eaters into the air with flashes of blue, brown, yellow. The island felt safe and familiar, despite her being more accustomed to the gentle slopes and worked land back home. She had not spent much time by the ocean and yet seeing the backdrop of blue through the eucalypts she felt a sudden rush of contentment. The sense of freedom was exhilarating. Mrs Wright depressed the accelerator, felt the wheels spin and scabble in the dirt beneath her and the car surge forward. She clenched her buttocks with the thrill, tossed her head back and squealed. When she refocussed on the track before her she had come to a bend. She gripped the wheel, hit the brakes and felt the car take control. In slow motion she saw the outside spin, the trees, the scrub, the sky, the sea. The tyres roared in the dirt, stones flew, dust whirled, birds took to the sky. Mrs Wright took her hands off the steering wheel, her feet off the pedals and lost her breath. Sand rained on the windscreen. The car

stalled. Silence. Mrs Wright shuddered with heartbeat. She took a deep breath, looked over herself, checked that the casserole had not upturned, grinned, giggled, then laughed, laughed so hard her belly drew up towards her spine. She drummed her hands on the wheel, beeped the horn, started the car and got back on the road.

Ernest was happy for the food and company. The sherry was a treat. He was particularly fond of sherry—he was partial to a drink. The conversation was polite, but warm. Mrs Wright did not speak much. It struck Ernest as odd that such a large woman took up so little space. Jean was a slip of a thing, yet she had filled the house. He looked at Mrs Wright over the dirty plates, noticed the dampness at her temples and forehead, the fine coating of dust on her arms and the mottling of blood under her cheeks. He had not seen such flesh on a woman, such soft folds at the jaw and neck. He wondered about her under her clothes. The thought intrigued, but repelled. He would not know his way around such a body. He thought of her husband losing his hands at her waist and asked suddenly, *Are you happy in marriage, Mrs Wright?*

She was momentarily shocked into silence. In time she said, *It's Nada, Ernest. Call me Nada.*

*Margie?* Mister shuffled to the bedside in the moonlight. He put his fingertips against her forehead. *Margie, are you awake?*

She nodded. She could see his only his white underpants, a suggestion of shadowed torso.

*I was wondering if I could sleep in with you tonight. The ground makes me back crook.*

Mumma lifted the bed clothes. She said, *The sheets stink.*

He lowered himself carefully onto the bed, sighed and whispered, *No matter.*

They lay side by side in silence, Mister was selfconscious about the whistling of his breath through his nose. Mumma's stomach gurgled. She put a hand on her belly and turned her head to face him. *How many days have I been in bed?*

Mister thought for a moment. *Four in the hospital, maybe two weeks here at home.*

Mumma frowned, *That long! That can't be right.*

Mister shrugged. Outside, a car pulled up in the driveway. He said, *That'll be your mother.*

They listened to her fumbling at the front door, stumbling down the hall way to the bathroom. They heard a tap run, the toilet flush. Mumma reached out and ran the back of her hand against Mister's rib cage. He started to speak, then stopped. Mumma drew herself up on her elbows, leant over and kissed him. He was surprised and awkward. She tasted bad and smelt different, but the rush of feeling made his back arch.

It was one month after baby Gracie died. It was Mumma's birthday. Mister lay watching her. He knew she was close to waking as her eyeballs rolled beneath their lids, her lashes flickered and the skin of her brow jumped. She sighed, stretched her legs out from under herself and frowned. Mister whispered, *Happy birthday, Margie.*

Mumma opened her eyes, squinting at the whiteness of morning. She took a moment to realise he had slept next to her and that he was smiling. Mumma felt confused.

*I have you a little something.* He carefully placed the kitten on her pillow against her cheek. It nuzzled into the crook of Mumma's arm and began pawing her,

hooking its needle claws into the cotton of her nightgown, suckling against the fabric, against her skin. Mumma's chest tightened and she burst into tears.

Mrs Wright stuck her head around the bedroom door. Mumma was sitting up, teasing the kitten with her hair.

*I heard you were awake.* She waddled over to the bedside, leant down and kissed at the air above her daughter's forehead. *Happy Birthday, Margaret.* She hoped she had not winced at the terrible smell. *I see you like your pet.*

Mumma forced a smile. Mrs Wright took a paper bag from the pocket on the front of her apron and lay it on Mumma's chest. Mumma looked down the bridge of her nose into the gaping bag and saw a golden custard danish, coiled in a neat knot. The smell of sugar made her stomach ache. She looked up at her mother and croaked, *A birthday breakfast treat, just like when I was little.*

Mrs Wright nodded, wiped her hands on her apron and looked out the window. *I ate custard from dawn 'til dusk when I was nursing you.*

Overhead, galvanised iron popped and cracked in the late morning sun.

Mumma clenched her teeth and decided. *I think I will cook lunch today.*

Mister unloaded the groceries and the air was sweet with passionfruit and strawberries. Mumma arranged a basket of brown eggs, a bunch of carrots, a neat row of sweetcorn cobs, two tins of black cherries and a bowl of peas. The shelves in the refrigerator were jam-packed. There were two cartons of cream for the birthday cake, three sticks of butter, a tub of lard, two parcels wrapped in butcher's paper and two pints of pig's blood for the black pudding.

Mumma rolled up her sleeves and immersed herself in the task at hand. The activity made her heart beat, strong and slow, deep within her chest. She took her breath down to the pit of her diaphragm and felt herself expand. The sun crept across the lawn and Mumma stacked dirty dishes in the sink, wiped the bench clean and worked on.

Her mother said, *That looks awfully fancy. Do you need any help?*

Mumma said, *No.*

Mister touched her forearm and whispered, *What are you thinking about?*

Mumma said, *Nothing. I'm cooking.*

Vegetables boiled, chicken crisped, sausages and onions fried and the sponge cake was assembled with black cherries, whipped cream and shavings of dark chocolate. The champagne was popped open. Tops were knocked off long necks. Bread was broken. Lolly got her fingers in the butter and sang 'Happy Birthday' with glossy lips. She gave Mumma a hard boiled egg with a painted face, a pretty blue jar filled with sugar and a packet of corn seeds. Mumma drank her champagne quickly and thanked everyone. She lifted her glass, took a shallow breath and said,

*To absent family.*

Mrs Wright toasted and thought it momentarily odd Margaret would mention her father, until realising she would—of course—have been making reference to the child that passed. Lolly bounced on her chair, whacked the tabletop twice and exclaimed, *Gracie!*

Everybody fell silent and looked to her. Mumma had not heard the name mentioned since the paperwork at the hospital. She felt faint. How did Lola know? How did she understand 'To absent family'? Lolly blinked up at the adults. They

seemed to be waiting for her to speak. Their mouths open-close, open-closed like fish. Gracie was born dead, tangled and strangled in Mumma's cords. Lolly reached for a prop and acted it out. Swinging the cord of the toaster, Lolly performed. The baby was hanged, she was never meant to be. Mumma burned red, put her glass down on the kitchen table, stood slowly, placed the kitten on her chair, walked two calm steps and slapped Lolly's cheeks.

Mrs Wright took Lola out on to the front porch and held her firmly by the shoulders. She hushed and calmed the child and wondered what was best said.

*Lola Belle... Shush, shush, shush, shush... Lola Belle... Shush, shush.* She licked her lips and said quickly, *You must never speak of baby Grace. It is a knife in your mother's heart to hear her name spoken. Gracie has gone to heaven and will be of no concern to you now.* She pushed down on Lolly's shoulders, pressing the importance of the matter with as much weight as possible without buckling the child's knees. *Do you understand?*

Lolly nodded slowly and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

Now, Mrs Wright said. *You wait here and I'll get you something tasty.* She knew a chicken drumstick would soothe the child. Her Margaret had relied on them ever since the tender advancement of her first teeth.

Mumma ignored Lolly's sullen sucking on chicken bone and preoccupied herself with the kitten. She rubbed her face into its earthy pelt and breathed its warm, dusty smell. She peeled thin strings of chicken from the roast, cut tiny portions of sausage, dipped a finger in cream and fed it on her lap. Mrs Wright objected to the animal at the dinner table, particularly at such a fine meal, so many hours in the

making. But it was Margaret's meal and Margaret's birthday and the little creature had brought the colour back to those pallid cheeks. She noticed the smarting of Margaret's eyes as she tended to her pet and it made her think of Margaret as a girl, shadowed everywhere by that damn sheep. It burned her stomach to see Margaret in pain, feeding a kitten over her own malnourished self. Mrs Wright pushed back her chair and dragged it across the floor to be next to her daughter. She stabbed a generous piece of chicken breast and a roast potato, dropped them onto Margaret's plate and proceeded to slice them into bite size pieces. Ernest and Mister stopped talking for a moment and then went back to muttering over the homebrew. Lolly gnawed gristle and looked on, her cheeks stinging as the tears dried. Mumma watched as her mother speared the meat with potato, smeared it with gravy and brought the fork towards her mouth. She released her jaw as the food nudged her lips and chewed the mouthful carefully, thoughtfully, watching her mother prepare the next bite. The sweet chicken made her mouth bleed with saliva. The potato, light and fluffy and perfectly crisped, brought tears to her eyes. She kept her eyes on her mother's face and was reminded of when she was little, when she was loved over scone dough and stewed quinces. She remembered the kitchen back home as she ate blood pudding, minted peas, buttered carrots and chicken skin from her mother's fork. Mrs Wright's lips twitched and she nodded.

*Good girl, Margaret.*

Mumma swallowed and said, *Thankyou.*

Lolly stared with her chicken bone gripped in her fist. The kitten was asleep, its face buried in Mumma's skirt. Mumma had her eyes closed and Gramma was feeding her cake, scraping cream from the corner of Mumma's mouth and working the spoon

between her lips. Mumma cried some. Just tears. No noise. Gramma was making it better with cake and chicken and pudding with blood. Peas blocked up the holes. Gravy smoothed the sores. Cherries and chocolate up to Mumma's ears. Lolly reached for Mumma across the table, but Mumma did not see her. She reached and reached, stood up on her chair and stretched over the ragged chicken carcass, but could only make it as far as Mumma's plate. She rubbed her palm in the mess of gravy, meat juice and chicken jelly, fell back on her seat and forced her fist into her mouth.

\*

A childhood. Lolly's. A photograph. Lolly wrapped in Great Grandma Collins' old lace curtains. There was a moment of sunshine in the back paddock. Knee high rye grass.

Seeds pinched and pulled Lolly's white tights. She had wrapped a length of grass tight around her finger, made the finger tip bulge red, purple. Tighter, tighter. She stripped blades of grass and snapped seed pods. Green rained on white lace. Green bled on baby skin. She was reluctant having her photograph taken. She hung her head and her eyes watered. In the first few photos Mister took, Lolly's eyes crossed, parted and rolled. They still did that sometimes. When she was stressed or sad. When she was escaping. Lolly heard Mister snort and sigh.

*Lola he snapped. Keep those wayward eyes shut tight. Shut tight, I says. Your Grandma won't want a picture of you google-eyed.*

Behind her eyelids Lolly saw her blood run through threads, brilliant red cells jostling and nudging against one another. When she concentrated closely she noticed a few black spots. They made her think of the fat fleas she had seen crawling over the



rats that lived under the house. Lolly thought of the fleas when Mister described the photographs over her head to Mumma.

*Here she is. Eyes closed, flat profile. Your daisies are nice in her hair. In this shot she doesn't look so fat in the face.*

Lolly kept her eyes on the floor, peeled strips of nail from her fingers, heard movement and smelt Mumma.

*Lolly is peachy. Not plump, but pleasantly padded.*

Lolly felt the fleas prickling through her veins, eating her from the inside out. Three days later, Mister left for Queensland. It was her fifth birthday.

Mumma chewed on a parsley stalk and tilted her head to the sky. There were many changes and she had grown weary with all the adjustment. Her mother had left a great hole in the kitchen. When she left the house and dunes echoed. Mumma knew that her mother did not want to leave. On the day she left her eyes were sunken and dark. She had fussed with her handbag and said, *There's a cold roast, a potato salad and a coleslaw in the fridge, a chicken casserole and a stew in the freezer, five tinned camp pies in the pantry—they're bland, but the little Miss likes them. I've shelled a bowl of peas. There are lamingtons in the big cake tin, rum balls in tupperware—I know it's not Christmas, but you've always liked them. I bought bread and milk yesterday and there's sunshine powder in the pantry, so you needn't go to town for a while.* She passed Mumma an envelope and squinted. *Keep this for Lola's birthday and treat her to something nice.*

Mumma watched her get into the car. Lolly was crying and thrashing the ground with a stick. Mister started the engine, reversed the car down the drive way and onto the road. He braked, Mrs Wright opened her door, stepped out and yelled

over the car roof, *Custard! I forgot. I made custard. It's in the brown jug, in the fridge. Nutmeg on top.*

Mister's absence was not so felt. Mumma supposed it was because this was Mister's country. He had always been here. She imagined that as he traipsed the red earth up North, humidity beading on his skin, knocking post holes, straining wire, staples clenched between his front teeth, he would still see the breaking waves, the muddy shoals, the dusty trackside scrub. When he slept, she guessed he rocked in his tinny and licked salt from his upper lip. She wondered if he would think of her. She wondered if he really would come back or if this contract would be followed by another and another and another.

After Mister left, Mumma made rice pudding with raisins. Ginger miaowed and rubbed and bumped against their shins as they ate quietly on the front steps. Ginger was fond of rice pudding. Mumma always saved her a little. It was Lolly's birthday and the child had a stomach ache. Mumma couldn't tell if it was to do with Mister leaving. Since the television had been repaired, Lolly had seemed to speak less and less, thought flickering over her face, making her eyes bulge and roll in their sockets.

Later in the week they went to town and Mumma bought Lolly new clothes for her first day at school and an outrageous bright orange straw hat for herself.

*Tell me a story, Mumma. A one about The Amazing Lola Belle.*

Mumma was combing Lolly's hair with her fingers. *One day The Amazing Lola Belle was flying through the air above Sugar Beach, searching for those in trouble. She found some soup bones for a stray dog and a saucer of cream for a little kitty.*

Lolly clambered onto Mumma's lap and lay back against her chest. *Was it Ginger?*

*No, it wasn't Ginger. It was another puss —I think it was a white one.*

*With a pink nose.*

*Yes, with a sweet little pink nose. It was a poor puss that didn't have anyone to love her, so The Amazing Lola Belle found a sad old lady and gave Whitey to her and it made her ever so happy and pleased.*

*Then what?*

*Well, then the old lady gave The Amazing Lola Belle some hot cocoa and some tea cake with cinnamon on top and she said, 'Oh Amazing Lola Belle! How my legs hurt with all my years of tramping,' and The Amazing Lola Belle said, 'Dear old lady. Let me have a look and I'll see if I can make you better.' Well, the old lady rolled down her stockings and The Amazing Lola Belle pressed here and pressed there, poked here and poked there and scratched her chin and said, 'Hmmm.'*

*Lolly giggled.*

*'Hmmm,' said The Amazing Lola Belle. 'I think I shall have to get you some new legs so you can play on Sugar Beach with your new puss, Whitey.' The old lady nodded her head and looked worried. 'Don't be scared,' said The Amazing Lola Belle. 'I won't hurt you. I am a very skilled fixer,' and she set to work mixing up some new legs in a nice old porcelain bowl, that was a family heirloom from many years ago.*

*What did she make the legs with?*

*Oh, lots of things —sticks and mud and sand and salt and seaweed...*

*And bread and butter?*

*Bread and butter and jam and cheese and sugar and flour and all sorts of other things that are renowned for making the most strongest, best legs and then she cooked them in the oven for forty-five minutes until they were golden brown.*

*What did she do with the old legs? The broken ones?*

*She cut them off with a butter knife and fed them to the pelicans.*

*Did the old lady like the new legs?*

*Most definitely. And she and her little puss, Whitey, lived happily ever after.*

*What did The Amazing Lola Belle do then?*

*She had lots of other adventures, fixing up all the sad and sorry folks. Mumma pushed Lolly off her lap. But we'll hear about them another day. I have parsnips to peel now.*

In the first week of school, Sarah Downes tripped on the asphalt and grazed her knee and Lolly came running with her lunchbox open.

*Cheese for hurts*, said Lolly and presented a generous slab smeared with vegemite.

Sarah screamed louder and Lolly insisted, *Cheese fills up the holes and then the fleas can't get in and eat your guts out*. Sarah thrashed about so much the pretty ribbon on her ponytail slipped down her silky hair and came off the end. Julie-Anne said Lolly was dumb and Crystal ran for the teacher and Sarah screamed for Lolly to go away. Miss Clarke hooked her arms under Sarah's armpits, hoiked her off the ground and said,

*There, there. A bandaid and some antiseptic cream should fix this up*. She lead Sarah away, through the swinging green doors and towards the staff room where Lolly had never been.

*See*, said Julie-Anne, a hand on her hip. *She needed a bandaid. A bandaid —not your dumb cheese*. She looked at the chunk of cheddar softening in the heat of Lolly's hand and pointed. *And anyways. That cheese is dirty*. She started to smile. *That*

*cheese has poo.* She grabbed Crystal by the arm and squealed louder, *That cheese has poo!*

Some boys laughed, a ball hit the wall and the bell rang to signal the end of lunch. Julie-Anne sang out, *Poo poo. Poo poo*, pulled up her socks and trotted after Crystal. Lolly squeezed her cheese and watched all the children running for their classrooms. When everyone had gone, she picked up Sarah's pink shiny ribbon and hid it down the front of her trousers. No one would find it down there. Miss Clarke banged on the window and tapped the face of her watch and Lolly pushed her cheese into her mouth, looked up at the sky and spun circles until she was dizzy.

Lolly found school difficult. She had never been around other children. They frightened her with their different smells, their plastic toys and apple juice in flasks. At lunch time she walked around in circles holding her sultanas, cold sausages, rounds of metwurst and hard boiled eggs to her chest while the other children threw balls, giggled over ham sandwiches, climbed trees and whipped imagined horses over jumps. When Julie-Anne whispered secrets to Sarah, Lolly sang, *Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake baker's man. Bake me a cake as fast as you can* and whacked a stick against the cyclone wire fence to drown out the laughter. At the end of lunch, Lolly rummaged through the bin until she found their crusts.

Lolly took to burying treasures, digging in the organic matter under the gum trees. Into the hole she dropped a dried apricot, a fist full of sugar, the foil lid off a milk bottle. One day she shat her pants and buried them under the slippery dip, while the other children were quiet inside the library. She ate sand from the sandpit because she was sad for the beach. In class, she made a figure of Mumma from playdough and swallowed it while hiding under the table. She chewed chalk for Mister and licked

yellow paint for the colour of warm. She got told off for picking her nose during story time. Miss Clarke passed her a tissue. There were baby ducks on the box. Lolly tore the soft yellow into tiny pieces and ate secretly while the teacher read on.

The teachers did not find Lola Belle's behaviour particularly unusual. There were many odd children out here in the sticks. She'd eventually find her place or hook up with another loner. Children were resilient, after all. There was no need to worry her mother, not after all she had been through in the last year.

Mumma busied herself through the school term with jam, preserves, pickles and chutneys. She made a meagre amount selling her produce to the trickle of tourists that visited the Hillwater gift shop. Bob and Hilda Lewis asked her if she'd like to make tarts for their bakery and Mumma said yes, despite not being sure what would be involved. Her preoccupation became scrounging for fruit. Summer was easy. There were plenty of mulberry trees. They stood by the rubble of limestone cottages. They were low and gnarled by wind so they were easy to climb and the fruit was plentiful. After filling her buckets, Mumma liked to wander. She would jump rabbit holes and admire a solitary chimney against the blue sky. She would sift through the ruins, collecting dainty medicine bottles of thick green glass, rusted tin lids, the odd spoon. Her favourite finds were the shards of broken crockery with intricate paint work, the delicate brush strokes of blossoms, the rippled gold edging, the familiar willow pattern. She kept her most treasured pieces on the window sill in her kitchen. The rest she stored in an old cake tin. She liked to pretend they were trinkets from her family history, that her people had always lived here and that her little family really mattered and really belonged.

In winter, Mumma relied on the old lemon trees at Ernest's. The fruit was pithy, dry and mean, but it was the rind she needed to make lemon curd, so quality was not much of a concern. Ernest took it upon himself to start tending to the trees. He borrowed books on citrus management, bought fertiliser, arranged a watering system and put in a row of young saplings. Mumma told him not to fuss, but not since her mother had stayed had she seen him so jovial. Part of the deal was that she drop off a few lemon tarts on her way to the bakery. Ernest would come out to greet her, hobbling on his rickety legs. *Ah Margie*, he'd smile and dip a finger in golden curd. *So rich. We'll grow rich on these.*

Mumma, still somewhat tentative behind the wheel, would clunk the ute into reverse and say, *I don't think so, Ernie. We'll stay poor, but we'll be fat and happy.*

Lolly soon learned she could buy friends with Mumma's tarts. Crystal liked chocolate and Sarah liked lemon. But Julie-Anne preferred a handful of something. She called them exoticals.

*Bring me something exotical*, she would say, waving her finger. *I want exoticals.*

Lolly brought her desiccated coconut or glace cherries, cooking chocolate or mixed peel, currants or icing sugar neatly sealed and folded in a brown paper bag. Julie-Anne would take the bag, check inside and declare Lola Belle her best friend. Crystal and Sarah forced chocolate and lemon grins and agreed for the moment.

Once Lolly brought a particularly impressive assortment of treats and the girls pushed and poked and jostled for her attention.

*Lola, I really, really like those ones with pink icing.*

*I like that one. The one with the sprinkles.*

*No, I like that one! Me, Lola! Me!*

Lolly passed out her treats and the girls ate until they were as full as googs and silly with sugar. Crystal tipped her fritz and sauce sandwich onto the ground and put her lunch box on her head.

*Hello dumb dumbs my name's bum head.*

Julie-Anne tossed her pressed chicken sandwich and put her lunch box on her head.

*No, no. Look at me. My name's bugger head.*

Sarah copied, but was giggling so much she couldn't speak properly. She blew fart noises until she went red in the face and had to clutch at herself to stop from weeing.

Later, when the girls had skipped off to have handstand competitions on the oval, Lolly picked up their exploded lunches arranged them on the retaining wall, around the back of the incinerator. The spot had become a good hiding place. Mr Willis only burnt off on Friday afternoons and the other children stayed away because they didn't like the smell. Lolly reassembled the sandwiches with great care, brushing dirt from the bread and picking leaf litter from the butter. She looked up, checked that no one could see her and opened her mouth. Crystal tasted stale and was too soggy. Julie-Anne left an aftertaste and Sarah was bland. Lolly sat down in the ashes and ate them up —every last crumb.

\*

For Lolly's tenth birthday Mumma made marble cake and gave her a green velvet dress. Lolly scrunched the luxurious fabric in her fists. She rubbed the soft fur



against her face and stripped herself of her old clothes. The dress was tight, a green skin against her rib cage. Mister was back from the western border, in between jobs. He knocked twice, stuck his head round the corner and leant against her door way. He had a beer in his hand. Lolly in green, he all amber. Her smelling all brand new.

*A new me in green.*

Mister swayed in and out of the hallway light, watching her twirling in rich velvet.

*That's a bit fancy.* There was beer foam in his patchy moustache.

Lolly stroked her waist and smiled and twirled again.

*That's a bit fancy for round here.*

Lolly sucked on her lips and looked down at her toes, bright pink against the grotty carpet.

*Mumma says it's special to be ten.*

Mister rested his elbow on the doorframe, slid his arm up, into the corner, like he was holding up the ceiling, the sky. He tilted his glass towards her and said, *I see you've grown some little titties.*

In the next room, Lolly heard Mumma laughing with Ernest and a champagne bottle exploded.

Lolly's body outgrew her. She got lost under folds and flaps, under bumps, bulges and ridges. She went up two shoe sizes and couldn't feel herself in her feet. Lolly began to hear silence. She would wander out into the scrub, her back to the sea, Ginger at her heels and just listen. There were bird calls, the tittering of wrens, the whirring of willy wagtails, the odd curse of a crow. There were lizards in the leaf litter, cicadas in the tree tops, bees in the gum blossom and yet Lolly was more and

more aware of silence. She sat with Ginger, hot and dozy on her lap, breathing her sandy, warm stink, licking at the cat's pretty ears and thought, quite suddenly, that the silence must be within herself. She tried to picture her insides, but saw nothing but a black emptiness. She screwed up her eyes tight and worked to imagine something beautiful within, something tinkling like rain, something chiming like bells, something wispy and misty and apricot like the cloud at dawn, some kind of precious soul.

Lolly scrunched her eyes, tighter still, and thought of Sister Polly at Parson's Point, down on all fours at the church door, scrubbing the doorstep with her brittle arms, her hems wet with sudsy water, waving to the children as they walked home from school, calling, *Come learn about the Lord, little lambs. Come learn about the Lord.* Lolly bet Sister Polly had insides and she bet Sister Polly knew things and she bet she wasn't scared by people or confused by the things they said. Sister Polly told Mumma to take the tarts away and give them to the poor and the suffering. She said she didn't need them. She said she lived on God's love. Lolly remembered how Mumma curled her lip as they walked back to the car. *God's love may be enough for the soul,* she said as she snapped on her seat belt, *But it's little nourishment for a busy body.*

Lolly opened her eyes and wondered what it all meant. She picked up a handful of dry eucalyptus leaves, forced them into her mouth and filled the silence with crunching.

At eleven, Lolly wore bunches of toilet paper in her undies to soak up the blood. She heard Julie-Anne hissing that Joy Bates already had her period, someone had seen her with her mum, buying pads. Lolly hurt and bled silently. When she

finally told, Mumma said, *Congratulations*. Lolly didn't know why. She was scared. The last of her insides was coming out.

Lolly had a private book, covered in shiny foil chocolate wrappers that she had painstakingly flattened and glued to the cover. Her favourite wrapper was the cherry liqueur with its red and pink and silver swirls. But her favourite chocolate was the vanilla fudge. Before Lolly put pen to paper she always sniffed the cover. She fancied it still smelled of sweet. She would pinch up an imagined treat —just like when she was a little girl reading through Mumma's cookbooks —pop it in her mouth and pretend to chew. If only she had a vanilla fudge now. Lolly opened her private book and teased her pen until the ink came. She wrote: *Women have eggs and blood. The book in the library said so. Lolly stuck a finger in her mouth. Women get seeds from men's penises and they grow the babies in their stomachs.* She bore down on the fleshy pad of her finger. *The baby is only as big as a sultana, but it eats all the blood and grows until it's time to come out the mother's vagina.* Lolly frowned. If only she had a whole packet just of vanilla fudges, no others—no brazil nuts or hard toffees or green ones or plain sorts —just vanilla. Imagine, one night, being locked in the factory where they make the chocolates. Imagine when the last person shut out all the lights and left, you could get out of your hiding place and try every single flavour, over and over and over —see if there's another one as nice as vanilla fudge. Honeycomb, coconut rough, strawberry, peppermint cream, orange, caramel and hazelnut praline. Mumma says, *You'll spoil your appetite* or *You'll make yourself sick*, but Lolly would never get sick of chocolates. She shut her private book, sniffed the cover and put it away in its secret place.

In the car coming home from school, Lolly sat with her feet up on the dash. Mumma looked sideways at her. *Perhaps on the weekend we could go into Adelaide and buy you a bra.*

Lolly's face went red and she wound down the window. She had never left the island.

Lolly held her Mumma's hand and was wide-eyed in the city. The people dazzled and confused, pushed, shoved and shocked. There was colour and movement everywhere, music blaring, men crooning into microphones, women passing out fliers. Mumma quick-stepped into a department store and jumped onto an escalator. The slow jerk surprised Lolly and she spilled her jaffas and jelly babies. The jaffas ping, ping, pinged on metal, a stream of burnt orange. Strangers looked up at Lolly and laughed or sighed or rolled their eyes. Mumma strode off to look at something and Lolly waited for the jelly babies to arrive on the second floor. A yellow one was squashed by someone's shoe and the others were bunted and mangled against the metal teeth of the escalator, where the steps disappeared into the floor. Lolly was too scared to pick them up. She started to cry. Mumma trotted over red-faced and dragged Lolly from the escalator, twisting the fat of her arm and Lolly screamed over her shoulder for the mutilated babies.

They met Gramma in the David Jones café. She patted Lolly on the head and said to Mumma, *Your father sends his love.*

Mumma nodded and knew a lie when she heard one. She guessed her father did not even know that her mother was in Adelaide. They climbed up on tall wooden stalls at a round table. Gramma smiled at Lolly and said, *Well haven't you grown. You're busting out of yourself. Perhaps you'd like a new dress.*

Lolly blushed and ate sugar cubes out of a dish.

Now... Gramma put her handbag on the table. *What shall we have? I always like the ham and salad rolls and a struesel with my cappuccino.*

Mumma tapped her fingers nervously on the laminex table top and Gramma said, *My treat, of course.*

Lolly held the end of the long spoon, swirled the chocolate sauce through her milk, dunked the blob of icecream and watched it spring back to the surface. She had made a mess. While Mumma and Gramma chatted, Lolly pulled apart her salad roll and ate the ham, then the lettuce, tomato, pickled onion and sweet gherkins, scraped the butter with a fingernail, picked the sesame seeds from the crust and popped them between her front teeth, tore the roll into strips and finally cleaned her plate. She started to eat her struesel in the same manner—pulling the sweet, golden nodules from the top of the bun—until Gramma told her off. *Lola, eat sensibly, please, like the young lady that you are.*

Lolly reached for a fork and Gramma shook her head.

*You can use your fingers for a bun, but there's no need to dissect your food.* Lolly kept her eyes on the table while she ate. If it weren't for the struesel, so light and sweet and buttery and the chocolate milk in its tall, frosted glass, she was sure she would cry again. Mumma sipped her coffee and looked away.

After lunch, they went upstairs to the ladies wear. Gramma stopped an assistant and asked, *Is there anyone who can help us with an underwear fitting for this young lady?* The woman rolled her eyes over Lolly, stood on tip toes and crooned her lizard neck over rows of nightgowns, slips, bras and briefs. She pointed towards the powder room, wiped a glob of lipstick from the corner of her mouth with her index finger and said, *Maureen is on duty in lingerie. She will help you.*

Mumma answered all the questions and Lolly toed the carpet. *Yes, her first bra... No. No lace. Something practical... Skin tone, not ivory. She'll get it too dirty... Well, she's a fourteen in girls' sizes—big for her age as she's not even twelve, but I have no idea what she'd be in ladies' sizing.* Lolly noticed Maureen's name tag was pinned on crooked. She slung a tape measure over her shoulder, pointed towards the change rooms and looked straight at Lolly. *Follow me... dear.*

The woman was too close in the small, white cubicle with its curtained door, vinyl armchair and angled mirrors. Lolly held her breath and fixed on the reflection of Maureen's French roll in the mirror behind her. It was an impressive sweep of yellow hair, secured by tortoiseshell combs and lacquered with hairspray. Lolly had never seen a hairdo like it. Not in person, anyway. Probably on television.

*Miss? I need you to take your top off for the fitting. I need to measure the way the bosom sits without the impediment of clothing.*

Lolly blinked. One of Maureen's hairs had escaped and was vibrating on the air conditioning. Maureen snapped the tape measure between two hands.

*Come on, Miss. Let's not keep your mother waiting.*

Lolly unbuttoned her shirt and peeled off her singlet. She could feel her cheeks burning.

*Now look up, Miss. When you stand like that with your head down it drags the shoulders forward. Arms up.* Maureen reached around Lolly's back with her tape measure and they stood for a moment in a cold embrace. Maureen smelled sharp, of heavy perfume and cigarette smoke. Lolly felt her fingers on her back, her nails dragging against her ribs, following the tape measure, lifting and straightening it as she moved it around to Lolly's breasts. She arranged the tape measure so it sat at the centre of the nipples and studied the number. She then lowered the tape, measured

under the breasts, kneaded her fingers in the soft flesh at Lolly's ribcage and flashed her yellowed teeth.

*You'll want to watch this.* Poke, poke poke. She cocked her head. *You're not a girl any more.* Maureen slipped behind the curtain and left Lolly alone with her reflection. The air conditioning chilled. Lolly squinted at the paleness of private skin, the tangle of blue veins, the scattering of pimples, the swollen pink of her nipples. She chewed on her lips and looked for what Maureen had seen. *You're not a girl any more.* Lolly had not seen this before. She had not realised she looked like this. Lopsided. Lumpy. Porcelain white. The fluorescent light buzzed and flickered, Lolly half turned, redirected her head and saw image upon image repeat into infinity. She had not realised she had outgrown herself. She thought back a few years and remembered herself running along the sand into the wind, Mumma clapping and yelling, *Go, Lolly legs! Go!* She wondered about that little girl now, withered and shrivelled and knocking about inside this oversized body. So much empty space between her and the outside world. Lolly looked at the stains on the carpet and was sure she had room for another struesel bun. Anything to fill herself up.

They caught the last ferry home in silence. Mumma kept her nose to the wind and Lolly ate her way through a packet of mints. She kept her shopping bags tucked under her seat, behind her shins. Gramma had bought her a pair of sandals and a pink dress with white spots, puffed sleeves, ruffles at the collar and a drop waist. Lolly didn't like it, but she smiled and nodded when Gramma exclaimed how pretty she looked. Mumma bought herself four cookbooks, a set of baking trays and a wicker basket. She bought Lolly three skivvies, two pairs of jeans, a duffle coat, a pair of desert boots and two beige bras. Maureen had said, *Two training bras should be sufficient to start with, as young ladies like this one inevitably continue to develop—*

*particularly considering her young age of blossoming and her size.* Lolly liked the desert boots. They would carry her further into the scrub.

Later that night from the safety of shadows, Mumma watched Lolly sleeping. She could not help but cry. She looked at her daughter's body, all mounds of flesh and angles of bone under the blankets. In the violet night, the skin of her daughter's face was velvet, her lips as dark as an aubergine, her eyelids silk, her lashes the finest of ink strokes. In the shadows, Lolly looked like her father; the same arch of forehead, dark and prominent brows, the same tilt to her nose and the same strength to her jaw line. Even her hair was becoming darker, despite the amount of time she spent under the bleaching glare of the sun. Under the blanket of dark there was no trace of rampant growth, of cells bursting in division, of hormones gushing, pores oozing, hairs sprouting. There was no sign of the chocolate pie they had eaten some hours ago, no sign of the squirting of acid, the movement of villi on the stomach walls, the slow break down of nutrient, the rebuilding of muscle, the depositing of fat. Mumma had given birth to a baby and she had grown. The house ticked in the night. Mumma did not want to lose another child.

At thirteen Lolly was still very much a girl. On Saturday mornings while Mumma and Mister slept late, Lolly dressed her dolls. She fingered the glossy, plastic chests, let her stumpy fingers wander over the hard stomachs and down into the smooth groove between the legs. *Baby dear*, Lolly breathed as her fingers walked. *Baby dear, are you hungry?* Lolly sang to herself, gnawed on a plastic foot and bit off a pinkie. It scratchy-scratched all the way down.



On the Sunday before his next interstate job, Mister lay back on the bed and watched Mumma dressing. She hitched up a pair of blue cotton briefs, the snap of elastic disappearing into the flesh at her waist. She slipped her arms into an old beige bra, fastened it swiftly at her back and adjusted her breasts into the cups. She pulled on one of Mister's old shirts, chose a pair of trousers and stepped into the leg holes. When she got the pants to her waist, she struggled to make the ends meet. She sucked in her stomach, held her breath and heaved. When she saw Mister smirk, she turned her back to him and tried again. When she was sure that she would not get the button to the hole, she zipped the zipper as far as it would go and pulled her shirt down. As she dusted talcum powder inside her shirt she could hear Mister laughing behind her. She spun around and snapped, *What's so funny!*

He scratched at his bristle of beard. *Watching you struggling to fit.*

Mumma turned away and picked up a comb.

*If you don't stop eating so much you'll get fatter and fatter.*

She yanked the comb through a tangle and heard her hair break. *What's so bad about that?*

Mister snorted and thought for a minute. *When I first met you, you were trim.*

Mumma's hair stood on end with static electricity. *When you first met me I was almost seven months pregnant with Lolly.*

*After that. After she was born.*

*I was haggard with breast feeding and anaemic.*

*You had a waist.*

*I felt faint all the time.*

*You were beautiful.*

Mumma slammed the comb on the dresser.

*I'm making porridge for breakfast.*

*Margie! You know I hate porridge.*

Lolly ate and ate and ate. Something about chewing, sucking and biting stimulated and seduced. She was calmed by the action of her jaws—two blue-grey, walnut-sized muscles. She could bite through anything. Lolly's hunger was insatiable. She ate and ate. For taste, for texture. When she was happy or sad or tired. When she found something odd, something baffling, or shining she popped in her mouth to get a sense. But mostly, Lolly ate for the experience of being with others. While Mumma chopped vegetables and chuck steak for stew, Lolly skulked about the kitchen, fingers creeping through the off cuts in the compost bin, the scraps in the chook bucket, pinching a snip of beef fat here, a carrot top there. Lolly lurked in the shadow of Mumma, sneaking slices of bacon rind, potato peelings, stock cubes, pepper corns and plastic wrap. Lolly poured Mumma a glass of wine and the cork was a real mouthful.

When Mister left for Victoria, Lolly made batches of cheese biscuits with a pinch of ground eucalyptus leaf to bring him back to Mumma. As she cooked, she breathed flour, crunched egg shell and licked butter. Scone dough dried to a crust under her fingernails. She tongued her fingers, tasted salt and something she remembered as a child. For Ernest, she baked rock buns and fairy cakes, she made rhubarb fool and mastered marshmallow. But as her confidence and ability in the kitchen grew, Mumma began refusing her offerings. She would smack her stomach and say, *No thankyou pumpkin. I have enough sweeties stored up from last time.* Or,

*Oh no! I couldn't possibly. It's all your hard work. You eat it up, sugar. You're a growing girl, after all.*

Lolly ate her way through a batch of Anzac biscuits, while Mumma sipped black coffee. She watched Mumma take a little plastic box out of her pocket, shake out a white tablet and drop it into her coffee. Lolly swallowed.

*What was that?*

Mumma put the box back in her pocket. *An artificial sweetener.*

Lolly frowned and Mumma sighed.

*It helps me not be so fat. Mister thinks I should lose a couple of stone so I can do my pants up, so while he's away I'm trying not to eat so much and then when he comes home he'll love me all over again.*

Lolly bit into another biscuit. *Why doesn't he love you when your pants don't do up?*

Mumma ran her tongue over her teeth. The sweetener left an unpleasant aftertaste. *It's not right for a woman to be bigger than a man.* Mumma finished her coffee and stood up. *All the magazines say it.*

Mister had been gone some weeks and Mumma had become jittery. When she sat down to write in her record, the biro trembled in her fingers. She clasped the pen tight in her fist and wrote: *Breakfast: Black coffee. Lunch: Vegemite in water, grapefruit, two boiled eggs. Afternoon tea: Three carrots. Dinner: Lamb Chops. Stewed prunes for constipation. Two pills, as prescribed by Dr Warren. Weight: Eleven and a half stone. Lost half a stone. Two and a half to go. (Mister home in another two months.)* Mumma looked up and the room warped in and out of focus. She felt dizzy, her head ached and she was hungry. Very, very hungry.

Lolly woke in the night to a noise in the kitchen. She listened for a few moments and then decided to go for a look. She wondered if Ginger was into something on the kitchen bench. Lolly had made dinner and she would be in trouble if she had left something out for the cat to get into. She tip-toed down the passage and peeped around the door jam. Blue moonlight beamed through the window. It was Mumma in the kitchen. She had her back to Lolly. She was licking the dinner plates, bouncing from the ball of one foot to the other. Lolly watched for a minute or two and then slipped away. She felt guilty, but she didn't know why. She got back into bed and curled into a ball with her hands tucked into her crotch. It felt nice down there. Warm. She heard Mumma switch on the television. Lolly shut her eyes and wiggled her fingers.

A new girl called Sandy started at Hillwater Area School. She was in Lolly's class. She was tall as a man and thin as a stick. She had black curly hair and a brown birthmark on her left cheek. She wore big round glasses, a denim jacket and green stretch cords. She hooked her bag over her seat and sat down, right in front of Lolly. Mr Harper blew his nose, flipped open a book and started the lesson. Chalk dust hung low in the air. With her chin stretched forward, Lolly could see into Sandy's bag. There were three new lined test pads, a few tissues, a magazine called 'Girls' Talk', a glasses case, a coin purse, a can of Fanta, a packet of salt and vinegar chips and a lunch box. Lolly sat back in her chair and stared into the curly tangle of Sandy's hair. She had never eaten salt and vinegar chips.

Sandy was sitting on the retaining wall at the front entrance, sipping Fanta from the rim of the can. Her eyes were smarting. She looked up and Lolly said, *How come*

*you're starting school here? People leave here to go to college on the mainland, but no one ever starts up here. Not in year nine, anyway.*

Sandy put her Fanta down on the wall and metal grated against concrete. She said, *My Mum got work here.*

*Oh.*

*In the hospital.*

*She a nurse?*

*No. A radiographer.*

Lolly looked blank.

*You know—X-rays and stuff. She's part-time.*

Lolly sat down. *My name's Lola.*

*I know.*

*How?*

*Just do.*

The cold butter hacked up the bread as Lolly tried to spread it. Mumma watched, frowning. Lolly licked grease from her fingers and asked, *How do you become a radiographer?*

Mumma's eyes widened. *A radiographer?*

Lolly nodded and forced bread into her mouth. *You know—X-rays and stuff.*

*Well, I'm sure you go to university. You probably have to be very smart, know your maths and science. Probably you have to study anatomy. Maybe you do a medical degree first. Why do you ask, greasy lips?*

Lolly wiped her face. *Sandy's mum is a radiographer.*

*Her mum?*

Lolly nodded.

Mumma felt her stomach constrict. It was probably time for another pill. *Well she must be a very clever lady.*

Lolly shrugged and took out another piece of bread.

*Don't eat that, Lola. You'll ruin your appetite.*

Lolly took a breath and looked at Mumma. *Are you eating tonight?*

Mumma gripped at the sideboard. *Maybe I'll make some rice pudding.*

After almost two sleepless, jittery weeks, after fevers and cold sweats and palpitations and hallucinations Mumma made an appointment to see Dr Warren. On the way to the hospital, she swerved off the road four times, took a corner too fast, imagined strange creatures bounding from the scrub in front of her and hit the brakes hard enough to nearly spin the car. When she parked the ute out the front of the main entrance and turned off the engine she sat gripping the wheel for some minutes to steady herself. Her limbs trembled, her heart raced, she broke out in goose bumps and sticky sweat. She smelt bad, sharp like metal, acrid like fear. She spun around when she thought she heard someone climb into the tray of the ute. There was no one there. A willy-willy of dust turned a slow circle. Mumma swallowed and tried to read the time on her wrist watch, but her eyes were full of tears. She pulled the keys from the ignition, laid them by her purse, touched them, then her purse, then the keys, then her purse. Fear narrowed her vision, needled her temples and constricted her throat. She choked on a cry. She gasped for air. She opened the car door, kicked her legs and somehow got herself entangled in the seat belt. As she fell to the ground, she saw the rapid black spin of melting bitumen coming at her, a million miles an hour.

Mumma felt hands all over her, poking, pinching, pressing, punching. She saw herself skip out of the hospital into a lush, green paddock. She had her hair loose and her feet were bare and her limbs were pale and lean because she was a girl again. Dandy was there, bouncing and bucking and bleating and Ginger was shooting up trees with her eyes wild and her tail all fluffed up. Mumma was laughing and squealing to be free again. She waved to her mother, to Mister and Lola and she ran faster and faster until she took to the air and soared. As she rose to the sky, she saw Robin sitting cross-legged under a mulberry tree. He was holding a baby. Mumma felt ice cold wind fill her lungs as she broke through cloud. Everything went white.

*Welcome back, Mrs Armstrong.* Dr Warren had his fingers interlocked. *You fainted.*

Mumma blinked at the ceiling. There was a blowfly hanging on by its legs.

*The nurse is fixing you a cup of sweet tea.*

Mumma's tongue felt thick.

*Margaret, your medication? Did you deviate from the recommended dosage?*

Mumma worked to get her lips around words. *I haven't been myself.*

*This turn, Margaret. You took more pills than recommended—yes?*

The fly ran its legs over its eyes.

Mumma croaked, *No more medication.*

*Now Margaret.*

*I was better off without it.*

*If taken correctly, that medication is usually quite successful for weight loss.*

Mumma watched the fly fall through air, then bunt suddenly, against the wall.

*I want to go home, now.*

Lolly was called to the front office over the intercom. The woman at the desk shuffled through a pile of telephone messages, raised her eyebrows and passed one to Lolly. Lolly read it and said, *What does this mean?*

The woman narrowed her eyes. *Just what it says. That you're to go to the hospital after school. Your mother is there.*

Lolly felt her lunch rise up her gullet. *Has there been an accident?*

The woman tilted her head back and smoothed at her throat. *I doubt it, dear. They would have said if it were serious. They would have sent for you right away. You remember when Ryan's father was pinned under the tractor? Ryan was whipped out of class in two shakes. He was at the hospital in time to say his last farewells, poor lad.*

Lolly's stomach clenched so tight it was difficult to take in air. Her sneakers squeaked as she turned into the Chemistry lab. Her classmates were hunched over bunsen burners, flicking test tubes in and out of flames. Mr Harper was talking to Sarah Downes, his foot raised on the edge of her chair, his little finger rotating in his ear. Lolly found Sandy at the back of the class.

*Mumma's in hospital. Will you come with me? I don't know my way 'round.*

Sandy shut off the flame. *What's happened?*

Lolly stuffed her things into her bag. *I don't know. They didn't say.* The air stunk of gas and fumes. Two seats along, Jason was melting the end of his biro. Lolly told Mr Harper it was a medical emergency and slung her bag over her shoulder.

Sandy's mother was tall and thin, just like Sandy. She was leaning over the reception desk, reaching for a pen, her sandal flapping away from her soft pink heel. Lolly felt reassured by her, by her cotton pants and her red shirt and her short hair cut. Sandy said, *Mum?* and she spun around, her eyebrows high with surprise.



*What are you doing here?*

*Mum, this is Lolly.*

*Lola, Lolly swallowed.*

*She got a message at school that her mum was here and she didn't know where to go so I came with her.*

*Sandy's mother slid the pen behind her ear, extended her arm and shook Lolly's hand. I'm Rhoda. Her palm was warm and dry. Did they tell you where she is? Emergency?*

*Lolly could feel her cheeks burning. No. I don't think it was an emergency. The message was to come after school.*

*Sandy grabbed Lolly's arm. But Lolly was worried, so we came right away. We were only pissing about burning sulphur in Chem, anyway.*

*Rhoda checked her watch. Ok. Now Lola, do you know who your mum's doctor is?*

*Dr Warren.*

*Right. Well I know David's in Outpatients on Wednesday, so that'd be the best place to start. Do you want me to take you? I have fifteen minutes until my next appointment.*

*Lolly wrung her hands and nodded.*

*Mumma was pale and drawn, but sitting up reading a magazine on a bed. She said, You're early. Lolly's pulse was shuddering through her body with such force she thought she would fall over. Her throat seized and she fought not to cry. I was scared. Mumma smiled. Her lips were cracked. There was a little blood. No need to be scared, lamb chop. Dr Warren gave me the wrong tablets, is all. I had a bit of a turn. They kept me in for the afternoon 'cause I was a bit woozy. Dr Warren thought*

*it might be a good idea that I wait around for you so I had a bit of company for the drive home.*

There was a knock on the door as Rhoda stuck her head in.

*Excuse me. Lola, we'll leave you to it.*

Lolly stepped out of the room to thank them.

Sandy panted, *Is she all right?*

The door clicked shut. Lolly shrugged and nodded and started to cry. Rhoda put her arm around Lolly's shoulders.

*Dr Warren gave her the wrong tablets. They made her sick.*

Sandy picked at her fingernails. *What kind of tablets?*

Rhoda shot her a look over Lolly's head. Lolly sobbed into Rhoda's red shirt. She smelt warm, like cloves and cinnamon and rich velvet roses.

*They were pills to make her lose weight.*

Rhoda clicked her tongue.

*They made her crazy.* Lolly pulled herself together, wiped her cheeks on her sleeve and snorted on mucus. She noticed she had left a mark on Rhoda's shirt. She didn't know what to do. Rhoda put her hand on Lolly's head.

*She'll be all right now. She's got you to look after her, after all.*

Lolly hiccupped and looked at the floor.

*She might be a bit off for a while. There are a lot of different types of diet pills, but generally they're very addictive. She might be a bit crabby coming off them.* Lolly nodded and said goodbye. Rhoda smiled and took her hand from Lolly's head. It had made Lolly's scalp hot.

Late in the afternoon they took to the road. Mumma drove much slower than usual and sat in close to the steering wheel. Lolly cried secretly out her open window

until her nostrils had swollen shut. She had never really considered being without Mumma until today. If Mumma died, where would she go? Mister could not look after her. Ernest was too old. Gramma lived too far away. Lolly thought about living in the cottage by herself. She thought of the dark seeping in through the old chimneys, of rats gnawing through floor boards, of snakes and spiders and rusty nails, of cold hands around her throat, of eyes watching her from the bush; eyes always watching her. Lolly wanted Mumma to know how much she needed her, but there was no way to tell her. Instead, she cleared her throat and said, *That woman today at the hospital—that was my friend Sandy's mum. She helped me find you.* Mumma squinted through the windscreen and nodded, slowly.

A week later, Mister came home from Queensland. He brought real fresh coconuts. The first one they cracked had gone rancid. The second one was perfect white. Mumma and Lolly shared it and listened to Mister's stories of the rainforests and reef. He had to burn ticks from his forearm with a cigarette lighter. He pointed out the pink scars. Mumma clicked her tongue and shook her head. He had been stung by jellyfish enough times to learn to always carry vinegar.

*What's the point of a beach if you can't swim in it! And fish. The fish I caught were poisonous.*

Mumma rolled her eyes and snapped coconut.

*So what's been happening 'round here.* Mister stretched his legs and dipped his chin at Mumma. *I see you've lost weight.*

Lolly stopped chewing. Mumma smiled with half her mouth, wrapped a length of hair around her index finger and Mister grinned. Lolly opened her mouth to speak and coconut rained.

*She went to hospital.*

Mumma gasped and bit her lips. *It was nothing.*

Mister pulled at his nose and yawned.

*It was nothing, Lola. Just women's troubles.*

The coconut gave Mumma and Lolly the trots. They met several times well after midnight, dancing on the balls of their feet, hands clutching guts, on the way to the toilet. Mumma said, *So much for my lovely lamb roast. It's going straight through—won't even touch the sides.* Lolly let Mumma go first. She could hear the watery explosion of diarrhoea against the porcelain. Lolly doubled over, heard her guts groan, gurgle, squeal and squelch and thought about the journey of her meal, from mouth to anus. She pressed her fingers into her waist and felt a bubble of wind turn a corner. What was happening inside her? Was the roast really shooting along a tube, still pink and juicy and bleeding into potato? Would it come out recognisable? Minced lamb with diced carrot? The toilet flushed and a tap ran. Lolly felt repulsed by the idea. She squeezed her buttocks together as Mumma opened the door, grinning sheepishly. *Sorry about the smell, sweet cakes. My tummy doesn't like fresh coconut. White rice for breakfast, I think.* Lolly kicked shut the bathroom door, turned on a tap to disguise the noise, pulled down her pyjama pants and skipped to the toilet. As her buttocks hit the warm toilet seat, she was emptied. The smell was foul, but it was a huge relief. She glanced between her legs at the evacuated mess, the nasty splattering of her half digested dinner and felt cleaned out, purified.

At day break, Mumma boiled rice and drank sweet tea. Mister fried eggs and looked out over the tree tops to the sea.

He scratched at his chin and said, *I might take the boat out this morning.* He watched bubbles swell in the egg white. *You could come with me.*

Mumma blew over her tea and said, *Maybe I will. I think my tummy has settled.* She poured the rice through a colander and the kitchen window misted over. *I'll write a note for Lolly and then I'll fix us a little hamper.*

Lolly slept late and woke feeling spent. Her head felt cloudy, her stomach bloated, her back stiff. She pulled her legs towards her chest and felt her pubic hair pull. She threw back the blankets, sat up and looked down on herself. Blood had soaked through her pyjamas and dried on the sheets. She was always shocked by her bleeding—like it was the first time, all over again. She sighed through her nose and rubbed her eye socket with the heel of her hand. Her palm came away wet. She was crying.

In the empty house, Lolly squatted naked from the waist down scrubbing at bloodstains in the big bath. Pink water sloshed against white porcelain as Lolly worked a bar of soap in circles. She leaked tears as she worked and heard her cries echo against tiles as if they belonged to someone else. She did not know why she was crying, but the sadness had grown so big it filled every space within her. It made her head too heavy for her shoulders. It leadened her back, crushed her lungs, clogged her stomach. She felt it flush into her legs, tightening her ankles and numbing her toes. She was so heavy with sadness she wondered if she would ever be capable of hauling the wet sheets from the bath, if she would ever get up from the floor. Lolly scrubbed and sobbed and let her forehead whack against porcelain. She screwed her eyes shut and imagined herself taking to the air. It was warm against the ceiling. Looking down, she saw her half-naked body slumped against the bath. She saw the way she had outgrown herself, the way she had stretched, swelled and bloated. She saw the

way her breasts strained against the cotton of her pyjama top, growing despite her—in spite of her. Lolly hung low in the air, just above herself. The blood at her inner thighs was brilliant.

Air popped under the boat as they rose and fell. Mumma lay back in the sun and pulled her orange straw hat down over her eyes. *We're lucky it's so mild at this time of year. There'd be frost on the mainland on a clear morning like this.* Mister stitched a maggot on a hook, rinsed his fingers in the sea, drew his rod back over his right shoulder and cast into the burley line. The sinker plopped as it hit the water. A few drips, a distant bird call, silence. A little fart hissed out of Mumma. She giggled and excused herself.

*Ah!* Mister jerked his line. *We have some action.*

Mumma sat forward, adjusting her hat. She could see the occasional flicker of silver beneath the mercury surface. Mister was poised on the edge of the bench, sitting on his rigid buttocks.

He teased the line with his finger and said, *Come on... Come on, now.*

Mumma watched him with her eyes wide. She caught a glimpse of pale skin above his elbow, where his shirt sleeves had protected him from the tropical sun.

She smiled, *It's nice having you home again, Mister. It's like old times.*

He rose up off his buttocks and reeled in his first fish.

Lolly had washed herself with a flannel, put on clean undies and a sanitary napkin. She stood in front of Mumma's wardrobe, feeling fabric between her fingers. She shuffled through cotton trousers, woollen pants and kilts, Indian wrap-around skirts and canvas shirts. There was Mumma's grey winter coat, so heavy it had bent

the hanger, Mumma's water proof jacket with the ripped pocket, her old overalls she used to wear in the garden, the zip-up dress she wore when she baked tarts. Pushed at the back of the wardrobe, Lolly found a row of old clothes, protected by green garbage bags. She peeled back the plastic on the first. It was a yellow sun dress. She could not remember seeing Mumma in it. She took it off the hanger and stepped into it, feeling the cool shimmy of the hem against her bare shins, breathing the sweet staleness it gave off. In front of Mumma's little mirror, Lolly struggled with the zip. She pulled it up a few centimetres, then the dress would not give. Lolly held her breath and tried again. The stitching threatened to turn inside out. Lolly let go and slid her hands through the arm holes. She worked the puffed sleeves up over her elbows until the elastic was stretched taut. She could not fit. She could not fit the dainty tucks and pleats of the shoulders. She could not fit the tailored bodice and the pinched waistline. She was too big. She looked at her reflection from head to waist, her upper back arched, her shoulders squashed, her chest collapsed, her arms hooked, crooked and constricted by yellow nylon. She was a big, ugly moth, bursting from its cocoon. A snake shedding its skin. She was like a woman trying to fit into the clothes of her childhood, except these were not girl's clothes. These were her mother's.

Three fish danced around the floor of the boat, Mumma pressed her hands into her ears, begging him to put them out of their misery and Mister laughed. He chased the slippery creatures with his clumsy hands, slid his fingers in their gills and snapped their necks. Blood sprayed and Mumma, quite suddenly, launched forward and kissed Mister on his open mouth. She felt the heat of his breath, the slickness of his teeth, the leather of his top lip and the needling of bristle against her mouth. Mister's feet slid in fish slime, his legs went from under him and his arse hit the deck with a thud. He

barked a startled laugh, tucked his fingers firmly behind Mumma's shoulder blades and pulled her towards him.

Lolly stood on the crumpled yellow sun dress. She had tried Mumma's peasant blouse, only to get herself stuck half way. She had snaked and squirmed and sweated her way out of it. Stitches popped. Seams tore. She pulled on a pretty skirt, with cherries embroidered along the hem line, spun in a circle and felt the light fabric flutter on the air. Its elastic waist was tight, but it was the most accommodating of all of the garments. Lolly tossed her arms and twisted at the midriff, watching the cherries bleed into a bright red blur. She liked this skirt. She liked it against her legs. Lolly strained for a better view of herself in Mumma's mirror. She climbed up onto the end of the bed and examined herself from the waist down. The skirt was not flattering. The elastic waistband had been swallowed up. The fabric, which had felt so light and loose, did not sit right. It gathered in unsightly bunches, collected and piled on her hips, hanging lower at the front than at the back. Lolly tried to adjust it. She picked and pulled, straightened and smoothed. She poked at her hips, pressed, then punched. She jumped off the bed, ripped off the skirt and threw it into the air. It landed inside-out, its seams to the ceiling.

Mumma and Mister rocked the boat and made themselves giddy. The moment was all flashing sunlight, fish scales and fingers. Bloody brine soaked Mister's pants and as Mumma's weight bore down on him something sharp broke the skin at his spine. His slid his rough hands up her shirt, grabbed at her breasts, pulled at her hips, worked his fingers into creases and folds, wormed his way inside of her. Mumma's



hat slid down over her eyes as she bucked. She held a lungful of breath, clenched him with her buttocks and collapsed onto his chest.

Mister pushed her flaccid torso upright and breathed, *Not yet, Margie. Not yet.*

She let herself be rocked by his hands and spied his contorted face through the dappled shadow the broad rim of her hat threw. He whistled air through his teeth and let his head fall to the side. Eventually, he looked sideways at her.

*You still use that coil, don't you?*

Mumma straightened her hat and pulled herself slowly from him. *No. I use pills now.*

Mister nodded. *That's good.*

The last dress was ivory satin, yellowed with age, spoiled and soiled with stains. Lolly recognised it from the photographs. Mumma as a bride. Lolly was just months old, slumped on her mother's hip, cross-eyed. She rubbed the satin against her bare skin. She knew she would not fit into this dress with its high-buttoned neck, its tapered bodice and its snug line, so she tied the long sleeves together and hooked them over her neck. She scowled at herself in the mirror. She looked ridiculous. Her face was grey against the creamy dress, her dark eyes had sunk in her face. She took the mirror from the wall and lay back on the bed, holding it at arms length, moving it around and around, checking herself from every angle. She wondered about the shape of her skull under all that flesh, about the position of her cheekbones, the line of her jaw. Sandy had such an impressive face. Her skin was taut over bone and an elegant vein divided her forehead. Muscles bunched in her cheeks and at her temples as she chewed and when she swallowed, you could see the lump of food move down her throat. With one hand holding the mirror and one at her face, Lolly pulled at her

jowls, stretched skin. She had stared so intently that she no longer recognised herself. Her eyes glazed over and the mirror started to quake, her arm trembling under its weight. She dropped it on the bed, sighed from the pit of her stomach and gazed at the wall.

Mister shifted a handful of himself, snapped his undies and zipped up his fly. He said, *Do you really like having me back?*

Mumma was busy in the esky. There was a mottled rash over her chest. *Of course I do.*

*Because I've been thinking.*

Mumma passed him a slab of fruit cake.

*I've been thinking about buying a boat.*

Mumma rapped her knuckles on the tinny and tittered, *And what do you call this?*

Mister peeled a bit of foil from the bottom of his cake. *A real boat, so I can start my own business and live here permanently—so I can look after you.*

Mumma picked something out of her teeth and went cross-eyed examining it. Mister poked her with his big toe. *You used to say that crayfish made you sexy.*

From Mumma's bed, Lolly could see a white square where the mirror had hung. The hook had been nailed in the join of the wallpaper. The glue had come away from the wall and the paper gaped. Lolly wondered what colour the walls were before someone slapped on the horrible textured wallpaper. She took a fistful of the bedspread and pulled herself up. She felt light headed. It struck her that she hadn't yet eaten. She leant over Mumma's dressing table and slid a finger under the wallpaper.

There was something tucked in there. She pulled it out. It was a photograph. Young Mumma in black and white. Mumma in plaits, a smile ear to ear. And a man with ink black hair, smudged in a moment of movement, but most definitely smiling broadly, too. Lolly turned the photograph over. Something had been rubbed out. She flipped the image again, stared harder. He had his hand over Mumma's. Lolly ran her hands over the wallpaper, hoping for something else. There was nothing. She licked her lips, took one last look and worked the photograph back where she had found it. The wallpaper caught her middle finger and cut a neat slice in her knuckle. She screwed her eyes shut and tasted blood.

Mumma and Mister arrived home for a late lunch. They brought a whiff of the sea to the kitchen. Mister had dried salt rings encircling his jeans and a squirt of fish shit at his hips. He said, *Fancy some whiting for lunch, Lola?* and poured the bucketful of fillets into the sink.

Lolly did not look up from Chapter Five: Human Physiology. *No thankyou.*

Mumma pulled her head out of the fridge. *No thankyou? It's not like my Lolly to turn down fresh whiting. Are you still poorly, little dumpling?*

Lolly slammed her biology textbook shut. *Don't call me that.* She scraped her chair across the floor and stood up. *I don't want to eat something he's just killed.*

Mumma stood up and blinked, twice. She gripped a stick of butter in one hand. Lolly felt a shot of fear course through her system. She pulled her book to her chest and left the room.

Mumma potted aimlessly around the garden while Mister cleaned out the old shed. She pulled a few weeds, plucked dead flower heads from the lavender, scratched Ginger behind the ears and then could stand it no longer. Lolly's bedroom

door was closed. Mumma knocked gently, pressed her ear to the door, knocked once more and then turned the handle. Lolly was lying across her bed, books spread over the floor. The curtains were drawn and Lolly's eyes were big and dark in the low light.

Mumma said, *The fishies didn't suffer, Lolly.*

Lolly curled her lip and pictured Mister tearing the hook through translucent flesh, tossing the desperate creature on the metal floor of the boat.

*There's some left. I could fry it up?*

Lolly shut her eyes and wondered why Mumma couldn't see all the hurt.

*What about some plain buttered toast?*

No response.

*Some honey stirred through yoghurt?*

Silence.

*I could make chicken soup. There's stock in the freezer?*

Lolly couldn't speak, but she hoped somehow she was communicating.

Mumma stepped into the room and felt suddenly self conscious. *I saw the sheets on the line. Did you have an accident?*

Lolly flung an arm over her face.

*Is it Mr Monthly?* Mumma swallowed nervously. *You know, I would have washed the sheets.*

*I can do it myself.*

Silence.

Mumma looked about the room. Miss Lucy was stuffed between books, high up on the bookshelf. There was a spider web running between her plastic feet.

*Right-o, Mumma exclaimed, a little too loudly. I'll whip up a chocolate cake. I know how you love chocolate cake.*

Sandy's mum was going to Melbourne for the weekend and Sandy didn't want to go, so she asked Lolly if it would be OK if she came to stay. Lolly said yes and then wished she'd been quick enough to think up an excuse. She felt suddenly ashamed of the old cottage, of the linoleum tiles, buckled laminex, loud nylon carpets, textured wallpaper and mismatched furniture. She thought with horror that Sandy would have to use the bathroom. There was no shower, no towels that matched, no toilet roll holder. There was mould on the ceiling and spiders' webs along the cornice. Not like at Sandy's place. Lolly had been to Sandy's place on many occasions. Sandy lived in town, in a new brick house, with a couch grass lawn out the front. They had a plush velvet modular lounge suite, a glass-topped coffee table, a white kitchen filled with appliances and a stereo system with surround speakers. Sandy had a double bed, a doona bright with red poppies and a 'U'-shaped pillow with a frill. There were posters of movies and bands, post cards from abroad, a cassette player, a portable TV and a computer. Sandy's mum picked up pizza after work, or fish and chips, a roast chicken in a foil bag or frozen lasagne. Lolly did not mention that she had never eaten take-away, that the first time she had swigged a soft drink was with Sandy. Rhoda let the girls have a squirt of Coolabah in their Fanta, she played swear-word scrabble with them and told stories about the hospital. Lolly was fascinated by Rhoda's work and listened intently to tales of fractured femurs, chipped ulnas, fibulas burst through skin, shattered pelvises, snapped ribs. She heard about scans and ultra sounds, about measurements of unborn babies, stains and dyes that highlighted blockages in the bowel or tumours in the stomach. Rhoda could see inside

of people, see how they worked, note what was going wrong. Lolly wanted to ask if Rhoda could see inside of her, but it was a silly thing to ask and she was too embarrassed.

Sandy said they could go home together after school on Friday and Lolly nodded and worried that on the weekend Mister would be around and Mumma had her days off baking. Mumma might be wearing Mister's shirt with the sleeves cut off. Mumma might call her baby names and write messages in honey on her porridge. Lolly thought all this at a million miles an hour. Her shame made her feel sick.

On Thursday night, Lolly scrubbed the bath with Ajax, mopped the floor, brushed away cobwebs with a broom, chose the least threadbare towels and picked a bunch of lavender. She washed a sink full of dishes, wiped down bench tops and waxed the kitchen table. She dusted the shelves in her bedroom, beat out her rug, vacuumed her floor, washed the window and sprayed perfume on her curtains. Mumma followed after her asking what she should do, if she could help, where Lolly would like things. She said she would cook up a special meal, something impressive, a real treat for Lolly's first guest. Lolly clenched her teeth and wrung out a sponge.

Mumma spent Friday morning poring over recipes. She sent Mister to town to get a leg of lamb, a generous stack of bacon, parmesan cheese, bread, milk, cream and butter, dark chocolate, hazelnuts and a box of glacé fruit. Mister was not overjoyed about the prospect of grocery shopping, but Mumma pressed the importance of this dinner and gave him twenty dollars for a bottle of something, so he pulled on his boots and hooked his keys on his finger as soon as he'd finished his breakfast.

While a simple slab sponge baked, Mumma went through her linen in search of a table cloth. She rummaged through old sheets and blankets, through odd lengths of material, old curtains and half-used balls of wool. She stood on a chair to get to the

top of the cupboard. Dust made her nose prickle and her eyes itch. She pulled down cardboard boxes filled with half-finished sewing projects, incomplete crochets, imperfect macrame. There were piles of Lolly's school work, finger paintings, bold drawings in crayon, her first attempts at handwriting. At the very back of the top shelf, there was a box of baby clothes, bound in brown paper and sealed in plastic. Most of the clothes were those Lolly had grown in, but amongst them, wrapped in tissue paper, there were a few reminders of Gracie. Mumma guessed it was time for morning tea. She fancied something sweet, a crumpet with butter and honey. She ran her thumb under the waist of her trousers. They were still loose enough. Surely one crumpet couldn't hurt. She stepped down from the chair, settled on a plain white table cloth with scalloped edging and slammed the cupboard door shut.

Mumma heard the ute slow as it approached the driveway. Standing over the sink, she forced the last of her second crumpet into her mouth, licked the melted butter from her forearms, the sticky honey from her fingers and wiped herself down with a tea towel. As Mister juggled shopping, Mumma set herself to lining a pudding basin with damp muslin, cutting the sponge into twelve curved pieces with her sharpest of knives and arranging the cake to cover the base and sides of the bowl. Mister dropped the boxes and bags on the kitchen floor and looked over her shoulder. Mumma was drizzling rum over the cake.

*What you making?*

Mumma screwed the lid back on the rum, took a sniff of the cake and put the bowl in the fridge. *A special dessert.*

Mister kissed her quickly on the mouth and went for the front door. *I'm gonna get back to the shed, now.* He stopped, turned back to face her, licking his lips. *Mmmm. You taste sweet.* Mumma looked at the floor.

The girls arrived home well after four. Mumma had been keeping an eye on the driveway as she beat egg, grated parmesan, chopped bacon, breadcrumbs and parsley, onions, carrots, celery and rosemary. But when they finally appeared around the corner, she was preoccupied with her stuffing and up to her elbow in lamb.

Lolly opened the door and bared her teeth, *What stinks?*

Mumma pulled her hand from the meat with a start. *Oh! I didn't hear you come in.*

*What stinks?*

Sandy took her bag from her shoulder and held it in both hands.

*Oh... It's probably the parmesan. Sorry Lol... Lola.*

Sandy stepped forward and extended an arm. She had to slouch to arrive at Mumma's level. *Hello, Mrs Armstrong.*

Mumma did a funny dance on the balls of her feet and shook her hands. *Oh no! Don't touch me. I'm covered in sticky muck. Look at that.* She spread her fingers. *Stuffing under my nails.*

Lolly watched with her mouth open. No words would come. Mumma pointed to the table. There was a plate of cupcakes with chocolate icing and coconut.

*Please have a snack, Sandy,* said Mumma. *I made them for you.*

Sandy thanked her and took a cake. She bit the top off, icing first and caught her teeth on the patty pan. Mumma had never seen someone attempt a cup cake in this fashion.

She said, *Mind the paper. It's not edible.*

Lolly picked up the plate and squeaked, *We'll be in my room.*



Mumma watched them leave. Next to Lolly, Sandy's legs seemed ludicrously long. She had never seen such neat buttocks, so tiny a waist and such bony arms. Mumma nodded to herself. The girl was in need of a good feed.

Lolly closed her bedroom door and giggled nervously. She passed Sandy the cakes. *What do you want to do?*

Sandy shrugged and ate another cake. *Your mum's cute. Has she always had long hair?*

Lolly took off her school jumper and folded it carefully. *Always.*

Sandy swallowed a mouthful and worked her tongue around her teeth. *What're you going to do for your birthday?*

Lolly screwed up her nose like she had breathed something bad. *Nothing.*

*You've got to do something. Sixteen is special.*

*Why?* Lolly picked up a cake

*'Cause it's older. One year closer to leaving home.*

Lolly put the cake back on the plate.

Sandy cocked her head. *Not hungry?*

*No.*

Mumma stood at the head of the table, pierced the lamb with a fork and slid a carving knife into the flesh. She cut three thin slices before she hit the stuffing. She smiled to herself. The meat looked good. Pink and tender and moist. Mister looked uncomfortable behind his empty plate and polished cutlery.

He coughed into his fist and asked, *So, how'd you get the bone out of the meat?*

Mumma transferred a generous serve of lamb to Sandy's plate and blew a little raspberry. *With a knife, silly! How do you think!*

Mister pulled his trousers away from his groin. *It's a neat job, is all. Neater than they would've done at the butchers if you ask me.*

Mumma tucked in her chin and grinned. She served him an extra big portion. Sandy helped herself to vegetables and covered everything in salt. *So Mr Armstrong, do you go fishing on Saturdays?*

Mister licked his lips. *Sometimes.*

*Are you going tomorrow?*

*If the weather holds.*

*Could we come?*

Mister looked at Mumma, then Lola, then fixed on his plate. *Well... Yeah. If you were keen.* He spun his plate with his thumb. *Lola doesn't usually enjoy it.*

Sandy folded a bit of bread into halves, then quarters and forced it into her mouth. *I've never been fishing before.*

Mister speared his lamb and looked up, incredulous.

Sandy talked and talked and Lolly moved her food around her plate. When Mumma turned away to stack dishes on the sink, Lolly put her lamb back on the serving dish. Sandy hadn't stopped exclaiming over the meal. She had encouraged a blow by blow account of ingredients, preparation and tricks for roasting. She continued to pick at the lamb with pinched fingers as Mumma explained her thoughts on local produce, the age of flour, oven temperature and her simple understanding of the chemistry of cooking. Sandy sucked her fingers and shook her head.

She said, *Wow. I never knew there was so much to it. Mum and I don't really cook, much.* She grabbed a roast potato from the serving dish, broke it in two, pushed

one half to the back of her mouth and nodded as she chewed. *You know, Mrs Armstrong, you should open a restaurant.*

Mumma blinked into white light. She had opened the fridge to fetch the dessert. For a moment, she forgot what she was doing and steam unfolded to the floor.

Mister mumbled that all the cream and chocolate in the dessert was too much for his guts. He opened a beer and took a gas light out to the shed. Mumma cupped her chin in her hands, her elbows resting on the table and smiled. Sandy had eaten two bowls of dessert. Mumma watched as she cut through the sponge with the side of her spoon and hit the creamy centre. Before each mouthful, she examined the mix of glace fruit and nuts, the chunks of chocolate and plump, brandy engorged raisins. Mumma felt filled with air as she cleared away the table; not bloated—it was not wind or indigestion. It was a feeling of lightness, of happiness. Lolly pushed her chair back and stood up. Mumma looked past her and watched Sandy run her index finger around her bowl and plunge it into her mouth. Mumma tossed her hair and did the same. Lolly pushed her uneaten dessert towards Mumma and said, *This wouldn't fit in after all that dinner.*

Mumma shrugged, then nodded. The creaminess on her lips had given her a rush of pleasure.

Sandy lay back on her mattress with her arms folded behind her head. *What do you think of Jason?*

Lolly frowned. *Jason Newman?*

*Yeah.*

Lolly bit at a rough bit of nail on her thumb. *I dunno... Nothing?*

Sandy rolled over and propped herself up on one elbow. *I know he's a bit of a dickwad and he'll probably just end up working the quarry like his dad, but he's pretty good looking—don't you think? I love blond hair on a guy.*

Lolly clenched her thumbnail between her teeth, peeled it off and spat it onto her bedspread.

*And a good tan. He's got a good tan.* Sandy raised her eyebrows. *Have you done it with anyone?*

Lolly barked a laugh. *Yeah right!*

*I nearly did.*

Lolly's guts fluttered. *Who with.*

*This guy in Adelaide. We were going out—sort of. He ended up being a real pig, but he was a good kisser—good with his hands. He must be twenty now.*

Lolly said, *Oh my God!* And felt her cheeks flush. She sat up and pushed her window open a fraction. The night air was a relief.

*You know, you'd look good with Brendan, Lol.*

Lolly's cheeks were on fire. *Cooper or Lowrey?*

Sandy rolled her eyes, *Cooper!*

Lolly sprayed the air with laughter.

*I mean it. You've got the same colouring.* She sat up, leaned across to her bag, got out a magazine and started flipping through the glossy pages. *Here.* She held the magazine up to Lolly. *See how good they look together and they've both got dark hair.*

Lolly glanced at the picture. It was a couple walking hand in hand by the waters' edge. They wore white and she carried her sandals on a hooked finger. It was an advertisement for tampons. Sandy climbed up onto Lolly's bed and leafed through

more advertisements for cosmetics, razors, chocolates and pimple cream, through articles, quizzes, diets and fashion spreads. She pointed to a model with her hair piled on top of her head, her fringe teased. *You'd look good like that.*

Lolly leant in and looked closely. The girl had a woman's face painted on. Her cheeks were hollowed out with make-up and her lips seemed too big. Lolly could smell Sandy. It was a kind of warm, plastic smell, a bit like textas. She watched Sandy's eyes scanning the pictures. She said, *I'm too fat to look good.*

Sandy took a shallow breath. *You've got good hair.* She tapped the page. *I reckon it'd look good like that.*

Lolly woke in the night with her guts caving in on themselves. These first nights of hunger made her scared. She was scared to let herself be empty, scared of what it might mean, of what might happen, of what she might find at the pit of her stomach. She sunk her fingers into flesh, dug deep within the skin until she could feel something hard like bone, something firm like muscle. *Go, Lolly legs! Go!* Green lycra sparkled at mid-day. How snugly her bathers had hugged her rib cage, her tight tummy, taut as a drum. Mumma was there, sitting in the sand with her legs stretching towards the shallows, teasing the tide with her toes and watching after Lolly, smiling broadly, her teeth as white as shells bleached in the sun. Lolly recalled the warmth of Mumma's hands on her body after she had been swimming, the heat of those palms against her thighs, at her back, over her shoulders, on her cheeks. Mumma had touched away the last droplets of brine and rubbed her dry with a big blue beach towel. They ate curried egg sandwiches as the sun arced high overhead and Mumma never stopped tending to her, peeling a fleck of seaweed from her delicate ankle, scratching sand from her hairline, massaging the marks at her hips where the elastic had dug, brushing away flies, kissing egg from her chin. Mumma really loved her

Little Lady Lola Belle, her luscious Lolly lick stick. Lolly thought of the peanut brittle, the toffee treats in the shape of love hearts that Mumma used to make her. She would sit up on the kitchen bench and Mumma would show her how the sugar melted with heat. They used to eat sweet granules off each other's fingers. Lolly drove her fingers deeper into fat, pressed angry crescents into the skin, digging for a hint of that loved little girl. Mumma couldn't possibly love what she had become. She was something different all together. Misshapen. A misfit. On the mattress on the floor, her lean legs sprawled across the nylon carpet, Sandy sighed and rolled over in sleep. Lolly looked down on Sandy's angles in the darkness and thought of her friend, lying there with a bellyful of Mumma's cooking, those beautiful potatoes, so soft, so sweet, so warm and comforting inside. Lolly folded her arms across herself and squeezed. Mumma used to love her with bowls of whipped, white potato, a dob of golden butter up top.

Saturday morning, Mumma rose with the sun and made a generous bowl of pikelet mix. She whipped up a lemon curd, melted chocolate with cream and arranged a row of jams on the kitchen table. She fixed Mister's breakfast first, drizzling one drop-scone with lemon and one with chocolate. He ate them both quickly, but held his hand up to a third. *I'd prefer them with cheese, Margie.*

Mumma adjusted the hot plate, spatula in hand. *Pikelets are meant to be sweet!*

Mister sculled a glass of water, then another. *You know me.* He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. *I'm a savoury sort of bloke. Just marg'll be fine.*

Sandy loved Mumma's pikelets. She ate until she said she ached. When she left to get dressed, Mumma grabbed Lolly by the arm and whispered, *Why didn't you eat yours?*

Lolly felt the pinch of Mumma's fingers twisting her skin. *I hate pikelets.*

*Since when?*

*They give me indigestion.*

*Well, I can make you pancakes. You like pancakes. They're not so heavy.*

Lolly shook her head.

*You have to eat something.*

*I'm just not that hungry—not as hungry as Sandy, anyway.*

Mumma let her hand fall away. *Are you sick?*

Lolly shook her head.

Something struck Mumma. Her mouth tested the shape of words. *Are you angry with me?*

For just an instant, Lolly met her eyes. The moment was blinding, like a needle through the temples.

*No. Of course not.*

Mumma worked at a splodge of batter which had dried on her dressing gown. *I'd hate to think that you're angry at me.* She turned to the sink and ran the hot water. Lolly stared at her mother's back. She wondered what it would feel like to wrap her arms around her waist and rub her face into old terry towelling. Lolly had almost forgotten the smell.

It was a beautiful day for boating, the water calm and clear and sticky like silver syrup dripping from their fingertips. The air was cool, but dry and the puffs of breeze brought the sweet stink of guano from the limestone cliffs where the cormorants roosted. Mister, his nose to the wind, decided on a spot where reef fell away to sandy hole and killed the motor. They weren't far off shore—far enough to get a few fish

and for the kids to have a swim off the boat. Mister threw the anchor overboard, then rigged up a line for Sandy. She took a while to get the hang of casting. The first time she had neglected to flip the bail. The second she hooked herself on the back. She was good humoured about it and let Mister guide her hands.

Lolly listened to Mister's voice instructing Sandy. It was deeper, slower and more gentle than the tone with which he spoke to her. He tried a couple of jokes and Sandy's laughter echoed across the water. Lolly looked out to sea. Her mouth tasted sour and she wished she had remembered to clean her teeth. She cupped a handful of brine, gargled and spat. Sandy and Mister looked up.

Mister said, *Fish shit in that.*

Sandy wrinkled her nose and giggled.

Mister and Sandy caught half a dozen Tommies while Lolly leaned back in the bow, biting the skin from around her fingernails. Lolly refused to participate. It was too much to bear to haul those beautiful creatures out of the water, to watch them stroke the air with their translucent fins, to see their gills strain and flare, to see them shit mustard in stress. As the sunlight flickered and beamed off the water, she decided that she could not rationalise killing a fish anymore. Starving could justify hunting and Lolly was certainly not starving—anyone could tell that. She bit hard into her pinkie. Before long, she would learn to not even be hungry. Lolly kept her eyes on her fingers and on the rich spring of blood as she peeled away the skin. The taste of metal on the tongue was a distraction.

Mister packed the fish in the esky and looked to the sky. It would have been after mid-day. The sun had bite. He scanned the rocky ledge and decided to go for a dive. Amongst the life jackets, nets, ropes and hand reels he found a mask. He gave it a vigorous rinse, spat into it and worked the sticky foam with his fingertips. Sandy



had been talking quietly with Lolly about the difference between sunburn cream and reef oil. She looked over at him. *Are you going for a swim?*

Mister pulled off his shirt and felt the sun glare off his white chest. *Thought I'd have a look for crays.* He adjusted the mask over his eyes, slipped a leather glove onto his right hand, climbed onto the edge of the boat and slid slowly into the water. The girls rocked gently in his wake. Sandy squinted at Lolly, *Why don't you ever call him dad?*

The cold was a knife through the skull and Mister fought it as he released air and dove deeper. The odd rock cod was scooting around the weed, eyeing him sideways. Sunlight slanted in columns to the seabed, sparking off small shrimp and plankton. Mister took hold of the rock ledge and pulled himself down. He was nearly out of breath. The underside was dark and he didn't have the time to let his eyes adjust before he'd need another breath. He shot back up, gasping as he broke the surface. He breathed deeply, in and out, in and out, flooding his system with enough oxygen to feel light headed, sucked in a last lungful and plunged under water once again. This time he made it down in good time. He held the ledge, steadied himself and blinked into the dimness. After a few seconds he was able to make out five, maybe six cray, hanging upside down from the ledge, legs latched to limestone, feelers sensing the tide. His stomach flipped, his smile broke the suction of his mask and a bit of water leaked in. Slowly he reached up and grabbed the biggest cray from behind. With it firmly in his gloved hand, he pushed off with a surge of adrenalin. In the next few dives down, he got another two. One was a female and had to be put back. The remaining few were a bit on the small side and Mister figured the two he had bagged were of good size—enough for a decent taste, considering they had a fair feed of salmon and a bucketful of tommies.

Mister was cold to the bone and shivering like a boy. He pulled himself out of the water and into the boat.

Sandy said, *Is it nice in?*

Mister wiped his face with his shirt and nodded.

Sandy smiled, *You get cold quicker when you're skinny. That's what my Mum always says. I can never stay in that long.*

Mister looked at Lolly and said, *Lola can stay in for ages. She's like a bloody seal.*

Lolly didn't reply. Instead, she took off her hat, her jacket and her jeans and plopped over the edge in her undies and T-shirt. Mister opened a can of beer and offered it to Sandy. She took it and sipped tentatively. Mister noticed her flinch when she swallowed and it made him smile.

Lolly swam away from the boat, towards the rocks. She wished she could take off her heavy T-shirt and feel the water glide against her skin, but it would be inappropriate in front of the others. When she was a girl, she often swam in the nude. Mumma would hold her bathers as she splashed in the shallows, duck-dived in the rock pools and jumped through waves. Mumma said it was good to give yourself a good flush-out, good for your skin and for your front-bottom. Swimming always made Lolly hungry. She liked Saladas with cheese and vegemite from the pink tupperware container. Mumma spread the biscuits so thick with butter that worms squeezed through the holes when she bit. Being salty, greasy, crumb-showered and vegemite-smearred went with swimming. So did holding Mumma's hand on the walk home. Lolly dove under and felt her hair pull back, smooth from her scalp. She felt dizzy and weak. She turned over and floated on her back. Water filled her ears. She saw spots in front of her eyes. Mumma would have lunch ready when they got home.

Lolly knew she could not refuse food altogether. It would make Mumma mad. But she also knew she could not carry all this heaviness. She would make a plan—on paper, with pen. She would make a list. She would get things clear. Mister broke the moment, yelling out over the water. It was time to go. Lolly waved her hand and said she was close enough to swim to shore. Sandy gave her the thumbs up and Mister started the motor. Lolly watched him steer a tight circle and speed, full throttle, back toward the beach.

Sandy and Lolly sat in deck chairs on the lawn watching Mumma and Mister fussing over the fire. Mister was feeding more kindling to the flames and Mumma was complaining that it was getting too hot for the roses nearby.

Sandy said, *It's been really cool staying here—just like a holiday.*

Lolly pulled her fists into the sleeves of her windcheater.

Sandy asked, *Do you like living here?*

*I don't really know any different.*

*You know what it's like in town.*

*S'pose.*

*Would you ever want to live in town?*

*Not really.*

*Why?*

*Too close to everyone.*

Sandy crossed her legs and tucked her hair behind her ear. *I'll be going back to Adelaide after I finish school.*

Lolly's mouth fell open.

*Well there's nothing to do here. Anyway, Mum wants me to go to uni. Are you gonna go to uni?*

Lolly's head reeled. Rising panic made speaking difficult. She looked over at Mumma, stomping her rubber boots on the flames. *I... I haven't really... I haven't really thought about it.*

Sandy leaned back in her chair, the front legs coming out of the damp lawn with a sucking noise. *Well you better start thinking about it, 'cause you have to choose your subjects for next year.*

Lolly blinked furiously. She was surprised that she felt like crying, right here in front of Sandy. She said, *What are you going to do at uni?*

Sandy rubbed her palms up and down her thighs. *Probably science. Mum thinks it's best.* She looked over at Lolly. *Are you crying?*

*No.*

*You need to eat something. You hardly had any lunch and you did all that swimming. You'll end up fainting.* Sandy looked over at Mumma who was busy flouring fish fillets. *I can't imagine eating as little as you do, especially when your Mum's such an excellent cook.*

While the crayfish boiled in the old stock pot on the fire outside, Mumma worked half a stick of butter until it was soft, added a handful of chopped fennel, a pile of parsley, a grind of black pepper, a squeeze of lemon juice and a pinch of salt. She put on a cardigan, tucked a fry pan under her arm and took the herb butter outside to the card table next to the fire. Mister was leaning on the shovel and staring into the flames, his face long with shadows.

Mumma said, *I think we should get the fish going. Can you arrange some coals under the grate?*

Mister poked around in the fire and sent sparks shooting into the night.

Sandy sat up in her chair. *Can I do anything, Mrs Armstrong?*

Mumma passed her a bowl of batter. *You can hold this for me. Bring your chair 'round this side and you can help me fry the fish.*

The oil in the pan had started to shimmy. Mumma dunked a fillet in batter and lay it down on the heat. It gave a satisfying sizzle. Mumma looked over the fire to her daughter.

*Perhaps you could grab the towelling paper from the pantry, Lola. These tommies'll be done in two shakes.*

Lolly stood up slowly and said, *Does anyone else want a potato to put in the coals? I can't stomach any seafood.*

Mumma froze, a fillet dripping a stream of batter onto the sand. She opened her mouth to say something and a stone popped in the coals. Sandy moved the bowl under the fillet to catch the drips.

*Why ever not? Said Mumma. Why can't you stomach seafood?*

Lolly clenched her fists and blurted, *Because I don't want to eat living things anymore.*

Mister took the spatula off Mumma and laughed. *These Tommies are definitely not living.* He gave one a poke and grinned. *Nah. Not living, that.*

Lolly was embarrassed and hurt and angry all at once and her throat had tightened so much it was hard to squeeze the words out. *I don't want to eat things that have been alive. I don't want to eat dead things —killed things.*

Mumma looked at the fish fillets spitting in the pan and felt as though her stomach was writhing with worms. *But Lolly, she piped. You grew up on seafood. It's what makes you.* She blinked at her daughter over the flames and wondered what was happening between them. Lolly looked so different in the firelight —her eyes hollow, black, her face shifting and changing. Lolly was growing into someone she didn't

know and it made Mumma remember those months with him —Robin Foster —her love twisting into fear, her Robin turning.

Mister flipped a fillet and said, *Hurry up with that toweling paper, Lola. This one's ready.*

Mumma's appetite had evaporated, but she forced a smile for their guest and ate. *This cray meat is melt-in-the-mouth*, she said, her voice straining. *And the herb butter is the perfect accompaniment.*

*A real ripper*, Mister said.

*Most definitely*, said Sandy.

Mumma straightened up in her chair and smiled but she daren't look for Lolly's response. *So*, she said to Sandy. *Tell us a tale.* A good diversion, Mumma hoped.

Sandy sucked on a leg and spoke of her old house in Adelaide, before her parents had divorced and put it on the market, of the spa bath and the tennis court and the swimming pool. She told of her dad's new life in Sydney, his new Range Rover, new wife and twin sons. Mumma licked her fingers, amazed at the lives strangers lead in big cities.

She pushed another piece of fish into her mouth and asked, *What does your daddy do?*

Sandy picked at the sole of her shoe, where the rubber had started to melt. *He's a surgeon.*

Mumma coughed on a bone. *Well, my daddy's a doctor, too.*

Mister looked sideways at her as she worked the bone to the tip of her tongue and removed it from her mouth.

Examining the clear needle, Mumma said, *I would have liked to have been a doctor.*

Lolly listened from her spot in the shadows and waited for her potatoes to cook.

Lolly became a vegetarian. Mister threw his head back and laughed and Mumma wrung her hands until they shed flakes of dry skin.

*I don't want cream on mine, Lolly would say. No sugar in my tea... You should buy skim milk, not full fat.... I don't eat white bread... Chocolate makes me gag... No butter, Mumma. No butter on mine!*

Mumma repeated over and over that it was just a phase, it was something that all girls went through—being fussy and funny about food—it was completely normal, that it was what all the pop stars and models were doing and that as a teenager Lolly was bound to want to copy the pop stars and models. Mumma muttered this under her breath as she roasted beef for Mister and baked vegetable casseroles for Lolly, as she grilled lentil patties, fried eggs, piped spinach and ricotta into cannelloni and marinated mushrooms.

Ernest came for lunch on Lolly's sixteenth birthday. He presented her with an opal ring. *It was Jean's.*

Lolly tried it on her middle finger, then her ring finger but she couldn't get it over the skin at her knuckles. She knew everyone was watching her face flush, thinking how big and fat she was, so big and fat that she couldn't even wear a normal woman's ring. She looked at Ernest. *I don't think I got Grandmother's fingers.*

Ernest looked at Mumma and Lolly noticed. He took the ring and screwed it onto her pinkie. *Bullshit, sweetheart. There you go.*

Lolly admired the colours in the opal as it caught light from different angles. Ernest mashed his cake with a spoon and watched her. *I gave that to Jean before we*

*were married—before we were even engaged. There was a matching necklace, but she took that when she shot through. Lolly ran a fingernail under the gold band. The ring was starting to cut into her pinkie. Does she know about me?*

*No.*

*Why?*

Ernest licked his spoon. *Well...*

*Wouldn't she like to know that she has a grand-daughter?*

Mumma sat forward at the table and said, *You haven't tried your birthday cake, Lolly.*

*Isn't it her right to know that she has a grand-daughter?*

*Try your cake, Lolly.*

Ernest pulled on his ear lobe. *Thing is, sweetheart, she left a long time before you were born. There's been no contact. He gestured to Mister. Not even with her own son.*

Lolly looked at Mister, square in the face. She couldn't read his expression—she had never been able to, not like with Mumma. Mister's face was made up differently.

Mister and Ernest muttered about money and Mumma picked grated chocolate from the cake. Lolly was irritated. She was sick of sitting in front of food. She stood up, *I better go and do my homework, now. Thankyou for the ring.*

Ernest reached for her hand and squeezed it. *I'll come and say goodbye when I'm leaving. Take yourself a bit of cake.*

Lolly faltered. *No...*

He leant back in his seat. *Ah... You watching your figure?*

She felt everyone's eyes on her and wished she could leave.



Mumma straightened her spine and piped, *Lolly's being very healthy, Ernest. She must have lost a stone by now. Have you lost a stone, sugar?*

Lolly shrugged and kept her eyes on the table.

*It must be a stone. I'm sure it would be a stone.*

Ernest clicked his tongue and said, *I don't know how you can be healthy without meat.*

Lolly pulled the ring from her little finger, lay back on her bed and closed her eyes. She felt so noticed, so seen—all arms and legs and bumps and bulges, her cheeks burning with embarrassment and shame, giving her away. She turned over onto her side, pulled her knees to her chest and left herself there, curled up, as small as she could be, like a baby folded in a womb. She floated above her body, through the walls and out to the kitchen. Above the kitchen table, she thought up words. To the birthday torte: *You're just a cake. Just flour, eggs, butter and sugar.* To Ernest: *You're a skeleton of deteriorating bones, scars, secrets and sherry. We can all smell it on you.* To Mumma... Mumma, sitting there slicing slithers off the cake, eyes flicking side to side, icing melting into her tongue... To Mister: *You are a stranger. I knew you better when you were away, interstate, when I mixed you up in a mixing bowl—a gingerbread Mister.* To Mumma... Lolly flew back to her body that lay curled on her bed, put a tape in her birthday cassette player, took out her diary and favourite felt-tipped pen and opened her biology text book.

*Gastric juice, she noted, has a high concentration of hydrochloric acid, pH of about two, acidic enough to dissolve iron nails.* Lolly looked out the window. There were nails in Mister's shed. Were they iron? *Iron: Fe. One function of the acid is to dismantle the tissues in food by disrupting the intercellular glue that binds cells together in meat and plant material. Before an animal is slaughtered, they stun them*

*with electricity, then fire a steel bolt between the eyes. Mumma and Lolly used to drive past the abattoirs on the way to Seymores Beach and the smell of animal parts being boiled down was hot and sick-sweet, sort of like frankfurters, Lolly used to think. Pepsin starts to break down proteins. The body is a sophisticated machine. Pepsin should break down the cells of the stomach wall, but all kinds of clever chemistry happens to prevent this. Lolly tapped her pen and remembered mixing vinegar and bicarb, just for the spectacular fizz. She didn't understand the science, but the hiss and foam brought afternoons of pleasure on the front porch. Gastric secretion is controlled by a combination of nervous impulses and hormones. When we see, smell, or taste food, a nervous message from the brain to the stomach initiates the secretion of gastric juice. I had crossed eyes as a baby, until I was four, I think Mumma said. Mumma said I used to eat dirt and snails and shells and bark—even butterflies! I couldn't see these things—not properly. I wonder if I could smell them, if the scent initiated the secretion of gastric juices. I don't remember the taste. I am trying not to get hung up on taste, these days. It just gets you into trouble, makes you want more. I wonder if I ever ate iron nails. Lolly turned the page. The contents of the stomach are churned about every twenty seconds by muscles. A squirt at a time, it takes about two to six hours for the stomach to empty after a meal. Two to six hours! You carry the mess for that long. Crackers and cheese, soup, lasagne, salad, bread and butter pudding, hot chocolate. Flour, salt, eggs, water, potatoes, leeks, cream, stock cubes, tomato, butter, lettuce, yeast, sugar, sultanas, cocoa, marshmallow. Carbohydrates, protein, fat. Glucose, amino acids, lipids. Gastrin. Acid chyme. Bile. When an empty stomach churns, hunger pangs are felt. Sounds like a good indicator of emptiness. The more you pang, twang, gurgle and groan, the better. You can feel yourself empty. I would like to be cleaned out. On TV, on this documentary, there*

*were these men in India who could take out their bowel (and some of their lower intestines, I think) and wash them in the sacred river. I would like to be cleaned of muck. Washed out. Pure as fish... Sensations of hunger are also associated with centres in the brain that monitor the nutritional status of the blood. But you can choose to ignore these messages. You can choose to rise above.*

Ernest blew over his tea and eyed Mumma.

*Who's the girl's father?*

Mumma breathed tea into her wind pipe and spluttered into her hand. She said, *He's dead*, through her fingers and wiped her palm on her skirt.

Ernest dipped his chin and looked at her under his bushy eyebrows. *That's not answering the question. The girl's inquisitive. She's at that age. She's going to want to know about her roots.*

Mumma put her cup down and folded her hands. *Her roots are here, with me... and with Mister. I've worked very hard to make this her family.*

Ernest pulled a jowl between thumb and index finger. *Come on boy. Let's have a look what you've done to this shed, then.*

Lolly scanned the rest of the page. The next section was *NUTRITIONAL REQUIREMENTS: Food as Fuel*. The sun was low in the sky and her eyes were getting heavy. It was nearly the end of her birthday. It was nearly the end of her birthday and she hadn't tried any of her birthday cake. *The basal metabolic rate for adult females averages about 1300 to 1500 kcal per day. This is only a baseline—the number of calories we 'burn' lying motionless. Any activity—even sitting quietly reading—consumes calories in addition to the BMR. The more strenuous the activity,*

*the greater the caloric demand.* Lolly wondered if there would be any cake left. It was her birthday, after all. She took a breath and got off her bed.

Mumma was drying a plate, drawing slow circles with a tea towel, staring out the kitchen window.

*Where're Mister and Ernest?*

Mumma spun around.

*In the shed.* She put the plate in the cupboard and picked up a tea cup. *How's your homework going?*

Lolly lifted her left shoulder. *I was wondering if there's any cake left.*

Mumma put the cup down so quickly it spun on its base. *Oh yes! Of course there is. I've covered it and put it away, but there's plenty left. Plenty!* She got it out of the pantry, set it on the kitchen bench and pulled a knife from the knife block. *Perhaps I'll have another slice with you.* Mumma smiled. The tip of her nose was red. *It is a special occasion, after all.*

Lolly and Mumma ate in silence. It was a particularly fine cake, particularly moist, particularly light. It melted into the tongue, into floods of saliva. Its sweetness made the mouth warm and the richness of cream and chocolate coated the lips, lining the insides of the cheeks. Lolly ate each crumb painstakingly, guessing the ingredients, calculating the calories, considering the nutrients, imagining the molecules (glucose:  $C_6H_{12}O_6$ ). She licked the last of it from the fork and looked up. Mumma was smiling, chocolate lodged in between her two front teeth. Lolly felt sad. There was something else in that cake, something she could not break down, something science could not explain.

Mumma said, *I love to see you eat my cake. I just love it!*

The winds blew from the south, whipping up the needles of the old sheoak. Mumma lay with her eyes wide, hearing the odd splat of rain on the iron roof and the scratching and squabbling of rats beneath the floorboards. Mumma felt sick. The cake was repeating on her, bubbling up her esophagus and burning the back of her throat. She was sick of people's interference, sick of their comments, their judgements, their advice, sick of the way Ernest was able to bulldoze her choices and make her stomach churn. Should Lola Belle be told? What story would Mumma tell? How would Lolly react? Mumma screwed her eyes shut. She felt the same enfeebling, sapping fear that her father inspired in her.

Lolly did not know that Mumma lay awake in the next room. Lolly liked to think she was the only person on the island awake at this time, the only person hearing creatures move in the night, smelling the wind off the sea, the only person burning calories, sitting quietly, reading. She figured the slice of cake had three hundred calories—four hundred, to be safe. Four hundred calories... In her book, four hundred calories should equal four hours of study. *When we take in more calories than we need to meet our energy requirements, the excess calories are stored. The liver and muscles store energy in the form of glycogen. A human can store enough glycogen to supply about a day's worth of basal metabolism. If glycogen stores are full and caloric intake still exceeds caloric expenditure, then the excess food is stored primarily in adipose tissue in the form of fat.* Lolly held her forearms outstretched and looked at the padding of fat. They looked like the chubby arms of a baby, the reaching, clinging, desperate arms of an infant, helpless arms flailing as mother brings a spoon of mush closer... closer. *Open wide, Lovely Lolly. Here comes the*

*plane into the hanger, the train into the tunnel. Toot, toot, tooooooot... Between meals or when the diet is deficient in calories, fuel is taken out of storage. Most of us have enough fat to sustain us in calories for several weeks. Several weeks!* Lolly was sure she had been putting food into storage since she could remember. Somewhere, perhaps at the edges of her knees, was Gramma's jam pudding, at her stomach were pork sausages. She had accumulated years of Mumma's scallop potatoes, years of hot chips, roast spuds and mash, years of Mumma's bread, generously buttered, straight from the oven, steaming sweetness. She had stored countless desserts, tea cakes, sponges, scones, jam and cream, many a buttered Bush biscuit, piles of toast and honey, fried eggs, flapjacks, pancakes and pikelets. Lolly could remember an occasion for each of these meals, snacks and treats. She wondered if as she metabolised these stores she would relive the memories. She thought of the rice pudding Mumma had loved her with when she was a girl. She thought of the peanut brittle, the toffees, the marble cakes. Would she mourn their loss?

*Not really dead. What do you mean not really dead? How can someone be not really dead?*

Mumma licked her lips and bit her fingers. Mister's voice was prickly.

*Well, she said. I think it might be kind of like your mother.*

*She's not dead.*

*No. She's not dead, dead. But she's kind of dead —for you.*

Mister could not keep still. He paced and scratched his head and busied himself with stuff, ordered a newspaper, chucked a saucepan into the sink. The clatter made Mumma jump.

*So you've lied to me for all this time —our whole life?*

*It wasn't a lie. Lies were bad and nasty and designed to hurt. It was what I needed to believe to get on with things.*

Mister braced himself against the sink. In all the hubbub, he couldn't help but imagine the dead man, the dead man come alive, the father of Lola Belle striding up the driveway and taking him on. He didn't know if this was realistic. He didn't know about the ways of other men.

*Christ! He thumped his fist down on the sink. Christ, Margaret.*

Mumma fluttered about him but was too scared to touch.

*What does this mean?*

She shook her head.

*Are you married to him?*

*Oh, God, no.*

*You said you were married to him.*

*No, no, no. She looked at the floor. It was nothing like that. My father... It was nothing like that.*

Mister put his hands over his eyes and Mumma was afraid he might cry. She had never seen Mister cry. Never.

*It doesn't mean anything. Nothing. I will tell Lolly. That's all.*

Mister turned and left the house.

Mumma called after him, *Where are you going?*

He didn't answer.

*Dear Robin...* Mumma practiced writing letters in her head. It helped to work things out. *Dear Robin, I hope you are well...* No. *Many years have passed—too many years have passed. That fact makes starting this story difficult.* Mumma held her

breath and remembered the softness of his hair, the dark, silky softness, surprising on a man. *This is a story of your daughter, Miss Lola Belle, sixteen years of age and dark eyed like you. I should think it is a shock to hear that you live in someone else. Sixteen years on, it is still a shock that I live in Lola. She is a shorty, like me. You used to call me shorty. You called me a dwarf peach once, like the dwarf peach tree your parents had growing out the back in the old wine barrel.* Mumma pushed an aspirin out of its foil casing and pressed it into a spoonful of honey. *I wonder how angry... angry... 'angry' was too scary. I wonder how grumpy it makes you to hear this after all these years. I wonder what you are painting these days.* Mumma swallowed the teaspoon of honey and aspirin and pressed her thumbs into her eyes.

In the shed, Mister banged around a bit and tried a few curses. He had an unpleasant sensation of acting out anger because it was what was expected of him. He assumed Margie had kept the information for this long fearful of his angry outburst. He thought of her lying awake in bed next to him, dreaming up pictures of him shouting, shaking her, hitting her, hurting her. The idea made him all the more agitated and he spun around and sent things flying. As he up-ended boxes and threw tins of nails he was reminded of his father —the ugly jerks of movement, the thrashing and whacking. He remembered the smell —a stink of sweat and smoke and booze —and he remembered his fear. Mister kicked over a drum and collapsed. Conjuring up anger had him frightened. His heart thumped and his hands sweated. He kicked out, one last time. He couldn't face a stranger in their midst. He couldn't sit down and talk about it all. The only man he had ever spoken to was his father and their conversations stayed mostly in the predictable realm. For a moment he let himself imagine a hasty departure, him tossing a load into the back of the ute —his



swag and fishing gear and tools and clothes, the billy, the grill, some bread and cheese —him silent and steady and efficient in his leaving, Margie weeping on the sand. But there was nowhere for him to go. This was his country —his home. He stood up and attempted a bit of a tidy-up. It was best if he forgot Margie ever told him.

Mumma was sewing a button on Mister's shirt while he was wearing it. He wouldn't look at her. Mumma glanced over at Lolly and said, *Apparently Sister Molly died last week.*

Lolly put down her glass and looked shocked.

*It's all right, cup-cake. It was bound to happen. She was riddled with cancer. She's been skin and bones all the time I've known her.*

Mister flinched. *Careful with that needle.*

Lolly stood up slowly and left the room and Mumma watched.

After a bit Mister said, *What's wrong with her?*

Mumma bit through cotton. *I've got no idea.*

Mister went outside and left the front door open. Wind blew in and stank of bird shit.

Lolly walked along the beach against the wind. It was the last day of the school term. After holidays, the year elevens had study period then exams. Lolly walked with her head down. The sand had been whipped across the bay, forming ripple after ripple, catching in tufts of seaweed, collecting in rises and falling away in dips. She scanned the ground with each footstep, scrolling over bird prints, feathers, cuttlefish, shattered shell, tumbled pebble, driftwood, fishing line and sea grass. She was

vaguely aware of the grind of sand against her soles, of the coolness and dampness and silkiness. She had been working to shut the door on her ability to feel texture, to experience pain, to enjoy warmth. If she caught herself feeling the needling of cold as the tide rushed in about her ankles, she would fight not to flinch and say firmly to herself, *Of course the water's cold. It's the end of Winter and this sea is connected to Antarctica.* Lolly walked on. *Of course I have a headache. I was awake all night.*

To hate oneself was a very private thing. In Social Education, the class had called out ideas and Mrs Evans had printed them on butchers' paper in different coloured permanent markers. The smell of texta was intoxicating. Mrs Evans had penned: SELF ESTEEM, in capital letters, SELF RESPECT, SELF WORTH, SELF LOVE, DIGNITY, CONFIDENCE, PRIDE. She had drawn lines connecting these concepts to FAMILY, FRIENDS, PEERS, COMMUNITY, CHURCH. She had written, THE MIGHTY HILLWATER BOMBERS at the boys insistence and then included THE GULLS (open girls' netball) when Sarah Downes whined. To hate oneself was wrong, was selfish, Mrs Evans puffed, when there were children with nothing, starving in Africa. One had to work hard on oneself, work through issues, self improve, become educated, consider the image one projects to the world. *One wouldn't wear footy shorts to a job interview, would one—Jason?* She said that as seniors at Hillwater Area, about to go into matric, the class had a responsibility to be role models for the youngsters, to lead by example, to make the staff and their parents proud. *After all. This is a time of great change. In just over a year you will have finished school and will be independent from your parents.* Lolly wondered why Mrs Evans didn't have children. She could fit into a very tight denim skirt. It was probably a size eight.

As Lolly neared the point, the wind dropped off. She could hear her breath hissing out her nose. She didn't want to go over the class exercise again. She had replayed it all night and it had become so loud in her head, so bright and hyper-coloured, so big in vision that it filled her skull from ear to ear. Lolly took two steps and the coloured paper flipped through her mind.

*Right-O, Mrs Evans had said as she passed out the paper. Get someone to help you sticky-tape this cardboard to your back and make sure your name is written clearly up the top.*

Sarah had her nose screwed up. *Mrs Evans, can I have pink please.*

Mrs Evans sighed and shuffled paper and somebody laughed.

*Now seeing that today's lesson is the last in the self esteem series, I thought it would be nice to have a keepsake from your peers, a memory of why you were admired and liked by others. The idea is that we each write something positive about everyone in the class.*

Lolly took her paper from the teacher. It was blue. She would have liked yellow, but she would not stoop to asking.

*OK. Take the last few minutes and let's keep it down to a dull roar. And remember, we're looking for positive comments only.*

After receiving everyone's comments Lolly ripped the paper from her back. Texta print was the easiest to read. Lead pencil broke through the paper and biros ran out when writing vertically. The texta print stood out and demanded to be read first. *Nice hair... Top of biology class—I bet! Interesting shirt... Nice person... Nice person... And again, for the third time, Nice person... Lolly had tried to write something different, something genuine on each person's page. Lola is a pretty name... Friendly... Your mum makes the best chocolate tarts... My number one mate*

*(Love Sandy)... All the best to a conscientious student, Mrs Evans... Nice smile... And written up the right side, along the edge of the page in a biro that worked in fits and starts, Looking good. If you loose any more waight I might be forsed to jump your bones.* Lolly read this over and over, committing the ugly jerks of the scrawl, the spelling errors and the choice of the language to heart. It replayed in her head, again and again, on a loop like the lyrics of a bad pop song. She felt exposed, ashamed and dirty. She showed Sandy and Sandy laughed.

*You should be flattered. I bet it was Jason. It looks like his writing. Nice job.* She flung an arm around Lolly's shoulders. *He wants to jump your bones, girl!*

That afternoon, Lolly emptied her lunch box into the bin and spent the break in the library.

Around the point, the beach opened up into a long stretch of sand. There was a wedge-tailed eagle adrift on a current of air. Lolly raised her hand to block out the sun and watched the bird. It turned its head to look at her, circled once and soared higher. Lolly thought of Sister Molly and watched the bird with her mouth open, with her eyes welling. She would give anything to fly like that, to leave the ground and rise on the air. The eagle floated further away, casting a black, fluid shadow on the sand. Lolly ran after the shadow, her strides lengthening, opening, quickening to keep up. Her lungs heaved, her pulse surged, her muscles burned, but she ran on, on and on, over the shadow, out-running the eagle until she had settled into a rhythm. She ran through cramp and pain and out the other side into white light.

Lolly announced she had joined the cross-country running team and would be required to stick to the menu she stuck to the fridge door. Mumma read the strict list,

neatly written in black columns and cracked her knuckles. *Surely this can't be right. There's nothing tasty. Nothing to live for. Surely if you're running all that way you need more food, not less.*

Lolly rubbed her eyes and said, *You can't run distance carrying extra weight. You've seen the athletes. Are any of them carrying extra weight? Anyway, all the kids are following it. If I want to be part of the team I have to follow it too.* Lolly poured boiling water over a slice of lemon and went for her room.

Mumma called after her, *Do you want some honey in that?*

Lolly shook her head and said, *It's for detox. You can't detox with sugar.*

Mumma bit her lip. She didn't know when honey had become a poison.

Mumma kept busy in the kitchen and tried not to look at the way Lolly wrenched a leather belt at her waist, tighter and tighter each week until she was piercing her own holes with the point of the carving knife. She wondered if Lolly would eat tonight. She had been complaining of stomach aches, bloating and nausea. Mumma was sure it was to do with the strict regime she was following, where food was reduced to its elements, robbed of pleasure and art and fun and fantasy. Mumma stripped a sprig of thyme. Rabbit casserole used to bring them together over Grandma's white plates. Lolly would break bread and tear parsley. She would sop the juices with a crust, scoop with an out-stretched index finger, lick the last from her plate. Those days things were simple and food was love. Those days Lolly would be pacified by a dried apricot, a hard boiled egg, a handful of rolled oats, a raw sausage, a tea spoon of golden syrup. Those days Lolly made love bites for them to share and explored the world with an open mouth.

Mumma absently pulled on the legs of the rabbit carcass, aware of the cushioned rotation of bone in socket. She used to pull on Lolly's legs when she was a doughy, vanilla-bun baby. *Lolly legs. My little butternut pumpkin. My mashed potato pie with golden butter-love.* She glanced up at Lolly's closed door and wrapped her fingers tightly around raw meat.

Mumma thought more and more about telling Lolly about her father until she thought barely of anything else. She had convinced herself that Lolly's depression, her gaunt face and starved eyes were punishment for being a bad mother. If she had told Lolly earlier, if she had been more open, more able to discuss things, if she had been better at affection, if she had set an example, got a career and was good at public speaking, if she had travelled, if she knew about world politics, if she had taken Lolly to that specialist when she was a child, if she had admitted to her mistakes and if she had her hair cut right like Sandy's mum, then maybe Lolly would have turned out all right.

Lolly peeled a carrot with long, slow strokes. The sound made Mumma's hair stand on end. Mumma was trimming the fat off a steak. There was blood on the chopping board. All of a sudden, Mumma said, *Mister isn't your father.*

Lolly stopped peeling and wondered if Mumma had really spoken. From the next room, the newsreader on the ABC was detailing the discovery of human remains out near Kypo Forest. Mumma stabbed the chopping board and hissed, *Did you hear me?*

Lolly stared at her carrot. It was a brilliant orange. *Yes. I heard you.*

*Well?*

The next news story was about football. Sturt weren't doing well.

*I already knew.*

Mumma's pupils dilated until her eyes looked black under the kitchen fluoro.

*How could you have known?*

*I guessed. People say things. Or don't. Mister doesn't look at me... or like me...*

*I found the photo... Behind your mirror. I guessed.*

Mumma's hands flapped. She undid her apron, took it off, put it back on again.

She started to cry. *I'm a terrible mother. Terrible.*

Lolly wanted to ask about her father, but Mumma was somewhere else.

*I've been a terrible mother, right from the start. Just terrible.*

Lolly put down the carrot and left the room.

Mister's shed was out of bounds. It had never been said, not in so many words, but Lolly knew it was his space and his space alone. She put a foot in the crook of the old mallee and strained for a look through the dusty window. Darkness. Mister was out at Ernest's, straining fences. They were going to agist a few hundred wethers. Lolly jumped down from the tree and scabbled on all fours, through the loose flap of galvanised iron at the back of the shed. Dry earth grated her knees and she thought she could smell his rubber-soled footprints. She stood up, touched where he had touched, licked his fingerprints from her own and tasted salt. On tip-toes in Mister's space, Lolly burped up bile and felt her skin prickle. She felt watched. She took a breath and looked up. The ceiling was crawling with steel ants —hundreds of metal creations hanging from the rafters, from the beams, flying ants suspended in rows, workers nailed in procession, one after the other, up posts, across door jambs and over window sills. Lolly's mouth gaped. She had never seen anything like it. Up close, the

detail in his work was astounding. She had no idea he was capable of such craftsmanship. She touched at an antennae and knew she was invading on something. She clutched at a soiled rag, a screwdriver, a roll of red electrical tape and wondered what she had discovered about him. She tongued the air and felt her fillings zing. The taste of Mister was of grease, wood-shavings, rusted metal. And there was something else. Breeze set a length of wire slow-swinging and scratching. Lolly found a tin of old nails. She put two blunt tacks in her mouth and swallowed.

That night, in the dark, Lolly thought up Mister's twisted face. He was in the woodshed with one hand open on the wall, a closed fist around himself. Back and forth that fist slid. Walls quaked. Dust rained and ants marched on metal legs. Mister whistled through his teeth and his eyes rolled. Lolly dreamed up her biological father, her real father, a faceless man in shadow, his thing stuck up her mother, his buttocks clenching, forcing, thrusting, filling her with dirty, stinking stuff. Lolly felt a gush of heat between her legs that shocked and frightened her. She wondered if there were fleas in the bed, fleas that had burst from their eggs in the dry soil under the house and crawled through the floorboards searching for blood, fleas that carried disease that had infected her, given her fever and horrible hallucinations. She took several deep breaths. When she clutched her stomach, she was sure she could feel the nails rattling inside.

Mumma wrote to Robin's parents' old address. She chose her best note paper. She wished them well. She said that she was married and that she was kept busy with her cooking for the local bakery. She said that she was interested to know how Robin was keeping, whether they could pass on his address. She kept the note neat and short and simple and innocent. She sealed the envelope, licked a stamp and posted it before



she could have second thoughts. She bought herself a soft serve icecream on the way home.

Lolly ran and ran. She ran when she was tired, when she ached, when she was hungry, when she couldn't sleep. She hid her haggard body under two pairs of pants—tracksuit bottoms and jeans—beneath two skivvies and a jumper. She was cold right through. Chilled to the bone. She had never been so cold in all her life. The running helped somewhat, but soon after the sweat had cooled, she was plunged back into iciness. She knew from people's faces that she was no longer fat. She suspected she appeared dramatically different, but she didn't care to look. This was not about being seen. It was more about *not* being seen, about fitting between air, about rising above. At lunch time, in between study period, while the other students basked in the first sun of Spring, while they plaited each other's hair and shared each other's Twisties, while they talked about the weekend, about who liked who, who had kissed who, who had dumped who, who had fucked who, Lolly studied in the library. She was doing all right in Classics, Chemistry, English, Maths and Biology. It had been difficult concentrating on words, on facts, figures and formulas, while she trembled, quivered and jumped in her skin, while her stomach cramped and bloated, while she farted fetid air, lost control of her bowel and filled her pants with mucus, while her head reeled, her hands shook, her eyes lost focus and her heart skipped beats. She was up to Art. Her final subject to master. She had saved it until last deliberately. Through the day she went over and over her theory notes. At lunchtime, in the school library, she studied Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings in the great big hard cover that was almost too heavy to lift. His drawings made her soar. Some days, in her booth by the window, she would lay her forehead to the images and let da Vinci's fine lines

blur and burn into the front lobe of her brain. Some days she would doze like this until the bell rang for the afternoon's lessons. At night, when she was too wired to sleep, she would study her own limbs and the photographs in Mumma's battered medical textbook and sketch the layers of the human body, from skeleton to skin. Sometimes she tied elastic around her arm to see the way the veins bulged.

It was a week until exams. Lolly had just got out of the bath. She was dressing in her bedroom, bending from the waist as she pulled up her underpants. Mumma burst into the room and grabbed her by the hips. Lolly slipped through her fingers, fell onto the floor and scrabbled for her towel. Mumma's face burned red. Her hair sprang loose and her eyes bulged.

*That's enough, Lola Belle. Enough!*

Lolly pulled her quilt from her bed and bound herself in it. Her eyes stung with shock.

*I know that you are not—and have never been in the cross-country running team. I know you lied to me about this and you lied to me about that ridiculous diet. Mumma rolled her eyes, tossed her arms and counted off phrases on her fingers. No fat, no oil, no meat, no egg yolk, skim milk powder in water—not milk, no white bread, no cake, nothing heavy, nothing difficult to digest. Grated carrot, cottage cheese—unflavoured, five sultanas at a time, apples no bigger than cricket balls, melon, half a banana only, half a cup of bran flakes—no milk, celery, lettuce, cabbage, tomato, wholemeal crumpets with no bloody butter.*

Lolly pressed her hands into her ears and wedged herself into the space between her desk and bed.

*I wonder what other things you've been lying to me about. I wonder what other secrets you've got that I don't know about, that I'm too stupid and too bad a mother to know about.* Mumma fell against the wardrobe and started to cry. *The coach at the school said he was surprised I'd let it come this far before inquiring. He said he'd never let a student run in your condition.* Mumma hiccupped, wiped her face on her sleeve and sobbed to the wall. *Everyone must be having a jolly good laugh at my expense, 'Poor old stupid Margaret. Doesn't even realise her daughter's starved herself half to death. Doesn't even realise 'cause she's such a terrible mother, such a hopeless, stupid, terrible mother.'*

Lolly felt her chest swelling with anger. She breathed in and in and in and then blurted, *This isn't about you.*

Mumma span around and glared at her. *Of course it's about me!*

Lolly panted through her open mouth and shook her head. Mumma jabbed the air with a finger.

*You are going to come out into the kitchen and eat your dinner like a normal person. You are going to do this for each meal—like a normal person—or I will whip you out of school so fast you won't know what hit you.* Mumma's voice rose higher and higher until she was screeching like a child throwing a tantrum. *I'll whip you out of school and send you away to where they put crazy people... crazy people like you and your crazy father.*

At half past seven, Lolly came out and sat at the table. Her eyes were almost swollen shut, but she sat down calmly, tucked a napkin into the neck of her skivvy and received her plate of cheese and asparagus mornay like it was the most natural thing in the world. Mister ate his chops and sausages leaning back on his chair, straining to hear tomorrow's weather on the television in the next room. Mumma kept

her eyes on her plate as Lolly slowly ate her way through her dinner. When she had finished, Mumma put a bowl of apple crumble and custard in front of her and Lolly said thankyou and forced a smile, despite the desperate aching of her stomach and despite the anger growing so big and black and sharp and wild that Lolly was scared it would rupture her guts and send vomit spraying all over Mumma and her freshly polished kitchen. Lolly finished her meal well after Mister and Mumma had retired to the lounge room. She stood in front of the television and said, *Thankyou for tea. I'm going to study for exams, now.*

Mumma smiled, said, *Good girl* and changed the channel.

The window barely made a noise as Lolly pushed it up and removed the fly wire. She jumped outside into the night and ran across the lawn, through the vegetable patch and into the scrub. When the house was just a dappling of light through foliage, Lolly stopped, took a few deep breaths and started to push on her distended stomach. She pushed and pushed, willing herself to be emptied. She burped and coughed and thought of unpleasant things—horrible things like eating road kill or shit or maggoty old bait. She lurched and heaved, but nothing came up. She reluctantly put her fingers in her mouth and worked her esophagus to open. It repulsed her to force dirty fingers down her throat, to dig the food out of her stomach by hand, but Mumma had left her with no choice. Her finger bunted the gag reflex and a hot burst of liquid shot into her mouth. She coughed and spat and plunged her fingers deeper.

The last day of study period before exams Sandy found Lolly in the library and grabbed her by the wrist.

*Come on!* She started to stuff Lolly's things into her bag. *We're out of here.*

Lolly pulled herself free and pushed down on the notebook Sandy was struggling to pull from under her. *What are you doing? Sandy, don't. You're ripping it.*

Sandy squatted next to the desk, eyes blazing, spit spraying. *Jason's got his license and he's taking a car load out to Smit's Point. We're gonna have a party on the beach. He's asked you, Lol. You!*

Lolly smoothed her crumpled page and snorted through her nose. *I can't go to a party tonight—not just before exams.*

Sandy curled her lip. *Exams are on Monday, Lola. Monday.*

*Yeah, but I'm not ready yet.*

Sandy's laugh was like a gun shot. *Bullshit. All you've done for the last two months is study.*

*So?*

*So... What about other things—like having a life, like having a good time. She bared her teeth. Like fucking Jason.*

Lolly drew in her lips. *I don't want to fuck Jason. I don't even like Jason.*

*What's wrong with you! You go to all this trouble to lose weight and look good and then you just hide yourself away when everyone wants to do stuff with you.*

Lolly pushed at a pang in her guts.

*You're being so weird. It's not normal to be in here every lunchtime while everyone else's having fun.*

Lolly glanced out the library window. She could see someone throwing a tennis ball against a wall.

Sandy leaned in close and hissed, *You know, you didn't just lose fat on your stupid diet—you lost your personality too.*

Lolly felt as though her ribs had snapped as she collapsed in on herself. It was difficult to breathe. She sucked on air as if she was trying to draw glue through a straw. The librarian was looking at her, frowning. Lolly rubbed her face, pointed a finger to the page and tried to read on. *Science interested Leonardo increasingly in his later years. His investigations in anatomy yielded drawings of great precision and beauty of execution, drawings often so true to fact that they could be used in medical instruction today.* Lolly felt her trachea relaxing. *Leonardo originated the method of scientific illustration, especially cutaway and exploded views.* She dragged air into her lungs, imagined the increased volume of her thoracic cavity, the contracting muscles of her rib cage and diaphragm. She picked up her pen and sketched an upper torso. On the left half of the figure, she drew skin cleaving the ribs, a shrunken breast, a deep shadow at the collarbone, a twisting of tendons up the neck. On the right half, she sketched vertebrae, the curve of the rib cage, the sternum, scapula, clavicle and humerus. She outlined the head and started to construct the face. On the right side, she peeled back the skin from the skull. She knew that taste was associated with the temporal lobe of the brain, vision with the occipital lobe, speech and language with the parietal and frontal lobes, but she didn't draw these. Instead, she shaded a dark, swirling cloud, like the formation of a vicious storm, a hurricane. If she was to magnify this tumultuous whirl, she would sketch the bumping of cells, the white zap of impulse, the tastes of memory and the colours of fear. On the left side, she worked on half of the chin, the lips, the nose and eye and brow. She drew the cluster of freckles on her cheek and the little scar from a childhood accident. She had not attempted a self portrait before. This was a sketch made up of many. *You lost your personality, too.* Lolly shook her head at the afternoon's work and wondered how much oil paints cost.

Lolly's exams were over in ten days, finishing on a Wednesday afternoon. She guessed she should feel relieved, but she just felt numb —exhausted and empty and numb. As she stepped up onto the school bus she saw Sandy. She was listening to Jason as she rubbed her finger in a little pot of vaseline and smeared it over her lips. Lolly wanted to call out through the bus window, ask her to come over and to hang out down at the beach, but Sandy had been avoiding her since the confrontation in the library. Lolly sat down on cold vinyl and stared straight ahead. She knew Sandy still had her physics exam on Thursday, so she didn't bother her.

Mumma was waiting on the verandah with Ginger in her arms. She said,

*How did it go?* and sunk her fingers in fur.

*OK, I think.* It had been difficult—difficult to understand the questions, difficult to focus, difficult to know where to start, to know how to prove yourself in two hours of blue biro scrawl.

*So that was your last one?*

*Yep.*

*The very last for year eleven? Everything's finished?*

Lolly stepped up onto the veranda and scratched Ginger behind the ear. *Yep.*

Mumma put the cat down. *Right... Well, I'm taking you to see Dr Warren tomorrow.*

Lolly felt her guts drop.

*Sandy's mother rang me and she thinks you're sick.*

Lolly breathed, *I'm not sick.*

Mumma folded her arms across her chest and stared out from under the roof, over the tree tops, across the ocean and off into the distance. *Well, we'll see.*

In black pen: *traitor*. In black pen, a page of scribble, spinning around and around and back over itself. How could Sandy fuck things up so easily. The pressure beneath the skin was too much to bear. Lolly jabbed the nib of the pen into her arm. Again and again. The beads of inky blood were a relief.

Lolly looked at Dr Warren's balding pate, at the sweep of hair he had brushed over it. It didn't fool her. He leaned back in his chair.

*So, Miss Armstrong. I believe you've been dieting.*

Mumma sat forward on her chair. *She has, Doctor Warren, and she's been very successful as you can see.*

Dr Warren wrote something in his notes. *So what seems to be the problem?*

*Well, Mumma said, her knees jiggling under her skirt. It has been brought to my attention that there might be more to this, that Lola might have a disease.*

Lolly kept her eyes on the floor on the grubby pile of worn hospital carpet.

Dr Warren pursed his lips, *And what disease is that?*

Mumma made two fists in her lap. *Anorexia.*

Lolly could not believe it. The word made her heart race. How could she be so misunderstood?

*Anorexia*, Dr Warren nodded and ran his eyes over Lolly. *It's possible, but the weight loss isn't particularly severe.*

Mumma scoffed. *Dr, she was a big girl before this. A big girl. She's lost half of herself—at least.*

He caught his chin in his hand and looked at Lolly. *And what do you think of this?*

No answer.



*How much weight have you lost?*

Silence.

*Mrs Armstrong, perhaps it would be best if I was to speak to her alone.*

Mumma looked shocked. *Have Janice make you a cup of tea. We won't be long.*

Dr Warren rolled across the floor on his chair and pulled a heavy book from the shelf.

*Your mother has always been particularly neurotic about you, Miss Armstrong. Our job today, is to investigate the claims a concerned third party has laid in her mind and weigh our findings.* He dropped the book on the desk with a thud that made Lolly jump. A puff of dust rose. He opened the book, ran a finger down the index, found the page he was after and tapped the entry with his pen.

*Here we go. Diagnostic criteria for Anorexia Nervosa. A. Refusal to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height... Blah blah blah... Weight: eighty-five percent less than normal.* He looked up. *Do you know how much you weigh?*

Lolly shook her head. She hadn't been measuring herself on the silly, pink *Ladyform* scales Mumma had hidden under her bed. This project was bigger than mere strokes on a measuring dial. Dr Warren stood up.

*Well... Let's get you on the scales, then.*

The pen scratched across the page. Dr Warren had scrubbed, white hands, a crop of wiry hair over his knuckles, fat fingers, like the grubs Lolly had found bored deep into stringy bark trees.

*Height, he said as he wrote, One hundred and fifty-five centimetres. Weight... forty-five kilograms. Considering it's late afternoon and you're fully clothed, that would make your actual weight around forty-three, forty-four kilograms. Not enough*

*to have you admitted forcibly, not overwhelmingly dangerous for your height, but a significant weight loss, considering your size previously. Enough of a weight loss to fit the criteria.*

Lolly watched his glasses slide down his nose. If forty-five kilograms wasn't dangerous, then she wasn't doing anything wrong, she needn't worry about eating—not yet, anyway.

*B. Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight. He looked up at her. Does this ring true, Miss Armstrong?*

Lolly clenched her teeth. *I don't believe I need to gain any weight. I know about the negative effects carrying excess weight can have on one's health.*

Dr Warren tapped his notes.

*True enough. True enough. Obesity is a serious health issue. He smirked. But I'll take that as another yes. He continued to read. C. Disturbance of the way in which one's body weight is experienced... blah... blah... blah... You've already demonstrated that. And, D. In postmenarchal females, amenorrhea. Are you still menstruating?*

Lolly glared across the table, over the open book, straight into his eyes and said nothing.

*Hmmm... Dr Warren wrote something in his notes. It seems the patient is particularly non-compliant. This problem could be bigger than we first thought. His chair squeaked as he leaned back. Have you been engaged in... He frowned, sat forward and referred to his book. Purging... Purging? He read on. Ah... Have you been inducing vomiting? Using laxatives?*

Lolly let her eyes rest on his neck. A ridge of red skin was squeezed above his starched collar and his mustard tie was skew-whiff. Lolly took a deep breath, listened to the roaring of pulse in her ears and said nothing.

Mumma held her half-finished cup of tea on such an angle that Lolly was sure it would spill.

*And what is this book, Dr Warren?*

He slapped the pages together and held up the cover for her to peruse.

*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.*

The tea threatened at the rim of the cup.

*So this is serious, then?*

Dr Warren put his chin to the ceiling and nodded once. *Yes. I think your fears were founded this time. I believe we have a case of anorexia before us.*

Mumma bit her lip. *So what can you do? How do you cure it?*

*I can prescribe anti-depressants—possibly a sedative—but the main treatment involves a hospital stay...*

Mumma gasped and tea slopped onto the floor.

*On the mainland, I mean. In Adelaide. We're not equipped to deal with psychiatric conditions here.*

Lolly had never felt so sick.

Mumma borrowed the only books available from the library in town. She put them on the counter face down and tried to hide her shame with chit-chat about how much rain they had over the weekend as the librarian fussed with her blue members' card. When she got home, she spread the books over the kitchen table, fixed herself a cup of hot milk and held it in both hands. Outside, it was a watercolour afternoon, but Mumma felt everything washed in thick, black mulberry syrup. She turned to the index and found *Causes: Page twenty-seven.*

*Mothers may interpret all signs of an infant's distress as requests for food. Consequently, the infants fail to learn to respond differently to different needs and feelings (hunger versus anxiety, for example). Such infants grow up to experience difficulty distinguishing hunger from other feelings, including anxiety and they eat whenever they experience emotion. An anxious situation may be dealt with by doing the one thing they have learned brings them comfort—eating. Such people will eat whenever anxious.*

Mumma gagged on milk skin and slammed the book shut. Her stomach fluttered. It was true. She was to blame. She had made Lolly sick. She had not loved her daughter right and now things were very, very serious. She traced a trembling finger over the author's name, embossed in gold print. *Professor Ronald Horn MD*. The blurb said he was from some hospital in the United States, eminently qualified, with many years of experience treating anorexia and bulimia nervosa. Mumma was suddenly aware of how much she ached. She slowly uncrossed her legs and looked over herself. Her stockings were twisted at the ankle, her slippers spattered with kitchen stains, there was flour and grease on her old striped skirt. She was a mess. She put her hands on the book, flipped through the pages and fanned up musty air. These words were dark and permanent and knotted like scar tissue. These words implied what her father had always said. Many years ago, just after he had moved her to Hillwater, he had slapped a paperback into her hands and puffed that motherhood should not be in the hands of women. All the evidence was out there. It was written in the books she had relied on her whole life.

Lolly's forehead was cool against the glass of the car window. She blinked at the road signs as they rolled passed, blinked at the council workers, steam rollers, the

back hoe, the truck full of molten bitumen as the highway was reconstructed. She followed the low loop of powerlines and noticed a dead crow hanging by a claw. They drove over wet bitumen and the sound was sticky—a million ping, ping, pings as fine gravel hit the underbelly of the ute. They drove through the road works and out the other side, passed a Shell service station, a Sip N Save, a McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken and a seven-day supermarket. They stopped at a traffic light and Lolly could see chewing gum on the footpath, dog shit on the curb, kids eating icecream with melted chocolate around their mouths, a man biting a woman's neck. Mumma turned the radio on and Lolly could tell she was looking at her—for an objection, perhaps. It was Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers, 'Love Lift Us Up Where We Belong'. Mumma tapped her fingers anxiously on the steering wheel and made an effort to hum along. Lolly watched a girl turning cartwheels in her front yard, a dog chasing its tail, a man sitting on a fence smoking, a woman eating something out of a brown paper bag and she thought, That's what people do with their lives—fill time with stuff, skip when they're happy, eat when they're hungry. Lolly wondered how it was that her life had become so complicated, so filled with rules, regulations and orders, with voices that she once would have considered bizarre, irrational. She couldn't walk on the same side of the street as the bakery. When she was out running, she had to always touch the same rock at the end of the bay with her right palm, then her left. She couldn't leave sketches incomplete. She had to read a whole chapter, then the first and last paragraph over. Her hands had to be washed four times—up to the elbow—before and after she had handled food. Walking home from the bus, she had to touch the same tree trunk in the same place. She couldn't eat between eight am and seven pm. Time-wasting chit-chat was to be avoided. People were to be avoided.

Emotions were to be curbed and pain savoured. Mumma said, *What are you thinking?* and turned right into Hospital Drive.

Lolly watched the shadow of towering concrete creep nearer, then engulf the car. She clutched her bag to her chest. *Nothing.*

Everything white. Everything sterile. Metal clanging, a phone ringing, a television audience applauding. Doctor Bartrum, psychiatric registrar, was talking, but the sound of his voice was distant, as if he were speaking right into a gale. There were patients watching her. Women. Girls. Haunted eyes. Someone rocking. Someone else pacing the corridor. Someone being pushed in a wheelchair, clinging a mobile drip. Pale women. Women in pyjamas, in track suits. Women with acne, with sores, with greasy hair, with faces painted on. Women hollowed, angular, pinched and pointed. Rounded women, puffy women, ankles as thick as calves. Women smiling, with sympathy, with fingers in their mouths. Women snarling. Lolly was vaguely aware that Mumma was crying, that she was being escorted away by a nurse. Lolly had to sign something, but the pen didn't seem to work. The Doctor took another from his coat pocket and clicked the end to reveal the ballpoint. Lolly jumped at the sound—like a gun shot, but without a bullet.

Apparently, when Mumma left, Lolly had screamed, tipped up the mattress in her room and hit her arms with the back of a hair brush. They tried to calm her in voices reserved for conversations with children as they struggled to fasten a plastic bracelet around her wrist with her identification typed in bold black. Lolly screamed out her name, tipped up her toiletry bag, pointed to the neat name tags she had affixed; *Lola Belle Armstrong* on her toothpaste, on the handle of her toothbrush, on her deoderant, her moisturising cream and her soap box containing her peach and

mango vegetable soap. *You know my name*, she screamed as they raised eyebrows and confiscated her pink Ladyshave razor, examined the rest of her toiletries and went through her bags. They gave her a sedative and bound her in starched sheets. Finally, a nurse was able to attach the plastic bracelet. *UR No.: 0050078*.

Everything white. Everything sterile. Sound bouncing off stainless steel, pagers beeping, sliding doors grating, filtered air buzzing, trolleys squeaking on lino, nurses laughing. Someone sobbed. A door closed. A lift dinged. A television droned. Lolly opened her eyes on the stark ceiling, burning her retinas on the fluorescent light. Curtains were drawn on the outside world. She pissed her bed and dissolved.

Lolly dreamed of herself and a baby girl. They were shadow puppets with skeletons of butterflies wings extending from their shoulder blades. Their hair was wound and bound at the napes of their necks. The shadows traced the fold of ear lobe, jutting jaws, even the sweep of eyelash. Lolly's hand waved slowly as if passing through water and the tiny fist of a baby opened and closed on air. Lolly turned and stared into burning light and watched fruit flies pass through the glare, millions of black specks, silver light bouncing off transparent wings, all white flashes and black motes and milky baby skin. They beat their wings and took to the air.

Lolly woke an hour later, wet and warm with piss, woozy, blinking gummy lashes, tasting her thick and fetid tongue. A nurse looked up and smiled. Lolly turned her head and closed her eyes. She didn't know this world. She struggled for a hint of where she was or who she was, tried to conjure up some memory, to recall something familiar, something comforting, something precious, but there was nothing but the flash of dread and white-hot panic. There was no way to make sense of it all and she tried to call out, but language failed her. The exhaustion was overwhelming. She guessed she was at the end, that she was experiencing the last neuron firing, the last

sparks of life, that her body had already started rotting into the mire. She was too tired to be just sixteen.

Mumma cried in the car until she was limp. She wanted to stay, to be close to Lolly, but that would mean contacting her mother and re-visiting her old bedroom, the old sights and sounds and smells of before. She could not face telling her mother what had become of Lola Belle, she could not prove her father right, that the seed sown, all those sixteen years ago, really had carried the threat that this would happen, that Lolly would slide into the blackness, just like her daddy had done. Mumma had always believed that with enough care she could stop this from happening, with enough careful observation, frequent medical consultation and attention to nutrition, with enough strength and good, solid parenting skills she could love her child normal, love her child proper and right, just how a girl should be. Mumma took a toffee from the glove box and unwrapped the gold foil. She sucked and slurped and sniffed and decided that Lolly's predicament would be a hidden thing. She would not contact her mother or her brothers or her auntie Nancy. She would just have to manage alone, just like she had done when Lolly was born. She looked up through the windscreen at the hospital and tried to imagine her daughter somewhere within the maze of floors and corridors and rooms. Looking up made her head spin. Mumma knew that Lolly would receive the best of care and that people would be working around the clock to cure her. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes, slipped another toffee between her lips and turned the key in the ignition. She would be able to make the six o' clock ferry, be home by seven to put a pudding in the oven and have dinner ready for Mister.



Lolly was woken at six by Joy, the head nurse with a stiff back and a squeaking shoe. She said,

*It's time to sit up for dinner.*

Lolly blinked for some minutes, struggling to order her thoughts into some sort of story that would lead to this point.

*Come on, dear.*

There was too much information to sort and thinking made her dizzy.

*Chop, chop.*

Lolly looked at the woman. *Beg your pardon?*

*It's dinner time. It's time to sit up for dinner.*

Food. The woman wanted to give her food. Lolly tasted her tongue, wiped her mouth and rasped, *I'm not hungry.*

Joy stood up straight. *Come on, now. I appreciate you're still a bit woozy, but this isn't a holiday. You're here to work on yourself.*

Lolly painstakingly lifted her leaden arm and felt for her mouth. There was a crust of dried drool on her chin.

*You've been on the waiting list for this program for what—three months?*

Ever so slowly, Lolly traced her jaw bone to her ear and pressed her finger deep into the canal. When she moved her finger she could almost hear the roar of the sea.

*Look, there are so many other poor girls out there waiting for a bed. Now you've signed the contract to do the bed program for six weeks so you owe it to them to do this properly. Anyway, Joy patted down her electric grey hair. You won't be able to get up until you've reached your target weight, so eat up.* Lolly tried to sit up, to protest, to show her objection, but her face felt numb and her body dead. She started to panic. Why couldn't she pull herself up? Why couldn't she leap from the bed, run

from the room, from the walls that were closing in around her, out down the corridor, her bare feet slapping cold tiles. Why couldn't she tumble down the stairs, sprint through the lobby, past the strangers sipping milky coffee and eating doughnuts at the cafeteria, past the gift shop and the florist, through the sliding doors and out into the fresh air? She gripped the starched sheets with weak hands and could do nothing but leak a few sticky tears.

Joy helped her sit up, propped and bolstered with pillows. She arranged a table over Lolly's lap, set down a tray of food and took a seat opposite her. Lolly looked at her from under her eyebrows. Joy said,

*While you're settling in someone will sit with you while you eat. You're to eat all of the meal under supervision. If all goes well, after a few days you'll be able to eat unsupervised. If you continue to be a good girl, eat all your meals and steadily gain your weight, you'll also gain privileges.*

Lolly almost laughed. *What privileges?*

*If you're progressing well, you can choose to attend the arts and crafts class. You'll be able to shower more than twice a week—unless you're menstruating. You're allowed a shower every day you're menstruating. You'll be able to get up and go into the lounge. You'll be able to eat meals with the other patients and you'll be able to make phone calls.* Lolly gripped the bars of her stainless steel bed. The taste of fear was metallic. She swallowed awkwardly and wondered what it was that she had done that was so, so wrong. Joy pointed to the food and ever so slowly, ever so carefully with two pinched fingers, Lolly peeled back the foil from her plate. A lump of meat swam in gravy. Fat had congealed in a white ring around the edges. Lolly looked up.

*I can't eat this.*

Joy half-heartedly rolled her eyes. *Let me guess. You're a vegetarian? If I had a dollar for every time I heard that...*

Lolly sucked in her bottom lip to stop it from trembling.

Joy stood up. *Your mother didn't say. Look, tomorrow you'll have a chance to go through your menu with the dietitian. Until then, just eat what you can and I'll make a note of it.* She picked up the plate and left the room. Lolly looked at the rest of the meal. There was a serve of vegetables: carrots and zucchini boiled for so long they had been bleached of colour, an anaemic bread roll, spread thickly with butter, a container of orange juice and a bowl of apple pie topped with long melted icecream. The knives and forks were too shiny. The tray was too clean. The food was cold. And ugly. It looked as though it had come straight from a machine that hadn't been serviced since the late 1970s. Lolly had never seen food so disrespected. She wondered what had been added to it, what drugs were mixed in to deaden her, to kill off her will, to over-ride her personality until she became a spineless blob—a nobody. Joy returned, her shoes slipping and squelching on her heels.

*You're in luck. There was a spare slice of tomato quiche.* She put it on the tray. *Now to save yourself a lot of trouble you'd be better off just eating all this up like a good girl.* She stretched out her fingers, looked down at them and frowned. *One of my old patients was brought into ICU for the third time by the mental health crisis team last night—police escort, and all. She's been restrained and sedated and is being fed nasal-gastrically and I can assure you she's finding it particularly unpleasant and uncomfortable.* Joy shook her head. *Such a waste. Such a waste of a life.* She tilted her head at Lolly. *You don't want to end up like that, do you.*

Lolly stared at the slice of soggy quiche. *Is the food drugged?*

Joy laughed and crossed her legs. *Of course not.*

*Who cooked it?*

*The kitchen staff. I can assure you they're imminently qualified for the job.*

*Where do they cook?*

*Here on the premises. Look, I suggest you get on with eating. It won't be nearly so nice cold.*

*It's already cold. Is there a window where they cook, somewhere they can see outside?*

*Joy frowned. I don't know. I don't think it's important.*

*Are they women? Do they have children?*

*Joy looked impatient. Pick up that fork and get busy, miss. Otherwise I'll be forced to make note of this diverting and procrastination in your notes.*

*Do you write stuff about me?*

*A file is kept on your progress.*

*Like a diary?*

*Well... Of sorts. It's for the Doctor's records. So he knows how treatment is going. Now knife! Pick up that knife.*

Lolly dreamt of the fleas crawling through her blood eating her from the inside out. She had been given more pills after dinner, *Something to calm your nerves, something to help you sleep*. She had tried to hide them under her tongue, but the nurse had made her open her mouth and had checked with a rubber-gloved finger. Now she slept in a foggy state of semi-consciousness, struggling to swat away the fleas that streamed into her nostrils, into her mouth, her ears and squeezed through her tear ducts. Her first substantial bellyful of food in months had left her nauseous, bloated and in pain. Her stomach moaned and bubbled and expanded further. Lolly

dreamt that she was in an underwater cave, under the limestone cliffs back home. She had her nose in a tiny pocket of air. She knew that there was only enough oxygen left for a few more breaths. She had to dive down, follow the narrow walls of the cave back out and into the open ocean, but each time she tried to dive, she bounced up and whacked her head. She was full of air. Bloated like a balloon. Her attempts to get out became more and more frantic and in her panic, she swallowed more air and became more bloated. She cracked her skull on the rocks overhead, her vision was bloodied, her nose full of mucus, she choked on brine. Lolly coughed and heaved and woke up covered in vomit. The taste was so bitter, the smell so foul, the embarrassment so extreme that Lolly retched again and again until her bedclothes were ruined. She knew she would be in trouble for this. She called out, but no one came. She remembered the buzzer and pressed it twice. A young nurse with bright red hair appeared in the doorway.

*Oh dear.*

Lolly opened her mouth to speak, but there was no explanation.

*Oh dear, oh dear, it looks as though I'll be needing some gloves.* She left the room. Lolly listened to the splat of her vomit as it hit the floor. The red-haired nurse returned carrying a bucket and mop, a number of sponges and towels, a clean gown and a pile of sheets. There was another nurse with her who pointed to Lolly, then the wall. *Stand over there and I'll strip the bed.*

The red-head chose a towel and tucked the clean gown under her arm. *Follow me. We'll get you cleaned up.*

The red-haired nurse was called Emile. She watched Lolly in the shower as she twisted and turned to hide herself.

*I've seen it all before,* Emile said. *Don't worry.*

Lolly kept her back to her, regardless. Emile may have seen many naked bodies in her work, but Lolly could tell she was checking her over, summing her up. Emile could see that she wasn't really here because she had got too thin, she was here because she was bad at being normal, she was crazy in the head and a disgusting excuse for a young woman. Lolly knew that's what all the nurses thought. She was a stupid girl who couldn't even feed herself properly, a stupid, pointless waste of hospital time and resources. Shampoo stung Lolly's eyes as she worked the lumps of vomit through her hair and pushed them down the plug hole with her big toe. At least she was free of that poisoned meal. It gave her an idea.

*Can I have a shower every night?*

Emile laughed. *Showers are always supervised, Lola —always.*

Lolly put her face under the spray of water and closed her eyes.

*This is your first night here, isn't it?*

Lolly kept her back turned, her face averted and nodded.

*Tomorrow they'll go through the rules with you so things are more clear. This shower is highly irregular, but we could hardly let you lie in that mess all night. If you choose to make yourself sick again, you won't be allowed the luxury of a shower to clean yourself up. You'll be sponge bathed by a nurse.*

Lolly stared at the white tiles and whispered, *I didn't make myself sick. I woke up in it.*

Doctor Bartrum came at five past eleven, carrying a folder. Lolly had been crying all morning. They had taken her biology text book off her, because studying was too much of a tax in her condition. The Doctor opened his folder and referred to his notes.

*Good morning, Lola. How are you today.*

Lolly managed to squeak something.

*That's good. Now I hear we had some trouble in the night.*

Silence. He sat down on the edge of the bed. *Would you like to tell me about it?*

*I threw up.*

*So I hear. Now you realise you have signed a contract that forbids you from inducing vomiting? If terms of the contract are broken you only get one warning in here and then you are discharged. The beds are in too high a demand.*

Lolly started to cry again. *I didn't do it. The food made me sick.*

Doctor Bartrum sighed. *All right. All right. Well, starting from today, we will adhere to the contract for the six weeks of the program. Are you familiar with the contract? Do you remember signing it?*

Lolly shook her head.

*Right. He shuffled papers. This is your copy. You can refer to it whenever you're uncertain what's okay and what's not. This is the standard contract that everyone who does this particular bed program signs, but you'll also get another contract which stipulates your goal weight and what privileges you're entitled to as you gain. You'll get that after you've met with the dietitian, the head nurse and your team. Clear?*

She shrugged and took the contract off him.

Later, Lolly saw Doctor Bartrum in the corridor talking to one of the nursing staff. She sat forward and called out to him. He leant on the door jamb, his shirt gaping just enough for Lolly to glimpse his hairy belly, and he raised his eyebrows.

*I don't know about this.* Lolly pointed to her copy of the contract. *Can't I be in charge of preparing my own food, so it's just the way I like it?*

Dr Bartrum laughed. *Lola, there's no negotiating the contract. It has served many girls for twenty years. For twenty years it has sufficed.*

*Twenty years!* That was well before Lolly was even born.

*Exactly. Why change something that has worked for twenty years.*

A nurse held up a syringe.

*Dr Bartrum needs your blood.*

Lolly blinked at the prick of the needle as the nurse approached.

*It's just routine.* She pulled Lolly's arm straight, located the vein, then let her elbow drop to the bed. Lolly felt the sting of metal puncture her skin and watched the rich, sticky red drain from the crook in her arm. The thud of her heart beat echoed louder and louder in her skull until she was sure the nurse could hear it.

*Are you all right? You look a bit pale.* She pressed her hand to Lolly's forehead and smiled sympathetically. *Are you a bit squeamish about blood?* Lolly shook her head and stared up at the ceiling while the nurse finished up.

As the afternoon waned, she worried more and more about her blood in its generic plastic vial, identified only by *UR No.: 0050078*. She thought of her cells spinning and bumping against one another, about her DNA, genes and chromosomes. What was Dr Bartrum looking for? What would he find in the pictures of her spilled blood? Lolly drew the sheets over her head, pulled her legs tightly to her chest, tucked her nose between her knee caps and licked at her skin. A touch of salt. She slipped into sleep picturing sea-blue.



*Delia Walker*, said the woman in red, her right shoulder pad lop-sided. *Dietitian*. Lolly shook her hand. She had met more people in the past forty-eight hours in hospital than she had in a lifetime on the island. Delia Walker drew a chair closer to the bed, sat down and arranged a folder over her lap.

*The purpose of today's visit is to establish your goal weight and sort out your menus. We'll be meeting once a week to monitor your progress and during that time you can inquire after anything that's pressing. Now... First to work out your goal weight. I know it says in the contract that this can be negotiated, but bear in mind that we'll only let you go as low as your lowest BMI. Do you know what BMI stands for?*

Lolly said, *Body Mass Index. I just did my biology exam.*

Delia ran a painted fingernail down a page in Lolly's file. *I see you're one hundred and fifty five centimetres*, she looked over Lolly, *and I'd say you're of average to large frame*. She consulted a chart. *That would make your lowest ideal weight about fifty-three and a half kilos. They've noted your admission weight as forty-three kilograms—not too bad—so that makes a gain of ten and a half kilos — about two and a bit kilos per week, over four weeks and at four weeks—provided you've reached your goal weight—you'll be allowed up off the bed, for a few hours at first, still relying on the wheelchair in between times, until gradually you'll be mobile again and ready for your return home.*

Lolly took a breath and said, *Everyone keeps saying that my weight isn't too bad, so why am I being forced to gain? I read that Elle MacPherson weighs forty-four kilos and she's much taller than me.*

Delia spun a gold ring on her finger and shook her head.

*Lola, Ms MacPherson is utterly out of the ordinary. That's why she's a Super Model.*

Lolly wondered what she meant. Things seemed to be getting more complicated.

Delia puffed out her chest and said, *We're all about intervention here, Lola. We don't want things to get any worse for you. There's a lot of evidence to suggest that you would not be able to fight this alone—particularly coming from a rural and remote area with inadequate health care to deal with such a disease.*

Disease. Lolly mouthed the word, felt it stick to the roof of her mouth.

*Disease? Have I really got a disease?*

Delia frowned. *Do you know why you were admitted?*

Lolly shrugged. *Dr Warren thought I had a bit of anorexia.*

*Do you know anything about anorexia nervosa?*

Lolly bit her pinkie between her molars. *Well...*

*You have to ask yourself if you were ever really in control of your behaviour.*

Lolly squinted at her hands and chewed on her bottom lip. She thought of how profound the hunger had been, how it had her down on all fours, hunting for dehydrated scraps of food under the fridge with the handle of the spatula, how it had resounded so terrifyingly throughout her body that there was nothing she wanted more than to run to Mumma, take her by the hand and laugh, *I'm hungry* and have her fry up eggs and bread and squirt a smiley face in tomato sauce. But she could never do it. If she broke the fast and chose to eat she would never stop. Never. She was sure her hunger was wild and crazed and too big and tangled and complex for her ever to wrestle. She would not be able to control it, would not know what to feed herself,

how much and when. That was why Mumma had brought her here. To be taught by the experts.

Delia said, *Perhaps you'd benefit from some reading material. I'll have someone bring something in. Now...* She checked her watch and slipped Lolly some papers. *Back to the matter at hand. This is a list of food you can choose from for your meals. You're allowed three dislikes, so if you really are a vegetarian as your file suggests, meat will count as one dislike. Should I make a note of meat?*

Lolly nodded and read the list.

*Dear Lolly,*

*How are you? I bet those doctors are helping you get better. I bet they're doing a better job than I could have done.* Lolly stopped reading and looked out the window. She had asked the nurse to open the curtains, but there was not much point. Her view was of another wing of the hospital. Lolly had memorised the patterns made by the salt of concrete sweat. She learned the movement of shadow by tracking the rise and fall of the sun and she had worked out which way was home. *I borrowed two books from the hospital library on anorexia. I am learning that I have been too controlling and protective. I am very sorry to have made you get sick, Lolly. Very sorry.* Lolly looked back to the window. Mumma's letters were almost too much to bear. There were streaks on the glass. Lolly wondered if she would see a bird fly by. Occasionally she would see a pigeon, a messy flutter of purple and grey. *Dr Warren gave me something to help me sleep because I've been that sick with worry...* Lolly skipped sentences and read on from the beginning of the next paragraph. *Mister should be back with his new boat soon. There are some letters waiting for him from the department of fisheries—no doubt his long-awaited licenses and registration*

*details. We will be doing very well once he gets established. You know how much money the boys bring in when they're working the trawlers...* Lolly's eyes scrolled down. *Remember when Sandy said I should open a restaurant...* Over more words. *I'm trying a new brand of flour for my tarts. It gets shipped in specially...* More words. *Ginger ate nearly a whole stick of butter!* More words. Hillwater seemed like a fantasy. Mumma seemed made up. Lolly knew there was still night and day, but she could easily be stuck in a loop, living the same minutes over and over, eating the same recycled mash, drinking the same sweetened juice. There would be no trace of her on the beach back home. The push-pull of the sea would have erased evidence of her long ago, the tides subsiding and leaving shells and star fish and pebbles and urchins that she would never see. Mrs Walker at the newsagency would not have noted that she hadn't been in for cartridge paper or ink, that she hadn't stopped to flick through the glossy magazines, searching for pictures of beautiful women with protruding collar bones and knobbly shoulders. Kids would be hanging their legs from the town jetty oblivious of her absence. Sandy would have someone else sleeping in her roll-out trundle bed. Lolly was no longer a part of life. In here, in hospital white, she swallowed her pills and ceased to exist.

Lolly was simultaneously nervous and excited about art and craft class. She had been on the bed for five days. Five days sitting and eating and watching television and speaking to nurses. Five days feeling the fleas crawl through her legs, making her twitch and squirm and kick off the bed clothes. Five days of desperate muscles, of cramping and of spasms. Five nights of indigestion, of gastric reflux, of chronic wind, of sobbing into her pillow until she was spent. Five mornings straining over the bed

pan and watching the nurse measure the pH of her stools, checking with a disposable stick that she hadn't secreted the odd morsel of food under her shit.

Joy came in just before eleven, pushing the wheelchair. She closed the door behind her. She had her hair pulled back and fastened with a tortoiseshell clip. Lolly hadn't realised how big and fleshy her ears were underneath that frizz of silver hair.

*Now Lola, she lined the chair alongside the bed, It's best you keep to yourself during these classes. We don't recommend you spend too much time chatting with the other patients.*

Lolly slid off the bed and hit the wheelchair with a thud. *Why?* She wondered if Joy thought she would join with the others, plot a riot or an escape.

*You have to realise that there are girls in here on a range of different programs—the majority for two weeks on assessment, some for the target weight program, some for the four week bed program, a couple on six weeks like you and some readmitted for the umpteenth time. Now everyone is at a different stage—some girls are near discharge, some are still very ill. The problem is that when the patients are all together, attitudes can be expressed and comments can be made which are very unhelpful to your recovery. We always prepare new patients for this. I just want you to be aware that you might hear things that upset you. Joy always sounded like she was reciting something from a textbook. She put her hands on the armrests of the wheelchair and bore down on Lolly. Now if someone says something unhelpful, how do you think you might respond?*

Lolly avoided her eyes and picked lint off her windcheater. *Ignore them?*

Joy stood up and crossed her arms. *OK. That's a start. What else?*

Lolly lifted her shoulders to her ears and let them fall and Joy drummed her fingers on her forearm.

*How about after the class we touch base. I'll check in with you—see that it went all right. So you know there'll be someone to talk to afterwards. Okay?*

Lolly nodded silently as Joy took the handles of the wheelchair from behind. They lurched forward through the doorway out into the corridor.

There were nine people in the room murmuring softly, sitting around two big tables. Joy wheeled Lolly next to a girl of perhaps fourteen and two young women—nineteen, twenty—Lolly estimated. Across the table was an older woman—Lolly guessed older than Mumma. It was a shock to see her eyes peering out of such a small body, a tiny frame—like a child—transparent skin, fingernails bitten to the quick, face so drawn you could see the ridges in her eye sockets, hair so thin you could see her scalp. Lolly had been drawing that wasted body in black ink for months. She wasn't really sure it could exist. The woman hosting the class snuck up behind Lolly, smiled and said, *Hi. You must be Lola. I'm Wendy and I'll be running the class today.* She set down a square cardboard box, some cut outs of Botticellian angels and a pot of glue. Lolly looked around the room. The other girls were busy with their clag and appeared to know what to do. Lolly looked to Wendy and Wendy smiled again. She had a grey front tooth.

*We're making decoupage boxes. You stick the angels onto the box with glue, have a cuppa while you wait for them to dry and then varnish the box with lots of coats of lacquer. They end up looking really nice. See the one up the front? That's the demonstration model. Doesn't it look nice?*

Lolly kept her fingers wrapped around the handles of her wheelchair. *Do we have to?*

Someone across the room giggled.

*No.* Wendy bared that grey tooth again. *These classes are voluntary.*

*Is there any paint?*

*Well, yes, but today we're doing decoupage.*

*Can I paint my box?* Lolly was aware of the girls whispering.

Wendy grimaced dramatically and pulled at the orange scarf she had tied around her neck. *Usually we just stick to the allocated project.*

*Can't that involve paint?*

*Well...*

*What if I'm allergic to glue?*

*Are you allergic to glue?*

Lolly licked her lips.

*Oh, for heaven's sake!* Wendy threw her head to the ceiling and trotted towards the door. *I'll see what I can find.*

When the door clicked shut the girls at Lolly's table burst out laughing. One exclaimed, *Allergic to glue! Now that's a good one!* She had a sticky label stuck to her chest. The name printed in black text read: Rachael.

Another girl, Lizzy, asked, *Don't you like decoupage?*

Lolly said, *I'd rather paint.*

Across the table Crystal had emptied out way too much glue onto the lid of her box and was playing with it. *Hey, this stuff's non-toxic. I wonder how many calories in a pot.*

Lizzy screwed up her nose and said, *Gross. Crystal, you're gonna wreck that. You'll make it all soggy.*

Rachael had a pair of surgical gloves on. She was painstakingly applying clag with the tip of a cotton bud. She had the longest, thinnest, hairiest arms Lolly had ever seen. She glanced briefly at Lolly.

*You doing the bed program?*

*Yes.*

*Two week assessment?*

*No. Six weeks.*

Rachael's brow lifted and she looked up. *Oh. You don't look like you've got that much weight to gain.*

Lolly went to say something, then decided against it.

Lizzy was shaking her head. *I can't believe that on the bed program you have to eat all of your meal. Imagine that! All of it! I'd just die if I had to sit down and eat that much. Literally. I reckon I'd just die.*

Rachael sniffed and said, *What's your target weight.*

The older woman kicked the table so hard it jumped off the floor. Everyone looked up, but she had her eyes on her box.

*Do you mind, Doreen!* Rachael hissed. *I'm just being friendly.*

Wendy returned with an armful of acrylic paints and three fine brushes. She let them spill onto the table in front of Lolly as she winked, *I'll be expecting a masterpiece after all that trouble.* Lolly forced a smile, unscrewed the yellow and eyed Doreen through her lowered lashes.

After a week, Delia Walker, this time in lime green pant suit, a gold charm bracelet chinking at her wrist, pushed a wheelchair into Lolly's room.

*Time for your first weight in. You've emptied your bladder?*

*Yes, Lolly lied.*

*And you have an empty stomach?*



Lolly nodded. She had sculled over a litre of water. She had been hording it in her bedside cabinet, asking the dear old ladies who volunteered at the hospital to bring her jugfuls, because, she said, she was expecting flowers from her grandmother—beautiful irises, she said and the old ladies had smiled and tapped her hand with their papery fingers and obliged. Lolly figured the sooner she reached her goal weight, the sooner she would be allowed up to walk off the fleas. She was also privately determined that she wouldn't gain any weight over forty-nine kilograms. Fifty scared her. She didn't really know why, but it just seemed too much, too much like a grown woman with lace lingerie and lipstick and a self-assured laugh, too much like the woman the hospital had chosen she would grow into. She had to think up a way to add weight. Something like Mister's diving weight belt would be perfect— heavy, but discreet enough to wear under her nightgown without detection. Lolly also figured that the sooner she reached her goal weight, the sooner she would be allowed her biology book back.

Lolly stood slowly on her wobbly legs, surprised at how weak they had become in just a week. She stepped up onto the scales and concentrated on pushing herself down through the soles of her feet. Delia slid weights along the top until the balance settled. Outside in the corridor, around the doorway, Lolly could see Rachael lingering. Lolly whispered,

*Could you please write the number down. There are people listening outside.*

Delia glanced over to the door and scribbled, *Forty-five kilos* on Lolly's chart. She said,

*That's good, Lola. That's a steady rise—a little more than we aim for, but generally the rate evens out over the weeks. You can go and eat your breakfast now.*

Dr Bartrum had a horrible oil painting hanging behind his desk. It was a generic landscape in pastel colours with a garish, gold frame. Lolly stared at it for some time and felt disappointed. It was going to be difficult to speak intimately with this man with the horrible painting on his wall. She considered asking him if he liked it. Maybe it was hung there by the hospital. Lolly doubted it. It matched the gold cygnet ring he wore on his little finger and the cuff-links engraved with the letter 'B'. Lolly felt uncomfortable in the wheelchair. Her stomach gurgled and she worried that she would need to pass wind. Dr Bartrum closed the door to his office, sunk down in his vinyl chair with a slow hiss of air, opened Lolly's file and smiled.

*So... How have things been going?*

Lolly clenched her buttocks. *OK.*

*Really?*

*Really.*

*Have you had any contact with your mother?*

*Not yet.*

*Oh?*

*She'll be coming in the weekend after next. She thought it was best if I get settled in first.*

*Fair enough.* Dr Bartrum nodded. *Fair enough... Lola, we haven't talked about your mother yet. How would you describe your relationship with her?*

Lolly crossed her legs. She could feel her bowel filling with air. *Good.*

Dr Bartrum leaned back in his chair and grinned. *Good?*

*Fine.*

*How so?*

*I don't know.* The fleas started to bite.

*Why would you describe it as 'good'. Tell me what she's like. What does she do?*

*She cooks.*

*Oh? He jotted something down. She's a housewife?*

*No... She's a cook. She bakes tarts and specialty cakes... Lolly looked over his head at the pink sun setting over the mauve lake and added in a hurry, And she's about to open a restaurant.*

*It sounds as though your mother loves food.*

Lolly thought of swimming at dusk, the current sucking her out to sea, and said absently, *My mother loves with food.*

*Ah. Dr Bartrum sat forward. Now that's an interesting thing to say.*

Lolly felt the air bubble back up from her bowel inside of her. *I meant, yes. My mother loves food.* She was going to have a terrible stomach ache after this. *She loves to cook for people. She is an exquisite cook.*

*If your mother was to demonstrate her love by feeding, what would it mean if you refused to eat?*

Lolly worked to keep her face as still as stone. It was easy for him to make sense of it like that, but it was so simplistic a judgement and so far from how things were with Mumma that it was just stupid. She opened her mouth to speak and hiccupped.

*What would it say to her... Lolly opened her mouth again. If you folded your arms, just like you're doing now, and refused her food... She gasped like a fish, hoping for the right words. Flatly, refused to eat the food she had prepared with such tenderness... But he had such a big, strong jaw, such thick, worn teeth like an old ram, such a deep and booming and overpowering voice. Lolly felt her limbs tremble. It*

was too much to participate. She took to the air and found herself a warm corner against the ceiling.

Dr Bartrum re-read what he had just written and scratched his head.

*Is there an absence of affection in the relationship with your mother?*

Lolly floated and thought about the bubbles in pikelet batter as they cooked, the smell of hot milk, cinnamon sticks and the way sultanas swelled in rice pudding.

*Has there been more conflict as you've moved towards womanhood? Would you say your mother is afraid of you growing up? Does she baby you? Has she been interfering in your life? Does she get in the way of relationships with boys? Would she strike you as jealous? Does she stop you from doing things? Would you say your mother depends on you? Are there times when you feel as though you're the one taking care of her? Would you describe your mother as prone to depression? Anxiety? Angry outbursts?*

Lolly looked down on Dr Bartrum as he puffed questions into the air through his fleshy lips. She thought the neatly trimmed bristles of his moustache groomed his words to make them sound smooth and impressive, like truths. She looked down on herself, stooped and folded in the wheelchair, picking at her fingernails and toeing the carpet. Dr Bartrum had not noticed that she had left her body behind. He continued to make notes and continued to talk.

*Are you angry with her, Lola. Are you?*

Quite suddenly, Lolly found herself back in her skin. Her pants felt hot and she realised her face was burning. The smell in the Doctor's room was terrible.

Mumma turned off the ignition, pulled her jacket over her head and ran across the road to the phone box. The rain was thick and grey, so thick it blurred her eyes

and she almost ran in front of a silver sedan. The driver hit the horn and Mumma jumped back, feeling the shock of cold as water soaked through her worn soles, through her socks to her feet. In the phone box, she licked raindrops from her lips, wiped her face on her new jumper and felt the itchy tickle of angora-like acrylic. She took the phone from the hook, pressed the receiver to her ear and dialed. The moment she heard the click of someone answering, she hung up. She rubbed her forehead and glanced down at her wet footprints. Soup. She felt like Campbell's tomato soup from a tin, reconstituted with milk, not water and served with buttered crumpets. That's what she used to eat in weather like this when she was a teenager. Mumma took the phone off the hook and dialed again.

*Hello?*

She put a fingertip to glass and drew in the condensation.

*Hello?*

She chewed her lips.

*Who is this?*

Cars sped by, churning water into dirty foam. Mumma drew breath.

*It's Margaret.*

*Oh. Did you just call? The line went dead as I answered.*

*Yes. It must be the weather. It's raining cats and dogs.*

*Margaret, where are you? There's an awful lot of background noise.*

Mumma started to shiver. She was damp and uncomfortable and now she had no idea why she had braked with such a desperate urge to speak to her mother. It had just complicated things.

*Margaret? Margaret, are you all right?*

On her way to the hospital and everything.

*Margaret?*

Her first visit to see Lolly and she was so nervous she had to drive via K-Mart to buy a new outfit.

*Are you there?*

Her new tartan slacks were 'Dry Clean Only' and she had got them wet in the rain.

*I'm here... Mumma's throat contracted. I just wanted to say 'Hello'... That's all.*

A pause.

*Are you sure? Margaret, you sound upset.*

Mumma squeezed her lips together, afraid of what she might say.

*Do you need help? Are you in trouble? Is it your husband... It's not Lola, is it?*

*Do you need me to come and stay again?*

*I just wanted to say 'Hello'...*

*I can arrange things here. Your father needn't know.*

Mumma squeezed her car keys in the palm of her hand. *I have to go now. I'll phone again soon.*

Mumma came to visit on the weekend of the power failure. The hospital was running by generator and the emergency lighting was dim and grey. Lolly had been on the bed for twelve days. She felt as though she had been soaking in tepid water for that long, like an engorged, rehydrated prune, as though her cells had taken on as much fluid as possible without rupturing. Mumma flitted around the bed, smoothing the covers, picking off hairs, brushing crumbs and tucking down stray edges of sheet. She chattered about the weather back home, about how muddy the driveway had

become, how the lawn had gone yellow with all the rain and how snails had eaten nearly all the silverbeet. She described the ferry ride over, demonstrating with her hands the way the little freight boat had pitched and rolled on the swell and the angle of the rain as it blew sideways against the vehicle. She said,

*Thank goodness I packed a thermos of tea and some ginger snaps. I was ever so cozy tucked away in the cabin, sipping hot tea and dunking my bickies, watching the nasty old storm outside.* She patted the bed and perched herself on the end. *That reminds me. I have the best part of a batch of ginger snaps in my bag if you'd like them. I only ate a few on the way over. I made them for you, after all.*

Lolly had always loved Mumma's ginger snaps. They were so spicy and crunchy and sweet and they melted on the tongue. She remembered watching Mumma drizzle golden syrup, round and round in circles into a saucepan of melted butter. The memory of the caramel smell in the kitchen back home made Lolly feel warm for the first time in months.

*You'd have to ask the dietitian if I'm allowed them.*

*Oh.* Mumma looked down on her lap and traced the pattern on her trousers with a stumpy finger. *Of course. I suppose what they feed you is like medicine here—the right things to make you better.*

Lolly considered this comment for some time. It made sense, but Lolly was having difficulty believing it. She pulled her blankets up around her chest and regarded the face of her mother. It was still full and firm and plump and peachy, only hinting at her thirty-four years of smiling and frowning and sunshine in the delicate creases at her temples and the speckling of pigment over her nose. Flesh had kept Mumma from becoming haggard and angular. Lolly imagined the feel of her in embrace, her softness and her heat, the easiness of her well insulated torso, the

comfort in nestling between her breasts with her warmed vanilla smell radiating through her clothes. She realised Mumma was wearing a new outfit. The wet weather had made little coils of hair spring loose from her ponytail, softening her face. She looked clean. Nice. Lolly spoke quietly, like she was afraid of being overheard, despite the whirring of generator power and the steady drumming of rain against the window.

*The food here is disgusting—completely disgusting. The first night it made me sick.*

*It couldn't have been food poisoning—not in a hospital.*

*It's soggy and mushy and overcooked but always cold. It doesn't taste real. It has no taste—none. I smother it with salt and pepper, just to feel something.*

Mumma seemed upset to be hearing this. Eventually, she said. *Well, they must know what they're doing. The nurse said they've been fixing girls up for years.*

Lolly thought of Rachael and Lizzy and Crystal. She knew Doreen had been in and out of hospital for the past eighteen years—over half of her life. Mumma pulled her left knee up on the bed and turned to look at Lolly.

*Are you upset with me for putting you in here?*

Lolly felt her face flush to be in Mumma's gaze so squarely. She looked down on the hospital issue sheets which had become so familiar, so comfortable with her own stale, sleepy smell. The shame of hurting Mumma so much made her body ache.

Lolly swallowed and focussed on the tight weaving of white cotton. *I understand why you had to. Someone had to stop me misbehaving. Someone had to make me normal.*

There was a loud rap on the door and Emile brought in Lolly's lunch.



*Excuse me, but it's that time, Lola.* She smiled at Mumma as she arranged the tray over Lolly's lap, collected three empty glasses and left.

Mumma eyed the white crockery tightly wrapped in plastic and foil. *You get lunch early here.*

*Everything's early. Breakfast is at six, dinner's at five thirty.* Lolly worked her fingers around the side of the main plate, feeling for the edge of the foil. With Mumma sitting on the end of the bed, her eyes reaching for a look, the warmth of her body seeping into the hospital mattress, this meal would seem particularly repulsive. It made Lolly angry and embarrassed all at once. She sighed through her nose and peeled back the foil. It was some kind of pasty which had been re-heated in a microwave, the pastry soggy and wrinkled like someone had tried to re-warm, re-enliven dead flesh. Lolly put one hand over her mouth and with the other, slid a knife under the thing and flipped it over. The underside had gone sloppy with steam. No doubt it had been waiting in the kitchen foyer to be collected for some time. It made her think of a neglected child, sitting in its own soiled underpants. Finally, Mumma asked, *What is it?*

Lolly tilted the plate towards her. *I think it's meant to be a pasty.* Mumma couldn't help but smile. In a moment of boldness, she climbed up on Lolly's bed on all fours, broke an end from the pasty and pushed it into her mouth. As she chewed, she started to laugh. Lolly looked at the mash of food on her tongue and started to laugh, too. Mumma collapsed over her daughter's legs, rubbed her blushing face into the bed spread and cackled,

*I think you're right...* She wiped the tears from her eyes. *I think it's meant to be a pasty!*

Lolly lay in bed that night and watched the grey strokes of rain against the orange city sky. She felt comforted and dozy, despite refusing a sleeping tablet. She had been amazed to receive two of Mumma's ginger snaps with her hot milo at supper time. She hadn't expected Mumma to really seek out the dietitian, to make herself heard in order to get this sweet treat message to Lolly before bedtime. The beautifully formed golden biscuits tasted of warmth, of spice, of open fires and of Mumma. They were like hot embers in her belly and would help her sleep. Lolly stretched out and imagined Mumma in her bed back home, her knees tucked into the back of Mister's, the old puss curled at her belly, her hands under her cheek, her hair splayed out across the pillow. She loved Mumma with so much force it scared her. She wondered how many calories went into loving, pictured cells dividing, giving off bursts of heat as more love was made, the increased heat, in turn, prompting more cells to divide, making even more love, imagined herself as a potential love bomb, threatening to explode if she weren't to finally get up the courage to say those words, to look Mumma in the eye and say, *I love you*. Lolly kicked off her covers. She wished she could stand outside in the rain and feel the weather against her skin. Even better, she wished she could stand against the wind on the beach back home, feeling the needling of rain on her cheeks, the exhilarating freshness of the elements wash her clean of city grime, of shared air, of disinfectant and that hot plastic and burnt dust smell the heater gave off at night. Mumma had really liked the box Lolly had painted in art and craft class. It was covered with pictures of Ginger—Ginger chasing a butterfly, Ginger sniffing at a daisy, Ginger down on the beach, Ginger licking a stick of butter. Mumma had smiled and said that she would put precious things in it, precious things from when Lolly was little. She said she would line the bottom with sprigs of rosemary, because even Shakespeare knew that smell was good for

remembering. Lolly watched the rain until it subsided, well after midnight. She wondered what precious things Mumma had kept from her childhood.

Emile appeared at the doorway with a letter. She cocked her head at Lolly's sketch.

*That's very good, Lola. You have a very good eye.*

Lolly shut her sketch book and raised her eyebrows at the brown envelope in the nurse's hand.

*This came for you.*

Lolly took it and examined the hand writing. She didn't recognise the elegant script. There was a name and address on the back. Robin Foster. Lolly wondered who she was. The address was in Victoria. Lolly looked at Emile and Emile said, *OK, I'm leaving.*

Lolly slid a finger under the flap, tore open the envelope and unfolded the letter.

*Dear Lola, This letter has had a million beginnings and each one more empty than the last.* Lolly frowned, slouched forward in her bed and read on. *Your mother recently wrote to me and informed me about you—that you are my daughter.* Lolly gasped, sat up and sent her sketch pad sliding to the floor. Robin Foster. Not a woman. Her father. She pressed a hand over her mouth and wheezed through her fingers. *This has been very difficult news to receive, not because I don't like the idea, but because so much has happened in the past sixteen years, no doubt for all of us. I, for example, live in Melbourne with my wife and our children. The boys are four and six. I haven't found a way of telling them, or Silkie (my wife) about you, yet. I am going to give myself some time to think, first.* Lolly felt sick. She would need something for nausea. *I am writing now, before I've had a chance to really consider*

*what a long-lost father should say to his grown daughter, because your mother informs me that you are unwell. On her advice, I am writing to wish you good health and hope you manage to sort things out in hospital. I know it can be very tough in those institutions. Perhaps by the time you are discharged I will have got my head around this situation a little better and we can consider some further communication. In the meantime, best wishes, Robin Foster.*

Lolly pressed the emergency buzzer. Once, twice, a third time.

*Emile, I need something to settle my stomach.*

*Parents endow their offspring with coded information in the form of hereditary units called genes. Our genomes consist of the tens of thousands of genes we inherited from our mothers and fathers. When a sperm cell unites with an ovum, the genes from the two parents are combined in the nucleus of the fertilised egg. Lolly realised, suddenly, that her body knew her father in a way she never could. He saturated her, he lived on in her and yet she didn't even know what his eyes were like, or what his favourite colour was, or his most loved meal. Lolly didn't know how to reconcile this realisation. The biro had rubbed a blister on her finger and she absently played with the soft sack of fluid. Genes are made of DNA. DNA is a polymer of four different kinds of monomers called nucleotides. Inherited information is passed on in the form of each gene's specific sequence of nucleotides. She knew his hair was dark from the hidden photograph, but was it the same colour as hers? Did it split sunlight in the same way hers did—burnt orange at the temples? Lolly looked at the diagrams of chromosomes and wondered about the picture of her make-up, the elaborate folding, coiling and twisting of DNA histories—Mumma's and Robin Foster's.*

*'Omnis cellula e cellula'—'All cells from cells'... Life springs only from life...*

In her head, Lolly started the letter, *Dear Dad*, just like a normal daughter. But at the top of her page of notes, diagrams, thoughts, sketches and paintings, she wrote, *Dear Robin Foster...*

Lolly would never have expected to see Mister standing in her room, jeans washed and ironed, but stained with grease, sand ingrained in the scuffed leather of his boots, tanned skin out of place amongst the pallor and puffiness of patients. He held out a small blue ceramic pot containing a neatly trimmed rosemary bush. Lolly could smell it. It was a shock to breathe something alive. She said, *Just put it on the cabinet. I'm not allowed to get off the bed. Put my books on the floor.*

Mister seemed embarrassed touching her things. She wondered if he read the titles of the books as he dropped them to the floor. She would have. She would have been interested.

He said, *Margie wanted me to drop that off to you. It was a bloody nuisance in the car... Kept falling over and uprooting itself.* He pulled his nose and looked around. *Oh...* He took an envelope out of the back pocket of his jeans. *She wrote a card. It's a bit crumpled. I've been sittin on it for two days.*

*What are you doing in Adelaide?*

He tossed his head to get the words out. *Organising a bit of stuff for the boat. Been down at the Port.*

*Have you got it yet?*

*Oh yeah.* He grinned, his face folding into familiar creases. *It's moored off the jetty in town.*

*What's it called?*

Mister went to sit down, then decided against it. His right leg was shaking. *Lola Belle.*

Lolly's mouth fell open. *Really?*

He wrapped a hand self consciously around the back of his neck. His elbow was padded with calluses.

*Not after me?*

Mister nodded. *Well, yeah. It's was either that or Grace.*

Lolly felt spit trickle down her throat and collect at her larynx. *Grace?*

*Your sister.*

Lolly closed her eyes for a split second and felt a flash and burn of memory. She was sitting on Mumma's knees in the front of the old car. It was difficult to fit on her lap with all that belly. Lolly said, *She died, didn't she?*

Mister looked at the floor and kicked his heel against the lino. *Yeah... She died a long time ago... At birth.*

Lolly nodded and lay back. She said, *Thanks for bringing in the plant. Tell Mumma thanks.*

Mister guessed it was time to go. He was rarely a smoker, but he had a hankering for a rollie. He turned to leave.

*Mister?*

He was frowning.

*Maybe I could come out on Lola Belle with you some day.*

The muscles at his brow relaxed, ever so slightly. *Sure.*

*Oh, and Mister?* He stopped, his knuckles white on the doorknob. *Do you still have the weights from your diving belt?*

*Yeah.* He frowned again.

*I need them —urgently —at least four kilos, preferably five.*

*What do you want with diving weights in here?*

Lolly dipped her head and said nothing.

He took a good look at her, pale and vulnerable in this bloody great building, surrounding herself with drawings and writing, stacking a wall of books around herself, making something of herself and he nodded.

After Mister left, Lolly tore open the card from Mumma. She had written, *Rosemary for remembrance—and it's delicious with roast carrots, pumpkin and spuddies, tucked inside of a pasty too!* Lolly raised her eyebrows. Sometimes coincidence was clumsy.

Lolly had another orange on her lunch tray. There was one the day before and Lolly had been so excited to receive something that might taste, something that would fill the room with an explosion of fresh tang and disguise the staleness she had been breathing for the past three weeks, but the orange had turned out to be tasteless, just like all of the other food. It was dry and fibrous and had been refrigerated too long. The disappointment had scorched the back of her throat. Lolly looked at the orange on her tray and decided she wouldn't even bother to break the skin. She wouldn't eat it. Through her open door, she could see into the nurses' tea room. There was no one in there. She slid off her bed onto the floor, took a breath and rolled the orange out her room, across the corridor and into the tearoom. It banged the leg of a chair and then came to rest in a corner, next to the bin. Lolly giggled to herself and got back onto the bed. She was sipping her reconstituted apple juice when Doreen stuck her head around the door.

*I saw that.*

Lolly had never heard Doreen speak before. It was miraculous that she was actually alive, let alone capable of speaking. Lolly bit her lip, then grinned.

*I can't eat their oranges—not after eating the ones off the tree at home.*

Doreen nodded. Her face was sallow and sunken and scary. She rasped,

*Can I come in?*

*If you want.*

Doreen looked over her lunch and then read out the titles of the books open across Lolly's legs.

*Biology, Second Edition... Art Through Time. Aren't they in conflict with one another?*

Lolly screwed up her nose, shrugged, then shook her head.

*I don't think so.*

*I hear you do some impressive drawings.*

Lolly wondered who had been talking about her and what they had said. She focused on the movement of tendons in Doreen's neck.

*Can I see them?*

Lolly pointed to the sketch pad lying flat on the floor by her bedside cabinet. Doreen picked it up and studied the first sketch and Lolly laced her fingers, watched and waited. Doreen's face gave nothing away. It appeared her expression never changed and Lolly wondered if, after all this time, she had succeeded in starving emotion away. She guessed Doreen didn't like her drawings as she closed the pad and let it slap back to the ground. The noise made Lolly jump.

*They're very good.*

Lolly tried to sound sincere. *Thankyou.*

*What are you trying to work out?*



Lolly didn't understand the question. The silence was uncomfortable.

*Why are you in here?*

Lolly answered tentatively, like she was asking a question back. *Because I have some anorexia?*

Doreen was unimpressed. *Is that what they told you?*

Lolly swallowed and looked down at her lunch. She wished Doreen would leave her alone.

*They showed me it in the book.*

When Doreen smiled she looked like the mummified heads Lolly had seen in the encyclopedia.

*It must be true then. Was it a good read?*

Lolly's stomach started to flutter. She thought about making up an excuse to end the conversation, about lying, saying she had to ring for the bedpan. She didn't know what else to say, so she said quietly, *I guess it was interesting.*

Doreen bared her teeth again. *Perhaps you should be a psychiatrist.*

Lolly stuck a knife in her sandwich, pulled back the bread and poked at the yellow cheese. *I don't want to be a psychiatrist. I want to be a surgeon.*

Doreen said, *I wanted to be something once.*

Rhoda looked elegant in a grey suit and plum blouse. Her hair had grown and she wore rich lipstick and colour on her cheeks. She fussed over a bunch of yellow gerberas as she spoke.

*It's not that she doesn't like you, Lola. It's just that she finds it very difficult to understand what's going on for you. I think we all do—but it doesn't mean we don't care. Sandy has lots of other stuff going on for her at the moment, too. I think things*

*are pretty serious with Jason and she's started work experience—has your mum told you about that?*

*About what?*

*Oh... Sandy's spending a week with your mum making tarts. She thinks she might want to do the chef course, so she wants to get some experience. I've convinced her to stay on and finish year twelve first—it's sensible—but I think she's more inclined to stay an extra year because Jason's on the island, not because she listens to me!* Rhoda cocked her head at the flowers, turned to Lolly and smiled. *I'm sorry I can't stay longer—my meeting's at ten. I just wanted to say hello... Oh...* She dug into her handbag. *And of course give you this.* She passed Lolly something wrapped in a length of khaki calico, secured with rubber bands. *It's from your dad.*

*Mister?*

*He said it was important.* She frowned.

Lolly could tell Rhoda was curious, so she sat up slowly, folding her legs under her buttocks, buying some time, thinking quickly. *Oh, thanks, yeah... Yeah I mentioned I needed a weight. I wanted to press some flowers—I've had so many beautiful flowers.* In fact, the gerberas were her first. *Perhaps I'll press some of yours.*

Rhoda smiled, bent down and kissed Lola on the cheek. *Take care, sweetheart.*

Lolly waved her goodbye. The weight in her hand was warming.

It was week four, the morning of the weigh-in which determined whether Lolly would be allowed up off the bed and around the ward. Lolly's guts danced. She was terrified of being discovered and just a little thrilled by the risk she was taking. Mister's diving weight was still cold against her skin. She had slipped into her tightest pair of undies, just like one would wear a sanitary napkin. It dragged the elastic down

and threatened to slide out the left leg hole, so Lolly pulled on two more pairs of underpants until it felt secure enough. Delia Walker was always on time. Her perfume was intoxicating. Lolly could barely suppress her nervous giggles.

*You seem in good spirits.*

*Yes.*

*Excited about getting off the bed?*

*Yes.*

*Emptied your bladder?*

Lolly grinned. *As always.*

Delia tapped her pearly nails on the wheelchair. *In you pop, then.*

Lolly lay back on her bed and beamed. It had been so easy. Delia had never suspected. She folded her arms behind her head and took deep breaths into her lungs. It might have seemed a silly thing to the next person, but Lolly loved her secret. She would tuck it in a private bend of her mind and call upon it when Doctor Bartrum spoke his theories. She gripped onto her forearms and wondered if she should thank Mister. Everything was progressing as it should. She had done what she was told. Only two weeks until discharge.

The display in the fine foods section was dazzling. Mumma clutched her purse and examined the range of cakes and pastries, the breads, the biscuits, the chocolates, the confectionary. Turkish Delight came in vanilla or hazelnut or pistachio or rosewater or traditional. *Well I never*, said Mumma and she shook her head. There were exquisite truffles with skirts of chocolate, toffees in brilliant wrappers, marzipan fruits and sugared almonds. There were so many sweets Mumma didn't know what to

choose. The woman behind the counter adjusted her apron and stared into space as Mumma tapped at the glass, decided on something only to change her mind. In the end, after many questions and much fussing, she chose a mixed bag, then there would be a taste of everything. She checked her watch. It was almost twelve-thirty: time to leave. Time to collect her daughter. She felt nervous and excited all at once. As she weaved her way back through the store she couldn't help but buy herself a struesel bun. It made her think of her mother. *Good preparation*, she thought.

After hospital walls, the outside world seemed hyper-coloured. Lolly sat with her knees together, her pot of rosemary on her lap and squinted through the windscreen at the highway. Mumma couldn't hold on any more and she burst into tears.

*I'm sorry pumpkin. I'm ever so sorry. It's just that I'm so pleased you're coming home and I'm so extra pleased with sugar on top that you're better.* She sniffed loudly and laughed and bounced in her seat and whacked the wheel and squealed. *Yah hoo!*

Lolly felt odd —embarrassed and anxious and sort of angry all at once, but she tucked her hair carefully behind her ear and laughed with Mumma. Everything seemed the same and yet so, so different.

*In the glovebox there's a little something for you, for the trip home.*

Lolly found the David Jones bag and looked inside.

*Lollies for my Lolly*, Mumma sang and smiled.

They passed a semi-trailer full of sheep, all ears, snouts and wool, yellow eyes and piss on the wind. Lolly glared at the brightly coloured jubes and jellies, chocolates, toffees and twists of licorice and found no words.

*A bag of sweet treats, little lamb! Pass me a milk bottle. I've always liked them.*

The ink in the biro was running out. Lolly wrote in fits and starts. *Dirty stupid ugly dirty stupid mess.* She scribbled until the ballpoint was red hot. *Dirty mess. Dirty friggin dirty fuckin stupid ugly mess. You are guilty.*

Lolly got home and things were difficult. She was not cured. She was not free. She had a lot of things to think through, a lot of things to work out, a lot of things to say to people, but she had not yet discovered the words. She knew Mumma would be disappointed that she hadn't come home happy, that things were not neatly sealed in, like the sloppy contents of a pie, so she became expert at pretending. Pretending to be normal was exhausting, but it was easier than finding words for who she really was. She feigned interest in town gossip, in Mumma's relating of Gwen Kerr's hip replacement, of the Cooper lads caught doing wheelies in the main street, of old Bev's fall, of Russell Downes done for drink driving —*on his way to work, Lolly, on his way to work.* She feigned interest in the Target mail order catalogue Mumma had received and agreed on two new shirts, a pair of elastic waisted pants and some blue striped shorts. She learned to respond to Mumma's enthusiasm over specials at Foodland and agree that, *Yes, that was a good price,* or exclaim, *What a bargain! I would have bought four, too.* One afternoon, Lolly went out on the boat with Mister and although things were better between them, she guessed that her confusion was so beyond his comprehension that it was better left unspoken. Sandy was distant and preoccupied with Jason. Rhoda spoke tenderly, but she seemed impatient with the floods of Lolly's tears. When the school year started and Lolly turned up for her first day of matric, she noticed people speaking behind their hands as she walked by. She

passed her time in the library again, in the same chair, at the same desk, in front of the same window. She felt like a fraud and was sore with loneliness. Most of the time she studied and worked on her homework. Sometimes she drew in black ink with her nose just a fraction from the paper and sometimes she wrote in her secret book.

*And how is your Lola Belle?* Mrs Williams had grown jowls in the last few years. Her cheeks were rosy red and springing sweat. Mumma wondered if she was going through the change.

*She is all better, thankyou.* Mumma put a pile of change on the counter, rolled up her newspaper and tucked it under her arm.

*A tragic thing, that anorexia. We're forever getting magazines through with stories on the poor lasses. Some don't make it you know. Some just won't eat, ever again.*

Mumma shifted in her shoes.

*I can't understand it myself. I could never stop myself eating —not working so close to the bakery and all.* Mrs Williams laughed and counted coins into the till.

*Well my Lolly is very determined and she can do anything when she puts her mind to it.* Mumma said goodbye, closed the door on the newsagent and stood on the footpath for some moments. Now, what was she was doing? She fixed on the stitching of her shoes and stepped off the curb.

*Hey! Watch it, Mrs Armstrong.* A bicycle bell rang. *Stop dreaming. I almost mowed you down!*

*Hospital fixes hurts.*

*Hospital.*

*Fixes.*

*Hurts.*

*Being normal. By Lola Belle Armstrong.*

*1. Eat your dinner*

*2. Wear nice clothes*

*3. Get married*

*4. Laugh at jokes*

*Things to do:*

*1. Modify behaviour*

*2. Get assertive*

*Jason said my tits are big again.*

*If you could eat anything now, what would it be? Chocolate custard?*

*Butterscotch icecream? Mumma's bread, just out of the wood oven. With butter.*

*Mashed potato. With butter. I write poems and then I eat them. I dig holes in the scrub to hide my mess. I don't think a bad girl has any chance as a woman.*

*Ernest?* The floorboards cracked as Mumma walked through the kitchen. *Ernie, I've got a couple of pies. I thought you might like them for your dinner.* Something smelt bad. It could have been the dishes in the sink. It could have been the crab shells in the bucket on the floor, or the bin, or the bathroom.

*Hello?* She stepped slowly into his bedroom. It was dark. *Ernest?* As her eyes adjusted to the low light she could make out his body, lying face-down across the bed. She whispered, *Oh no* and held out her hand.

Ernest sat up with a start. *Who's there! Who is it? By God, I'll get the rifle.* He had his shirt off, his pants undone and the last of his hair was teased and matted.

Mumma sighed. *Good grief, Ernie. I thought you were dead.*

Ernest rubbed his face and squeezed the skin of his brow in his fingers.

*Well look who it is. Bloody Margaret.*

He spoke in a rough tone. It hurt. *I just came to give you some pies. There's a steak and mushroom and a chicken and cheese. I thought you might appreciate it.*

He puffed air through his flabby lips and his breath caught up with her.

*You're drunk.*

When he looked at her, she could see the inside rims of his eyelids. They seemed stretched, too big for his eyeballs and they were insipid and quite horrible.

*What do you expect me to do, cooped up here 'tween these four walls?*

Mumma looked away, brushed off her skirt. Eventually, she said, *I'll leave the pies on the kitchen table then.* Her voiced was pitched so high it made her ears hurt.

Lolly flipped channels and blew over her hot water. On *The Midday Show*, a man in a white coat, his hair parted, smoothed and slicked with oil, was explaining a procedure.

*Frowning, laughing, stress and surprise cause us to use our facial muscles in response, thus causing the unsightly creases in our skin we have come to call wrinkles.*

The host was nodding at the audience, her blonde hair so fixed with hairspray that not a stray hair moved.

This procedure involves the injection of the substance Botox into the facial muscles. This paralyses the muscles for up to three months and then the procedure is repeated. When muscle is paralysed obviously it is unable to move. If the muscle cannot move, then it cannot crease the skin.



The host smiled out into the audience. *And that's what we want, isn't it ladies.*

There was a shot of the audience, handbags on their laps, singing, *Yes* in unison and then the Doctor leaned back in his chair and wet his lips. Lolly thought of the face immobilised, slack, numb to emotion, lifeless. The man wanted women dead.

Lolly turned the sound down. These days she hardly ever watched television with the sound up. It perplexed Mumma, but Lolly needed only the movement of pictures. The Doctor took a handful of the woman. He grabbed at her flesh, marking out his incisions with a felt-tipped pen. He was nodding. It seemed there was too much of her. The camera zoomed in on the Doctor, on the movement of his mouth. Lolly blinked at the silent tumble of his words and saw spittle spark at the corner of his lips.

Sometimes Lolly watched hospital dramas, documentaries, surgical procedures. She chewed her fingers and watched the scalpel pierce the skin, glide through white fat to the tangle of guts, slide along a stretch of bone. She kept a sketch pad close by to imagine in black ink the layers of her own self. She had seen bone bleached white against sand. It was as beautiful as shell. There had to be something beneath the skin.

Lolly finished her hot water and turned off the television. She had three chapters of Chemistry to get through before lunch. She didn't know if she could concentrate. She wasn't hungry, not physically —she had forgotten what that felt like. But she wrestled a gnawing urge to eat. *Just three chapters*, she told herself. *Just three chapters, then the guard can come down.* On the way through the kitchen she grabbed herself a cork to bite into. In the reflection of the window she could see that she was frowning.

The house was quiet in the afternoon. Mister was out at sea and Mumma was making the last of her deliveries. Lolly sipped more hot water, slouched over her

homework. She had just eaten two celery sticks, an apple, an orange, four rice cakes, a tub of cottage cheese and a handful of sultanas. Her stomach felt volatile. She was jittery, tense, tightly coiled, as if she was only just containing herself. Each day, as she folded over her books, she felt the stress grow and grow and knew there was only one way of releasing the tension. She was able to work through the day chewing on the ends of carrots, or twigs, or bubble gum, or raisins, or a pen lid, or her own fingers as long as at night, after packing herself full of Mumma's cooking, she could slip out her bedroom window and empty herself, completely relieve herself of all the agitation, anxiety, distress, unease and restlessness. She knew that this was not the most effective and efficient way of dealing with life, but for the moment, it was all she knew.

Mister leafed through the paper and picked at the crust of a loaf of freshly baked bread. Lolly diced onion. Mumma scoured the fry pan and chose her moment.

*I called in on your dad today.*

Mister didn't look up. *Oh yeah.*

*He was pickled. Absolutely pickled. And he was like an old bear with a sore head.*

Mister didn't respond.

*I thought he didn't drink like that anymore. I thought after you had that talk about his health he eased up.*

Lolly scraped the onion into the pan, found a capsicum in the fridge and glanced across the table at Mister.

*Talking doesn't do nothing.*

Mumma sunk on one hip and waved the spatula at him.

*Of course it does. He needs to know that all that drink is messing his organs.*

*What did you say to him?*

Mister shook his head and went back to the paper. *Sometimes you just gotta leave folks to it.*

Mumma clicked her tongue, put her hand on her hip and objected. Lolly left the room.

They ate their spaghetti in silence. Lolly was not hungry. She ate quickly. She served herself two bowls in the time Mumma had eaten one and she swallowed her half-chewed mouthfuls with noisy and painful gulps. Mister sipped his beer, picked something from his teeth and said,

*It's a wonder you don't get fat again, eating like that.*

Lolly didn't look up. She was so close to slipping out her bedroom window and being free of all the mess that her hands trembled with anticipation. Mumma pushed the bread towards Mister and said, *Studying is very hungry work. You need lots of energy to study, don't you, Lolly.*

Lolly wiped her mouth and snatched two pieces of bread. *Yes. You do...* She looked Mister straight in the face. *Not that you would know about that.* Mister put his glass down very slowly and glared at her. His lips moved like he was about to say something, but he remained silent. Lolly ground her teeth together and finished her meal.

Lolly spewed spaghetti. The tangled mess splattered and steamed against the sand. The muscles of her stomach worked efficiently now, contracting with such force that she lurched forward with each heave. Somewhere, down the length of her gut, she was aware of some hurt, some confusion, but it was buried too deeply to get

at. It was easier to feel the physical pain, the tearing of her throat at her fingernails, the burn of bile, the cramp of muscle. Lolly tasted the sweet metal of blood and felt something turn mad circles in her mind, bunt against her temples and prickle behind the forehead. She washed herself from the inside out with water, purged herself of the last of it. In these last few moments she forgot everything and saw a blinding flash of light. The buzzing in her ears was like a fluorescent light about to blow. Soon, her plummeting blood sugar level would make her quake.

Lolly stumbled through the scrub on the edge of the garden, her head reeling. Twisted tubes, mushy, yellowed memories, drying and buckling at the edges like exposed pasta. A memory flung and splattered against the front of her skull. She used to be a little girl. She wondered if she had fallen over, if she was lying in the sand, asleep, dreaming up dizzy pictures of herself. The stuff of her life melted into a mucky brown. There was no way to keep it all neat and ordered. Memory galloped on her chest. A pounding of a thousand hooves, snapping bones, trampling her to a pulp. Her name—called out into the night --broke the dark. Lolly listened and heard the shatter of indigo. Mumma. It was Mumma.

Lolly froze in the shadows. The fleas crawled through her hair, gathered behind her ears and sunk their heads into her skin. Another thought slopped. In Winter, she used to sing in her rubber boots where the creek met the ocean, sailing seaweed boats and making music. She had fat fingers, hot pink in cold water, pale nails bitten to the quick. The water hummed, rose and stretched, limpid silver against her boots. It was such a disappointment to grow out of those shoes. For a while she forced her feet into them, tucked, folded and bent her toes, but she couldn't concentrate on her song. Mumma had taken her in to Hillwater to buy new shoes. Polished leather and starched canvas made her gasp. She should have become silent as well as blind.

Mumma was waiting at the side of the house. She clicked on the torch and shone it right into Lolly's face.

*Where have you been?*

Lolly crumpled and writhed in the glare. *Don't...* She gurgled on mucus and cleared her throat. *Don't...* She held her hand up to the light and felt her heart race, faster and faster. *I went for a walk.*

Mumma held the torch with two hands to stop herself from shaking.

*I heard you out there.*

Lolly covered her face with her hands as tears sprung to her eyes and fear buckled her legs.

*I heard you out there... making yourself sick... Why Lola? Why would you purposely make yourself sick?*

Lolly lay in the sand with her fingers pressed into her eye sockets. The torch light shone through her skin, blood red.

*I thought you were better, Lolly. I really believed you were better. You were doing so well, eating your dinner and doing your homework and putting sugar in your tea again.* Mumma's voice was unnaturally high and quavering, threatening to crack. *Do you need to go back to hospital?*

*No!* Lolly screamed into the cold night, kicking up the sand. *No!* Dust and salt swirled in the beam of torch light. *Don't make me go back there...*

Mumma clicked off the torch and came to sat next to Lolly. The sand was cold and silky against the palms of her hands. Lolly could feel Mumma next to her, her hands hovering gently over her body, skimming the surface of her edges. It was the closest they had come to embracing in years. It would have been easier if Mumma had beaten her, had smacked and slapped and punched and pinched and kicked her

for being such a terrible, horrible, ungrateful worry of a daughter. Mumma let her hand relax on Lolly's back.

*Sit up, now. Come on.*

Lolly let herself be lead by the pull of Mumma's arms.

*What do we do now? I need you to tell me. The books don't say anything about this.*

Lolly brushed sandy tears from her cheeks and felt the grains scour. *I don't know.*

*Come on, Lolly. I can easily call Dr Bartrum and ask him.*

*No.*

*Do I lock you in your room?*

*No.*

*Do I take you out of school?*

*No.*

*Is school too much? Is the stress making you sick?*

*No. I like studying.*

*Well what do I do? Lola, I don't know what to do.* Her voice finally broke and she crumpled. *I feel so hopeless... So helpless...You are making yourself sick right under my nose.*

Lolly blinked in the blue dark and noticed a few stars sparking between cloud. They sat there like that for a long time. Eventually, they breathed in time. Eventually, Lolly squeaked,

*Trust.* Her voice trembled. *Trust The Amazing Lola Belle.* Mumma's face was hidden in her hands but Lolly could tell that she had listened and heard. Lolly thought, *One day I might be the one to tell the story.*

Late in the moonlight, Mister finally spoke. He knew Mumma was awake. He could tell from her breathing.

*Will she make this house unstable?* He had been studying the cracks in the plaster and running his eyes over the old doorframes.

*No.* Mumma blinked up at the ceiling. *She said to say sorry to you, for before, at dinner.*

Mister felt bad for stirring the girl up. It wasn't fair sport. He had been pissed off with Margie, afterall.

*Will she be all right?*

Mumma turned towards him and felt under the bedclothes for his hand. *I hope so. I have to think so.*

Mumma put the car keys and a paper bag on the kitchen bench. She was beaming, her smile splitting her face from ear to ear.

*The Doyles have asked me to cook at the hotel—not the counter meals, but the restaurant. They said they need something classy for the tourists.*

Mister raised his eyebrows and put down the newspaper. *Well... Are you going to do it?*

Mumma looked at Lolly. *What do you think?*

Lolly switched on the kettle and said, *I think you should do it if you want to.*

Mumma wrung her hands together and clenched them to her chest. *I think I want to do it.*

Mister leaned back on his chair. *Good on you, love.*

Mumma twirled around in a circle, squealed, switched off the kettle and said, *Don't have tea, sugar pie. Let's open a bottle of bubbles.* She whipped a bottle of champagne from the paper bag.

Lolly had never really been fussed to try alcohol before. She knew the other kids drank and that they enjoyed it, but Lolly was suspicious of losing control of herself. She'd seen the way Sandy leaned up against Jason when she'd been drinking, the way her legs parted in her tight denim jeans and the way she pressed herself against his hip bone. But this was different. It was a celebration. Mumma was giggly and rosy by candlelight and Mister was in good spirits. He raised his champagne and said,

*To new ventures* and they all chinked glasses.

Mumma said, *To my new job, to the bounty Mister's been bringing in and to...* She sat forward. *What do you want to toast, Pumpkin?*

Lolly sipped her champagne and felt it fizz against her tongue. It felt tickly and warm in her mouth and made her break out in a light sweat. She wanted to toast good health, getting better, feeling happy and knowing who she was, but she settled for,

*Good exam results. Good enough to go to university in Adelaide.*

Mumma tapped the rim of her glass gently against her bottom teeth. *Oh... Of course.* The glassy chime rang like a bell. *Of course that's what comes next.* Mister refilled their glasses. Lolly noticed him squeeze Mumma's thigh, just above the knee. He said, *Of course it is.* He held up his glass. *To university.*

\*

Lolly sat on her bed among the neat piles of her things. There were singlets, skivvies, and T-shirts, blouses, trousers, undies and bras. Mumma said, *When we get*



*to Adelaide we can get you something new. Something nice. You can choose. Perhaps a dress or a skirt.*

Lolly was on the verge of tears.

Mumma said, *What's the matter?*

Lolly was terrified. She couldn't imagine being across the sea, all alone in Adelaide, with no private beach, no home, no Mumma. *Nothing.*

Mumma was glad for her simple reply. She felt sick. This was a terrible day. The worst in years. The beginning of the end of the family. *That's the spirit, my little muffin.* Speaking hurt her throat, like every word was too big and nasty and pointy to get out. *It's ever so exciting to be starting your new life, isn't it?*

Lolly thought no, but said, *Yes.*

*Come on now. Get these things in your bag. We've only got a couple of hours 'til the ferry.*

Mumma said she had to go to the toilet. She went out into the scrub, hid behind the big eucalypt and wept. Meanwhile, in her up-turned room, Lolly pulled Miss Lucy off her shelf and bit off three of her fingers.

*Another exciting chapter. The Amazing Lola Belle.*

*The Amazing Lola Belle flew to Adelaide to start her studies in being a grown-up, awfully smart, wonderful, clever artist and lady doctor. She flew over the sea to her new flat, arranged her things in her room, sat on her new (secondhand) sofa, looked out the window at all the busy bees being important and knew that she was now among them. If The Amazing Lola Belle ever felt sad, she knew that she could just fly down to Brighton Beach, tickle the water with her toes and Mumma would see the ripples on the shoals from her kitchen window.*

Mister fed Mumma battered whiting and wiped her tears with his hanky. He said, *Come on Margie. It's all part of the life cycle. The little fish have to learn to swim.*

Mumma nodded, *I know that. I know. But what will I do?*

He squeezed lemon and said, *You have your cooking.*

Mumma wailed louder. *It's not enough.*

Mister tore a strip of fish and worked it between her lips. He watched her chewing and snuffling and thought for a minute. *Perhaps we could get another kitten.*

Mumma shook her head.

*A dog? I haven't had a dog since I was knee-high. A foxie. They're good ratters.*

*No, Mumma sobbed. No, no no. No cats or dogs or pets. It's not enough.* She put her hand on her belly, took a big breath and said, *I miss our Gracie.*

Mister threw his arm around her shoulders and buried his face in her hair. She smelt nice —like salt and lemon and stout and old times.

Mumma had stayed for a week, to help Lolly get settled. On the morning she left, Lolly caught the train to Adelaide and wandered away the day. She looked through shop windows, sipped from a two-litre bottle of mineral water, to keep herself feeling full and chewed sugarless gum because she had to. In the evening, with the door closed on her new flat and her shoes kicked off, Lolly was really alone, for the very first time.

Lolly was completely anonymous amongst her suburban neighbours, unknown to the old man with the blind Labrador, to the young mother with the cheeky son,

unknown amongst the other students, lugging backpacks, riding bikes, in cut-off jeans. Generally, the people around here were transient. They came to study from the country, from interstate and overseas. They stacked themselves on top of each other in apartment blocks to save space and money. They ducked under each other's washing, stepped over each other's empties and breathed the smells of one another's cooking. Lolly lay back on her new green bean bag. She wondered if she would ever get used to the air.

On her first night alone, Lolly arranged a spread on the apartment floor, in front of the television. Mumma had left a box of food, but Lolly couldn't open it. Not yet. Instead, she had walked to the shopping center and spent two hours deciding on something appropriate. At first, she filled her basket with sensible things —milk, margarine, bread, vegemite, Coon cheese, pasta and a jar of tomato and mushroom sauce. Then, she had taken a moment to look about the store at the other customers with their trollies full of unusual, incongruous and intriguing goods and abandoned her basket in the toiletries aisle. There was so much to choose from in this supermarket. The fruit and vegetable section alone was bigger than the whole of Hillwater Foodland. There was a butcher and bakery on site, a continental deli, with cold meats, a million different kinds of olives, huge blocks of cheese, sun-dried tomatoes, marinated mushrooms, eggplant and capsicum, pork pies, dolmades, felafel, filo pastries stuffed with feta and spinach, vegetarian patties. Lolly had never seen such selection, had never heard of many of the things and had certainly never tried them. The gloss of fruit, the sheen on vegetables, the dazzling claims on plastic packaging, the bright lights and fast music made her heart race. The high shelves and endless aisles made her dizzy. A young man in a crisp uniform smiled and asked her if she needed any help. He had a round face and plump arms and his name tag read:

Simon. Lolly swung her shopping basket around her legs and said, *I don't know what to choose.*

He said, *For dinner? Or for a snack?*

*Just for eating.*

His eyes were wide. *I really like the vanilla slices. They have swirls of chocolate and coffee icing on top.* He pointed over her shoulder and revealed a damp armpit. *They're in the bakery section.*

Lolly's smile lingered.

In the end, she settled on mango, macadamia nuts, plain potato chips, a crusty loaf, camembert and cheap champagne. There were American soapies on TV. Lolly broke bread, cracked open the champagne, tipped most of it down the sink and spent the night gnawing on the cork.

Sunken in the beanbag, lulled by traffic and the monotony of late night television, Lolly dreamed up dessert. Her teeth sunk through thick chocolate and coffee swirl icing and pushed through pastry. Custard oozed out the other end. She licked. She was licked. She tasted sweetness and dozed.

It was a calm ride home. Mumma sat in the breeze and watched the water foam and spray against the ferry. She had bought herself an apricot and custard bun but now she didn't feel like eating. She knew Mister would enjoy it in his lunch box tomorrow, so it wouldn't be wasted. Mumma tried to fill her mind with things — menu plans for the Doyle's restaurant, which tasks she could allocate to Sandy, the colour she would suggest they paint the dining room —but her thoughts couldn't help but wander back to Lolly standing alone in the doorway of her room, her eyes wide, her hand raised and waving just like she did when she first learned to say 'Bye bye'.

Mumma had a flash of her old diary —her medical record. She wondered what she used to prescribe for the blues. She had an idea it was mulberry wine —that or butterscotch icecream.

*Dear Mumma,*

*I am liking Visual Arts and Archaeology the best out of all my subjects. We are starting at the beginning —or what is supposed as the beginning —a good place to start. We are looking at rock and cave paintings at the moment. I am liking it, but it will be great to get to Leonardo. I will do my first essay on his work.*

*The other students all seem to know each other. I don't know how. Maybe because they are all from Adelaide. They all seem much older too —some would be older than you and Mister put together. They are not very friendly to me, but I don't mind. I'd rather just go home and read or catch the bus to the beach than stay on campus and smoke cigarettes.*

*I have two friends here at the flats anyway. Their names are Chandra and Vijay and they are twins from India. They are in their first year of Medicine, but they did Science degrees to get in —not Arts like me. I am really liking their company. Chandra makes delicious dosia —they are fermented rice pancakes and she makes them with a potato curry, coconut chutney and sometimes with a kind of tomato and coriander omlet. I never used to like coriander—I used to think it smelt like stink bugs —but now I do. Vijay makes me laugh. Sometimes he thinks my ways are very unusual for a girl, but I just say, 'That's the way I am'.*

*I will see you in semester break.*

*Love from Lola.*

There was a knock at the door. *Come in*, said Lolly. *It's open.*

Vijay was sweating. *Will you come to eat with me? Chandra is at the library and there is a great pile of food ready for the eating.*

Lolly marked her page with a scrap of paper. *Okay*, she said. *I wasn't really being very productive, anyway. The words were going in one ear and out the other.*

Vijay and Chandra's rooms always smelt good —spicy and sweet and smoky. There was washing drying outside on the balcony railing. Lolly could see three pairs of Vijay's undies. They were all red. She was glad that they were there soaking up the sun —that he hadn't fussed and whipped them off and away before asking her over. It struck her that she had never been here without Chandra and she felt suddenly awkward as if she were on display. Vijay looked at her and she collapsed on a chair, crossed her legs and folded her arms.

*We have Parupu Urundai Kuzhambu (you might call them as lentil dumplings), Sagalay (or stuffed egg plant), Thengai Thair Pachadi (a coconut curd salad), Thakkali Sadam (tomato rice) and of course some naan.*

Lolly shook her head. *We'll need Chandra's help to get through all that. Did she cook all morning and then leave without eating herself?*

Vijay grinned and a bead of sweat escaped from his eyebrow and ran down the side of his head. *I must admit to forfeiting study last night and cooking myself.*

Lolly let her mouth drop open. *You cooked all this? On your own?*

*I know*, Vijay mopped his brow with a tea towel. *It is not characteristic, but Chandra has been encouraging my endeavours. Of course we may not get our internships in the same regions.*

*Your internships! But they're years away.*

*I need years of practice, Vijay laughed. Chandra has twenty years experience ahead of me.*

*But I thought you would go back to Mysore for your internship.*

*That may not be possible. We feel our plans have been boxing us in. We will see what life brings.*

*Yes, Lolly nodded. You can't always know what will happen.*

They ate outside on a rickety card table amongst the flapping of the clean washing. Lolly could smell the hot stink of pollution, but every now and then she would also get a whiff of the sea. *You should come, she said. To the beach with me. It's a suburban beach —not like where I come from —but it's a beach nonetheless. It's nice to go walking there... Sometimes you see strange things.*

*Yes?* Vijay put down his fork, shaped the last of his rice and ate with his fingers.

*Oh yes —very strange.* Lolly thought he was very efficient and neat and that he had quite beautiful hands. *Men... You know...* She felt suddenly embarrassed. *Playing with it. There's this one man who's often there. He calls out to me to look.*

Vijay's head wobbled. *You should be careful of that man.*

*I am. I'm careful of all men.*

He stood up. *Are you careful of me?*

*You're different.*

He took her plate. *Will you have a glass of beer?*

*But it's Wednesday —in the middle of the day!*

He shrugged.

*Okay, said Lolly. Some bubbles might be good.*

*Guess what Mrs Armstrong!* Sandy had burst into the kitchen, tucking her hair into her hairnet, her eyes bulging.

Mumma was kneading pastry dough. *I'm no good at guessing. Just tell me your news.*

*Jason asked me to marry him last night.*

*Good grief.* Mumma thumped the dough. *What did you say?*

Sandy wiggled her fingers at her and Mumma gasped. The ring was a pretty gold band with a row of tiny rubies and pearls and there was a stone missing.

*It was his grandma's. It's sentimental. His mum said she'd get the ruby replaced first, but I couldn't wait to wear it.*

Mumma didn't know what to say. Sandy was only Lolly's age and there was simply no way she could imagine having such a conversation with her daughter. No way. So, she said. *What do all your parents think?*

*Jase's parents are utterly stoked —especially his mum. She said she's always wanted a daughter.* Sandy fiddled with her ring, admiring it with her head cocked. *My mum's okay —I think. She cried a bit, but I think that was 'cause she was so happy. Maybe it made her think of Dad or something. Who knows. She hasn't said much, really. She made me promise I wouldn't give up my work here with you. She's really big on women's lib and all...*

Mumma listened to Sandy plans, watched as she skipped about the kitchen, effervescent with a bag of onions in one hand, a knife in the other. Today Sandy was making her feel old and tired and sad.

*We'll probably have a holiday somewhere —maybe Queensland, somewhere nice and tropical —and then we'll probably live here for a while until we can afford a house on the mainland. I'd just love to live in Sydney.*



Mumma clapped a floured hand to her forehead. *What on earth would Jason do in Sydney? There's no farms in a big city.*

Sandy looked thoughtful and examined her ring again. *I don't know. We'll work it out.*

Yes. Mumma looked down at her scruffy shoes. *I suppose you'll have to.*

Vijay had filled Lolly's plate again. *Oh no*, she said. *I can't eat any more.*

Vijay smiled. They had had this conversation before. *But you emptied your plate. That's a sign of someone whose appetite is not exhausted.*

*No, no, no*, Lolly shook her head. *That's a sign of someone who savoured every mouthful and a sign of someone who hates waste. There's no point in leaving a mouthful on the plate for you to scrape off into the bin when you're to go about the dishes.*

Vijay put the plate on the table and slid it in close until it pushed against her. *Eat. I love to see you eat.*

Lolly looked down at the plate and was surprised to feel tears stinging her eyes. She admired the little aubergine —so exquisite and glossy and plump, so tasty —so innocent —scooped and stuffed with care, with patience, with love. She felt the tightness of her stomach and she felt the weight of Vijay's expectation and she wondered if one more mouthful would hurt, if one more superfluous mouthful would be digested and processed and relegated to the pouch of flesh that hung over the waist of her pants. She wondered if she would store a memory of this meal —physically —in her private place, right alongside Mumma's roast potatoes.

Vijay reached across the table, took her cutlery in hand and prepared her a forkful. *Eat*, he said. *For me.*

Lolly accepted and as she chewed she let him see her face.

*Why are you crying?*

She took the fork from him. *Thankyou, but I can feed myself.*

He nodded and she pushed herself away from the table. *I will have my beer now.*

Vijay said, *You are a very beautiful person.*

Mister left the shell on the kitchen table. It was a good find and he thought Margie would appreciate it. He wrote a note on a scrap of paper. It said:

*For my Missus Margie. I hope the morning will find you in good spirits. (I heard you sad in the kitchen last night.) I will catch us a feed for tonight so don't bother yourself with sausages. Mr.*

Sometimes, when he was out at sea, he would think of her going about her business, chopping carrots or sifting flour or whatever it was she did in the Doyle's big kitchen, thinking her own private thoughts and feeling her own private feelings and he would watch the roll of the sea and the sun and shadows on the water and feel lonely.

Lolly couldn't concentrate on the lecture. The lights were down and the slides were interesting, but the lecturer's voice was too soft and soothing and the projector gave off a comforting smell —like warm dust and metal—and she couldn't resist putting her head down on her desk and closing her eyes. She had been thinking of Vijay often, of his clean fingers and his delicate wrists, of his wet eyes, his long lashes and curls of glossy black hair. She let herself have more private thoughts when she was alone at home in bed. She would dream up the feeling of his skin, soft on his

belly, tight over his ribcage and up his neck. Lolly smiled to herself and felt warmed. The lights came on and she sat up with a start.

*I'm available from two, the lecturer was saying, If anyone has any problems.*

Lolly copied the other students, organizing her notes and packing up her bag. She didn't know what time it was or where she was meant to be next. She felt all in a scramble. She slung her bag over her shoulder and made her way up the stairs. The fluttery butterflies in her stomach made her feel queasy.

There was a woman standing with Chandra. She was the tallest, biggest woman Lolly had ever seen. She wore a purple silk dress that shimmered as she moved.

*Lola, Chandra said. This is my friend Jessie.*

Jessie had a soft, round face and warm fingers when she shook Lolly's hand. *Chandra asked me to join you for lunch, she said. I hope that's all right with you.*

Lolly nodded and followed them onto the grass.

*You put me to shame, Chandra, said Jessie, her hand sweeping over the spread of food in plastic containers. I just brought a couple of muffins —and I certainly didn't make them. Do you cook, Lola?*

Lolly wasn't sure how to answer. *Sometimes... Sort of... Not really. My mum's a cook. I've never really tried because it's her thing. I just prepare food to eat, I guess.*

Jessie nodded and Chandra passed them squares of toweling paper. *Please eat, she said. Before the flies get to it.*

Lolly watched the dappled light dancing on her legs and listened to Chandra and Jessie discussing their assignments. Medicine was going to be a lot of hard work and it sounded as though there were some very difficult lecturers.

*He's an utter arsehole,* Jessie said, examining the insides of a samosa. *You've seen the way he directs his comments at me and that other big girl who always sits up the back. I reckon that's the problem with a lot of the course —their definition of health can be dangerously close to social control.*

*And culturally specific,* Chandra nodded.

Lolly frowned to herself and nibbled on a slice of cucumber. She thought of Dr Bartrum with his leatherbound books and his language and said *But surely medicine is a science.*

Chandra raised her eyebrows. *Yes. A science.*

*But even science doesn't exist in a vacuum. Medicine is excellent when it comes to treating disease, but today we're pathologising a lot of human experience. I reckon it's a big problem. But it's the same with everything. It comes down to money. The health market.* Jessie took a sip of a generic brand cola and offered it to Lola.

*No thanks,* said Lolly. *There's too much sugar.*

Jessie laughed and emptied the can.

Later, when they were walking home, Lolly didn't feel much like talking. Chandra asked her if she was all right and Lolly kicked a stone.

*Don't be troubled by Jessie. She has many opinions and much energy and some people find her exhausting.*

Lolly shook her head. *She must have thought I was stupid. I don't have any opinions on anything.*

*I'm sure you do.* Chandra patted her shoulder, ever so gently. *Sometimes it takes time to grow into yourself and your beliefs. I'm sure they are all there inside you.*

Lolly wondered about this. She felt like a fraud, like she should stop Chandra in her tracks and shake her by the shoulders, yelling: *Don't you see I am just filled with*

*shit and sick and muck and bad? I'm not like you. I'm not pure and clean and good and clever.*

Chandra patted her again and spoke softly. *Jessie is a lot older than you and she has lived all around the world and had all kinds of experiences.*

Lolly kicked another stone and felt a shot of pain through her toe. She had only lived on the island, in the scrub, by the lonely sea and the only experience she had was her horrible time in hospital and she certainly wasn't going to tell Chandra about being crazy.

*I don't like to see you troubled,* said Chandra. *Perhaps you'd like to come to our room this afternoon. We could drink beer and watch rubbish on television? I could make idli?*

Lolly didn't think she should eat tonight. She thought maybe she would run to the beach, run away the rest of the day. *I should work on my essay.*

*It's a shame.* Chandra smiled behind her hand. *Vijay would like to see you.*

Lolly felt the blood rush to her face.

Mister handed Mumma the letter. *Another one from Lola. That girl must get a sore wrist with all that writing.*

*She's a good girl,* said Mumma. *She likes to keep me up to date.*

Mister fished for a pickled onion with his fingers and Mumma passed him a fork. *What's she up to, then?* He said.

Mumma read the first paragraph. Lolly had been missing home and feeling sad and confused and had been wondering about Robin Foster. *She's doing well,* Mumma said with a smile. *And she got an excellent mark on her first paper.*

Next to her Mister smelt of cloves and vinegar. *That must make you pleased.*

*Oh yes, said Mumma. Very pleased.*

Mister popped another onion into his mouth and went outside and Mumma slumped against the kitchen bench and read on.

*I don't want you to worry, though, Mumma. After all, if we didn't have bad times then the good times wouldn't be so good. I imagine it should take a while to settle in to a new life and I am very lucky to have Chandra and Vijay to be my friends. Very lucky. Perhaps you would like to meet them?*

*Tell Mister happy fishing and see you soon.*

*Lola Belle.*

Mumma parked the car in the spot reserved for Lolly and looked up at the flat. She could see the curtain moving and felt glad that her Lola was looking out for her. The drive through the city did make her anxious and as much as she loved to see her daughter she was not at home among the hustle-bustle. She quickly painted lipstick as Lolly tumbled down the stairs.

*Mumma!*

Mumma got out of the car and kissed Lolly on the cheek.

*You're wearing lipstick!*

*Yes, Mumma covered her mouth like a girl. I like to wear it sometimes. It gives me a lift. Lolly blinked at her for a moment or two and Mumma felt embarrassed. Why don't you help me with these boxes? I did a little baking for you and your friends.*

It was hard for Lolly not to laugh. Vijay was wearing a horrible pair of slacks with his shirt tucked in and he had parted and slicked his hair down with grease. *There was no need to dress up. Mumma is just like me.*

Vijay smoothed his hair nervously and Chandra giggled and Lolly led them into her room. *Mumma, this is Vijay and Chandra who I have told you so much about.*

Yes, said Mumma and she shook their hands. *Lolly is forever on about you two. I am so pleased she has such good friends.*

Vijay was standing up straight with his fists clenched. *And we are thankful for her company.*

*Let's have a drink,* said Mumma, presenting two bottle of homebrew. *Otherwise we'll stand around all evening like we've got steel rods up our bums.*

Mumma slipped into Lolly's kitchen to heat up the quiches. She listened to the young people chatter and she felt glad to be among them. She liked Vijay and Chandra. They were respectful and polite and kind and childlike and a bit odd and mysterious and she liked that in people. She wondered what they thought of her. They were certainly were nice to her, but she knew people often hide how things really are and it made things confusing and complicated.

*Can I help you with anything, Mrs Armstrong?* Chandra had a smile full of crooked teeth.

*You can call me Margaret. That helps me not to feel too old.*

Chandra laughed and looked at the floor. She said, *You did not have to cook for us. I told Lola that it would be my pleasure to cook for you.*

Mumma wondered if she had offended her. *It's no trouble. I always cook —for every occasion. It's what I do. Anyway, there's nothing stopping us having a taste of everything. It will be a feast and if there are leftovers you can pop them into your*

*freezer for a rainy day. Chandra nodded and Mumma said, You have quite stunning hair. Look at the sheen on it.*

*I comb vegetable oil through it.*

*Oh?*

*Yes. The Adelaide weather is very drying. It makes my skin peel too.*

*Do you miss your home?*

*Yes.*

*Your mother?*

*Oh yes.*

*I should miss Lolly terribly if she were in another country. I should go crazy with worry.*

*My mother sends me recipes and it is how I remember my family and my country.*

*Mumma smiled and nodded and topped up her glass.*

*Your cooking smells good Mrs Armstrong.*

*Margaret.*

*Lolly was right. Mumma had never tasted food like this before. She knew she was boisterous with homebrew but she couldn't help but exclaim over the tastes and textures. She said, Chandra. I don't use a lot of spice, but this is simply exquisite. And, Chandra, I'm not usually a fan of chilli, but you take the burn out and leave the warmth. She asked question after question until Chandra's temples were wet with sweat and Lolly had to ask her to stop. I must organize a diary to write these things down, she said. This is just so exciting! It's like discovering cooking all over again. It puts my plain old quiches to shame.*



*Oh no, Mrs Armstrong, said Vijay seriously. Your quiches are very subtle — very delicate.*

*That's the sort of thing you should say to your prospective mother-in-law,* Mumma hooted and everyone fell silent.

Later, after Vijay and Chandra had retired to their rooms, Mumma stumbled into the kitchen to help Lolly with the dishes. *It was a very fun night, said Mumma. I like your friends very much.*

Lolly kept her face to the dishwater.

*Are you tired out, pumpkin?*

Lolly shrugged her shoulders and Mumma picked up a tea towel.

*Will Vijay go back to India?*

Lolly made herself busy scouring a pan.

*Lolly? Will Vijay be going back to India?*

Lolly sighed. *Eventually. They might stay here a bit longer —work in the country a bit. But their services would be most needed back there, I guess... Chandra has asked me to go and stay with them.*

*In India?*

*Yes. In India.*

*But surely... Is it... safe?*

*Bad things can happen anywhere.*

*I should go with you.*

*No Mumma. You have your restaurant.*

*Maybe I could take some cooking lessons.*

*Mumma. I might want to go on my own.*

Mumma took a breath and blurted, *I don't want him to give you a baby and then leave you here or I don't want you to go over there and have babies and not come home and be lost to me forever.*

Lolly made a gasping sound and then laughed. *I don't do it with him, Mumma.*

*But you might.* She looked at her lap. *I had you by the time I was your age... and I never saw your... I never saw Robin Foster again.*

Lolly swallowed. *Was I such a terrible mistake?*

*Of course not.* Mumma lifted her head and glanced out the window. *But it was awfully hard on my own.*

*Oh.* Lolly chewed on her lip and watched the clock change. *I never really knew that.*

These days Lolly had trouble sleeping. She would lie in bed for hours, thinking strange, coloured thoughts, listening to the odd truck on the road and the clicks and groans of the flat settling in the night. She thought of her old bed back home, of Miss Lucy and her midnight escapes through her bedroom window. She thought of the creatures in the dark and the pin-pricked sky and the sand between her toes and the moonlight on the water. She imagined slipping out of her pyjamas and into the black sea and swimming out into the nothing and the water was warm and she was buoyant and happy and felt sexy in her milky skin with the seaweed spiraling her legs and the fishes bunting in her private place. It was the best imagining —next to the ones about Vijay —because she was strong and confident but weightless in the water and there were no troubles in the dark —no one talking at her, no one watching her, no rules, no right, no wrong.

Sometimes in the hours before dawn, Lolly would get up out of bed and examine herself in the mirror. She would twist and turn for a different view, another angle and then she would take out her charcoal and sketch something and write a paragraph or two about what she had seen.

*I just remembered Mumma's bread dough, rising under a tea towel in the linen cupboard. I remember her plaiting the dough. She had a striped apron and her fingers were crusted, caked with her efforts. She gave me a little bit to play with. It didn't taste good raw, but I remember how good it felt in my hands.*

Lolly dreamed up meetings with Robin Foster, what she would buy for morning tea and the conversations they would have about their lives. She would talk about her studies and the island and maybe she would mention her drawings. She also pictured herself as a doctor pacing a hospital corridor in her white coat and her identification card. She wondered how she would stand. Feet together? Legs apart? Arms crossed? Hands on her hips? Under her coat, she wondered if she was slim and dressed in a tailored suit, or whether she could hide herself in loose shirts and baggy pants. She would go on wondering until the sky tinted with morning, the traffic increased and the magpies started their warbling.

Lolly got a letter from Dr Bartrum. He had made an appointment for her, to check her progress. He said he was disappointed she had cancelled the last two times and assured her this follow-up was important. The letter made Lolly feel sick. She folded it up and pushed it under the fruit bowl, disturbing three flies on a rotten banana. To take her mind off Dr Bartrum, Lolly found Vijay and said, *Come on. Let's catch a bus to the beach.*

They ate fish and chips with salt and vinegar and had chocolate icecream in waffle cones. They took their shoes off and walked through the shallows and Lolly pointed out the white flashes of tiny fish. There was a pang of pain and Lolly dug her fingers into her stomach and exhaled.

*What's wrong?* Vijay stopped walking and stood in front of her.

*It's just a stomach ache.*

*Indigestion?*

*Maybe. Maybe wind.*

*Do you get this pain all the time after eating?*

Lolly kicked water at him. *Yes Doctor.*

*Lola, he shook his head. I'm serious. Perhaps you should have some tests.*

She pushed past him and kept walking. *It's nothing to worry about. I've had it since...* She clamped her mouth shut and looked down at the sand.

He touched at her arm. *Since when?*

The sand was itching and the salt was sticky on her skin but Lolly could wait for a shower. She pulled out her notebook and began to write.

*I told Vijay! I can't believe I told Vijay. But I spilled a clue and then he asked and then I started talking and once I started talking I couldn't stop and I told him everything... Well everything as it came to me... A version of the story... And it was difficult and strange to be telling him when there are so many people starving and struggling in his country, but he listened carefully with his bushy brows gathered and I could just tell that he cared and that he was interested in what I was saying and it was such a beautiful evening and there were gulls and a cool breeze and it was nearly like being home and at the end of it all he said he would think about what I had told*

*him and talk with Chandra—if it was all right with me and it is —and he would have a proper response, because I had taken him by surprise and all and he couldn't find the right words just at that moment. What he did say, though, was 'Thank you Lola Belle for telling me a private story' and then he kissed me on my cheek and said 'We better get the bus home now'.*

Lolly put down her pen and shook the blood into her tingling hand. She shook her head, licked her skin for a taste of salt and laughed to herself.

Vijay put the pile of books on Lolly's kitchen table. *These are two-week loan. These two are just seven days.*

*What are they?* Lolly moved closer. He smelled plain this morning —like vegetable soap.

*Texts —on Eating Disorders. I borrowed them from the Medical library.*

Lolly stepped back. *Oh.*

*I thought you might find something of interest in them.*

She found a splinter in her finger that hurt when she pressed at it. *Maybe.*

*If nothing else, they will help you understand your diagnosis.*

Lolly knew Vijay was trying to help, but she was starting to wonder if she ever should have told him about her troubles. *I'm not sick anymore. I'm cured.*

Vijay looked awkward. He ran a hand through his hair and then stared at his palm. He said, *I will hope to see you later* and left so quickly he didn't close the door.

Lolly made a pyramid of sultanas on the kitchen table and ate them one by one as she leafed through the books. *Eating Disorders are characterized by severe disturbances in eating behaviour...* Her stomach fluttered. *Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by a refusal to maintain a minimally normal body weight...* Lolly

looked down on her thighs straining against the seams of her jeans and felt stupid. She ripped open the packet of sultanas and pushed a handful into her mouth. *Bulimia Nervosa is characterized by repeated episodes of binge eating followed by inappropriate compensatory behaviours such as self-induced vomiting; misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or other medications; fasting; or excessive exercise. A disturbance in perception of body shape and weight is an essential feature of both Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa. An Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified category is also provided for coding disorders that do not meet criteria for a specific Eating Disorder.* Lolly kicked her legs under the table and flipped pages, past *Associated descriptive features and mental disorders*, past *Laboratory findings*, past *Diagnostic features*. She slammed the book shut, dropped it to the floor and sent sultanas flying.

Lolly avoided Vijay for the next few days. If she heard his voice or saw him coming she ducked round corners or pulled back into her room. Once he knocked on her door and she slid under her bed and blocked her ears. He didn't persevere for long. She guessed he knew she didn't want to speak to him.

She had sifted through the rest of the books until her mind was so full she felt dizzy. Phrases from the psychology texts would play over and over in her mind and she didn't really know what they meant or what to do with them. *Phallic narcissism. Primary repression. Projection. Autoerotism. Repression.* It was like learning French in year eight and nine —being so full of words that didn't make sense. She wondered if there was something missing in her understanding, if one day she would work out the key, or learn the language or discover the method to know what it all meant. Her head felt tight and her eyes ached and she didn't know if she was hungry or nauseous.

\*

Mumma squatted in her daughter's bedroom. The air smelt mildewed and Miss Lucy was laden with dust on the empty shelves. Lolly had been gone for almost a year. Mumma had been missing her particularly badly on this day and she had come into the room for comfort. Amongst the boxed things Lolly had brought home last time Mumma found a notebook. It was Lolly's last diary and it was full. Mumma guessed she was on to filling another book with her clever thoughts now. She traced the smooth edges of cardboard and noticed the suggestion of age on her skin. She would be thirty-nine, soon. There was a hint of rabbit blood around her fingernails, a whiff of bacon, a bite of onion. In the kitchen, potatoes rumbled in boiling water and the afternoon air was heavy with steam and starch. Mumma was aware of her pulse in her chest, the gurgle in her guts. She weighed the diary in her palms. It would be at least an hour until tea time. The emptiness was hard to bear. She swallowed, opened Lolly's notebook around half way and read.

*Grandiose self and idealised parent images.*

Mumma's brow collected in a frown, a crease of skin dividing her forehead in half.

*Subject has failed to develop autonomy from parents—particularly from Mumma.*

In the kitchen, water hissed against the electric element. Mumma sunk on her haunches and slowly turned the page.

*Phallic narcissism.*

*Reality. Primary repression. Projection. Autoerotism. Repression.*

*I used to suck the raw mince out of sausages.*

*Gramma's bought Mumma those sensible white plates, just the right size for a round cake.*

*Problem: Disruption of self-cohesion. Persistent illusions. Intra psychic conflict. Frustration.*

*I watch the women at uni and I don't know what they laugh about over coffee and cake.*

*I remember fruit stains, deep in the creases of Mumma's skin.*

Fruit stains. Mumma remembered the joke with the mulberry juice. She was amongst the canopy, her head in the clouds, with a bucket looped at her elbow. Silvereyes flitted and tittered and purple rained splat, splat on her daughter's head. It was spectacular to see the juice seep across the scalp, staining the white part in her hair. Mumma grinned, secured her footing in the fork of two branches and performed. *Oh Lolly! Help! Help! I've cut my hand.* She winced and cried out, a stained hand flapping. Lolly had found her feet so fast the colour drained from her face. Sun light sparked through the leaves and Mumma saw the child's love, dependence and fear collide. She laughed too loud, hoping to dissipate the difficult moment and licked the stains from her sticky palms. The sour juice turned her mouth black. She swallowed awkwardly, averted her eyes and said, *Just jokes, peanut brittle! Just jokes.*

That batch of mulberry jam had not set and they had given it away in glass bottles as syrup.



*Subject remembers when Mister left for Queensland. Mumma made rice pudding with raisins and Ginger licked the bowls clean. Subject had a stomach ache and Mumma insisted rice pudding was a comfort.*

Mumma put a hand to her mouth and sucked air through her fingers. Onion always made the eyes smart.

*I am the daughter of Mumma.*

*But who is your father?*

*I was born long before fathers were around. Mumma made me up in the old china mixing bowl, loved me with potato and egg yolk, bathed me in milk.*

*Robin Foster gave me half of my genes. Probably my ability with a paint brush came from him. Possibly my instability. I know him intimately, yet we have never met. He is just a man among many.*

*Then there is Mister. He buried Ginger in the vegetable patch when Mumma and I were too sad to manage a shovel.*

Lolly's handwriting distorted through tears. A thin slug of mucus slid from Mumma's nostril, traversed the curves of her lips and hung from her chin.

*A recipe: Lolly.*

Mumma dabbed her eyes and thought it a nice idea —a recipe of oneself. It seemed Lolly was made up of things she had learned, things—Mumma guessed—from her time in hospital, from consultations with specialists, from conversations with friends and no doubt from her studies. Mumma once told her little Lolly lick stick that she was made of sunshine and cheese, but now she was beginning to learn that the ingredients were infinitely more complicated and their combination highly complex. A pinch of this, a dash of that... Two scoops... five cups... a teaspoon... an ounce... a gram... a kilo... Sift for impurities. Beat. Whisk. Fold... It could so easily go wrong. Mumma wiped her face on the hem of her skirt. She could feel hot blood mottling her cheeks.

Trauma. Regulation. Un-pleasure. Self definition.

*It is an ugly thing to admit, but I feel a beautiful buzz, a hum of my whole self, mind and body united, when chucking up, when cutting and bleeding.*

Subject seeks physical sensations as means of bolstering depleted, discordant, devitalised self.

*Intervention?*

*Mumma's sponge cake. A family story served with sliced banana and whipped cream, dusted in icing sugar.*

It was a long time since Mumma had made a simple sponge. She was so busy with work at the hotel, with keeping abreast of trends, with dazzling and impressing

her customers that she had neglected some of her old favourites. Golden sponge. So light on the tongue. She tipped the notebook on its side to read the scrawl in the margin. It was a note about the taste of butterflies.

*As fragile as air. Magic dust on the tongue. I imagine it as the taste of flight.  
DO NOT eat the body. It is full of shit.*

Old blood was trapped in Mumma's legs. She had been reading for some time and had left the folds of her skin. The bubbling of the potatoes on the stove had become distant, the smell of rabbit stewing less preoccupying than usual. She rearranged her body and blinked for some moments at the view through Lolly's bedroom window. A spoonbill flew against the wind and shat through thin air. Clouds scudded low on the horizon. Lolly would be home for the summer and for her nineteenth birthday. Mumma nodded. She had plenty of time to get organized, enough time to go over to Adelaide if Hillwater Foodland didn't have the right ingredients.

*Tuesday: I went to see Dr Bartrum —a catch-up, he called it. I didn't want to go —but I did. I was a bit interested to hear what he had to say and I knew Chandra would have dosai waiting for me. 'Come home to food,' she said. 'Come home to food and friends.'*

*Dr Bartrum said I am still anorexic—apparently I have an anorexic mindset. Based on standards set by the American Psychiatric Association, to be diagnosed anorexic individuals must be at least fifteen percent less than their minimal normal weight. He seems to pick and choose when I fit the criteria and when I don't.*

*What weight do I have? Mumma threw out the pink Ladyform scales. The kitchen scales won't even fit my forearm. Am I one bag of wheat or two? Am I two thirds Mumma, one sixth Robin Foster, one sixth Mister? Gramma? Am I as heavy as water in the sea? Am I as heavy as mud on land? What is fifteen percent less than the weight of mud?*

*Mumma and I used to play a game with watermelon seeds. We'd give each seed a boy's name and stick them to our forehead. As they dried, the seeds would fall off. The last remaining was the name of the boy we were to marry. I got Mister three times in a row. Mumma pursed her lips giggled that it was a silly game and we should go and get on with things. There were parsnips to be peeled, after all.*

*'Run on the sand for me Lolly legs. Collect me a shell. Tell me a story.'* Mumma bought a nice straw hat when Mister left. It was just us for a while, but Mumma was always flushed pink when he came home.

The day was fading. Mumma managed half a smile and wondered where that loud orange hat had got to. It had a habit of blowing off in the sea breeze. Last summer she wore a cap that came free with the chicken feed. It said *Golden Layers* in yellow embroidery.

*Last month a girl died in hospital. She was wrongly diagnosed. She had bulimia but no one knew. Her stomach had ruptured.*

*Bulimia is characterised by recurrent episodes of binge eating followed by attempt to purge the excess eating by means of vomiting and laxatives and cleansing fasts, salt water gargles, ice cubes, and bleeding.*

*Weight is normal. Hidden disorder.*

*Mumma found out and the blackness nearly undid her.*

*Yes, Mumma nodded. I was nearly undone. I thought I made my daughter up wrong. She pressed the notebook against her mouth. But Lola Belle is setting me straight on that. Lola Belle says it is all much, much more complicated than that. Mumma wet her lips and read on.*

*Patients lack a sense of identity and self esteem. Depression is a common link. A chemical disorder that underlies some cases of depression may be the basis of some cases of bulimia, for example the deficiency of the neurotransmitter serotonin could be behind both bulimia and depression.*

*Was the deficiency of serotonin already written in the bloodline of Mr Robin Foster, stranger and father?*

*Dr Bartrum said I show some bulimic symptoms and that I also fit the criteria for 'Eating Disorder Unspecified'.*

*I didn't say a thing about that. I looked at the floor and hoped he knew what I was thinking. Later, I imagined seeing him in his pastel rooms and I imagined myself in some kind of outrageous outfit —maybe beat up jeans and a workman's shirt with the sleeves ripped off—my hair cut short like a boy, a tattoo on my arm and I imagined talking with Jessie's confidence and jostling with his knowledge. Chandra says something about us being born into adulthood out of crisis —or that there is self-realization through friction... something like that. It was the best thing she ever said to me and it happened over her Potato Bonda —the best fried potato snacks I have ever eaten.*

*I bought a bottle of sparkling red wine after my consultation and I shared it with Vijay and Chandra. They said in the summer break next year I should go home to Mysore with them, where women are loved for their curves. Their sister is getting married and they say I would be most impressed by the spectacle and by the food.*

*I will need money... I will go into the supermarket and ask for work.*

*I think I was allergic to something in the sparkling red, because it made my face burn. Perhaps a preservative, Vijay said. We are better friends again, now. I gave his pile of books back and told him they had an unexpected effect. I said anorexia and bulimia are just words Vijay. I said what those words stand for mean lots of different things to lots of different people. I am sure of that now.*

*I always remember Mrs Williams saying it would be good to have a bit of anorexia, stop the cravings for kitchener buns. She said Mr Williams gave her an exercise bike. She said her slacks got caught in the chain. 'Now', I remember her saying , 'The bike is just a clothes horse'. She said she dries Mr Williams' smalls on the handle bars.*

Mumma laughed out loud and took a lung full of the rich smell of rabbit casserole. She wondered if Lolly bit the stub of her pen and giggled to herself when she wrote that. She wondered if her daughter anticipated someone reading her private thoughts in this notebook with the cardboard cover and she flipped back to the beginning. There was a title page written in black ink: *Some thoughts to Mumma, By Lola Belle*. Mumma sat up with a start and her spine clicked. It was addressed to her... to *her*. Mumma hugged the book to her chest and squinted into the dying light. She rearranged her legs and went back to the last pages, where she had left off.

*Dr Bartrum says bulimics use food to fulfil feelings of longing and emptiness.*

*Potato Gratin.*

*Le Gratin Dauphinois.*

*Mumma's spud-love pie.*

*Peel and slice potatoes. Place in bowl of water, drain and pat dry. Crush and peel garlic. Rub garlic over the inside of the serving dish. Let the flavour bleed. Grease the dish. Place a layer of potatoes in the dish, overlapping as you go. Tuck them in under one another. Keep them close. Peel shallots and slice thinly, sprinkling with thyme, sage and nutmeg over the taters. Season with salt and pepper. Heat cream until almost boiling. Plop dobs of butter over the potatoes. Pour the cream. Bake at 180 C for one hour or until cooked and golden.*

*Serve with cold milk in the Bunnykins mug.*

Mumma stood up slowly. The cold floor had locked her joints and seized her muscles. She tucked Lolly's notebook in the elastic waist of her skirt and ambled down the corridor into the kitchen. The rabbit was nearly done, the flesh tender and coming away from the skeleton. The potatoes had almost boiled dry, had split their skins and lost their shape. *No mind*, Mumma thought, tipping the last of the soupy water away. *They'll be all right mashed.* She added a good scoop of butter, a slop of milk, salt, pepper, a spring onion and set to work with a fork. She paused to knock the top off a home brewed stout, tilted a glass, poured the thick liquid and sucked at the creamy foam. It was a rich, sweet stout reminiscent of past summers. Mumma gulped and nodded to herself. She took Lolly's notebook from the waist of her skirt, reached up overhead and slipped it between *Vegetarian Cookery* and *Old Favourite Recipes* on her cookbook shelf in the kitchen.

Lolly leaned over the railing into the breeze. The air in the strait was cool and fresh and free from the heavy pollution she had got used to in Adelaide. The ferry broke through a wave and sent a shower of water into her face. Lolly laughed like a girl and licked salt from her lips. There was an old couple next to her in matching spray jackets. The woman was busy brushing water from her husband and he was protesting.

*Leave it, Mother. It's all right.* He looked over at Lolly and rolled his eyes theatrically. *This your first time over?*

*No.* Lolly said. *I'm going home for a visit.*

*Oh. You're an islander. Hear that, Bev. She's an islander.*



Bev nodded and said, *Well you're very lucky to have such a special place in your blood. We try to come over every summer. We're from Victoria.*

*Oh?* Lolly pulled a stray hair from her mouth. *My Dad lives in Victoria. His name's Robin. Robin Foster.*

Bev glanced at her husband and they shook their heads. *Australia's a big country.*

Lolly put a hand on her hip and looked out over the sea to the shores of Hillwater. *I'm going to go and visit him next year.*

Bev wiped something from her husband's cheek. *That'll be nice, dear. It's always nice to catch up with family.*

*Yes. And then this time next year I might go to India.*

*India? Well, well. How exotic.*

Lolly strained to see Mumma and Mister waiting on the beach. *There they are.* Lolly waved. *That's my family.*

Ernest hobbled into the kitchen smelling of disinfectant and looking grey. He shook Nada's hand and hugged Lolly with all his might. He was creased, cranky and confused —*Nothing a bloody drink won't fix, though.* Lolly poured him a sherry, called him an old bugger and he laughed and sucked on his dentures. He could see the girl's bra through her dress, the cut of soft flesh at her shoulder blade.

*You're looking good,* he said to her. *Is student life agreeing with you?*

Lolly shrugged. *I guess so.*

Lolly lifted a shopping bag onto the kitchen bench. *Just a few little somethings.*

Mumma raised her eyebrows and had a look. *Oh, goodness. Look at all of this. It must have cost you a fortune.*

Lolly shook her head. *I get staff discount, so it's not too bad.*

*Almond bread. Pistachio nuts. Pretzels. Dates. Japanese rice crackers. Chocolate covered coffee beans. Cashews. Corn chips. Muscatels. Mango chutney. Papadams.* She held up a plastic tub. *What are these?*

*Dolmades. Rice and pine nuts wrapped in vine leaves.*

Mumma drew breath through her teeth. *Chocolate wafers. Fruit jubes. Oh, goodness—anchovy stuffed olives!*

*The beef jerky's for Mister. So's the licorice.*

Before dinner, they drank champagne on the front verandah and ate watermelon. Lolly ate a scoop with a big metal spoon and it cut the corners of her mouth. She screwed her eyes shut with the stinging, bled into the fruit pulp and everyone fussed. Nada clucked, *Oh dear.*

Ernest shook his head.

Mister mumbled, *I really should sand that spoon back.*

Mumma said, *You have healthy looking blood* and dabbed her delicate finger. Lolly opened her eyes as she discreetly tasted.

Mumma and Nada went inside to prepare tea and Mister slipped away to check the cricket score. Lolly sipped her third champagne, looked at Ernest and slurred, *The personality changes through time according to genes and hormones and environment.* A silence. *Have you always been yourself?*

Ernest rubbed his fists at his ears and grunted, *You think too much, Lolly.*

She laughed. *You don't mean that. You know it's all there is. You stop thinking, the world ends.*

Ernest sloshed another sherry into his glass as Mister nudged the fly wire door open with his hip. *We're three for one-forty.*

Ernest scratched his chin. *Not bad.*

Mister was chewing on a strip of jerky. *What're you two talking about?*

*Lolly reckons the world ends when you stop thinking.*

Mister's face shifted. *When I stop thinking the sun'll still cross the sky. The fish'll still bite for some lucky bastard.* He pulled the jerky from his mouth and waved it at Lolly. *This is the best bloody beef jerky I've ever had.*

Nada turned the chops in their mustard marinade. *These are ready for the barbeque, now. What else do you want grilled?*

Mumma wiped her hands on a tea towel and slung it over her shoulder. *The boys put in a request for pork sausages —those big fat ones. They're in the fridge, wrapped in paper. There's a vegetable burger for Lolly and some mushrooms in soy, ginger and garlic. I know she likes them.*

Nada stacked everything on a tray and went outside. Mumma could hear her organizing Mister. It made her grin.

*Do you need any help?* Lolly had red cheeks and Mumma thought she looked beautiful.

*No, no. It's all under control.*

*Okay.* Lolly left and then came straight back.

*Mumma?*

*Yes?*

*It's really good to be home.*

*It's really good to have you home.*

Lolly looked awkward. She scratched at a smear on the kitchen bench.

*There's an envelope for you,* Mumma pointed to the kitchen dresser. *Over there.*

Champagne had made Lolly all thumbs and she opened the envelope clumsily. *For me?* She looked to Mumma and then back at the cheque. *My God! This is for one thousand dollars!*

Mumma grinned. *It's to help with your plane ticket—for next year.*

*You know about India.*

Mumma pointed to the notebook. *Yes.*

Lolly put the cheque into her pocket. *I think I'll go outside for a minute to catch my breath.*

The smell of the Golden Sponge wafted through the oven door. Mumma inhaled deeply and pulled Lolly's notebook off the kitchen shelf. She opened to a page close to the back, propped it on its spine and referred to it like she would a cookbook. Potato mashed between the prongs of the fork. Mumma breathed butter-love and read the paragraphs that had become so familiar over the past weeks.

*Mumma made sponge cake when I was spinning in her. She called me baby bird and broke eggs. Yolks are the colour of warm. Hot milk reminds Mumma of Gramma, but they are still working on connecting. Sponge cake has real vanilla essence—never artificial. Mumma prefers vanilla pods. The black seeds float in milk. The smell of vanilla is so good it is painful. It makes my guts flip. Corn flour is pure white honesty but it can go wrong—lumpy, gluey under certain circumstances. You always sift the*

*dry ingredients for impurities, break down lumps, reduce all particles to sameness. Sifting adds air. Air makes for excellent sponge cake. Golden syrup is as sticky as feeling. Sticky, messy, sticky. A butterfly gets its feet stuck. It flaps up flight dust and tears its own legs from its sockets. Cook in a moderate oven for 30—40 minutes. A skewer inserted in the centre of the cake should come out clean. Not covered in blood or shit or vomit or someone else's filthy finger prints.*

*Truth is in the rich purple gloss of an aubergine, reflections curving and stretching over the bulb, dried watermarks like evaporated tears.*

*Honesty?*

*Pumpkin*

*Lust?*

*Tomato. Cherry tomato. A centralised explosion. An ejaculation of seed.*

*The closest thing to love is potato. Whipped white paste. The starch that bonds.  
My Mumma loved me with potato.*

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**Errata: *Eating Lolly***

p. 42, line 3: 'surprised' should be surprise, line 16: 'weavels' should be weevils

p. 73, line 20: insert a

p. 91, line 7: 'of' should be on

p. 141, line 5: 'break' should be brake

p. 143, line 22: 'pokey' should be poky

p. 153, line 3: 'diagram' should be diaphragm

p. 164, line 13: insert and

p. 169, line 22: 'crooned' should be craned