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The Shaded Side



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DECLARATION

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signed:



Date: 20 | 3 | 98 ..

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Gwen and Les Chard.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project has been to research and write the novel *The Shaded Side* and a critical commentary. The novel is based on the fictitious events that take place in an Australian tuberculosis sanatorium in the 1940s. The story locates and reflects the consequences of relationships, experiences, morals and attitudes of this early period against the present day story of an adult adoptee searching for the identity of her birth mother.

Research into the history of TB treatment in Australia and into broader representations of illness and disease has been required for the project.

General themes include: sanatorium treatment, wartime experiences of women of Footscray, the influences of Catholicism as it was generally practised earlier this century, adoption and the mechanics of searching for one's birth relatives.

The critical component consists of two essays.

Essay 1 discusses comparative representations of illness and disease and the use of metaphoric language.

Essay 2 explores the controversial issue of appropriation of research in realist fiction and the requirement for writers to understand and take responsibility for their choices of representation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my research supervisor, Dr Rosaleen Love, of Victoria University of Technology. Rosaleen's guidance, encouragement and advice throughout the project has enabled me to maintain motivation while facing the challenges in bringing it to fruition.

Staff at the libraries of Victoria University of Technology, Living Museum of the West, State Library of Victoria, Performing Arts Museum (Victorian Arts Centre Trust) and Department of Human Services (Adoption Information Service) have been most obliging with their professional assistance.

In particular, some of the material contained in Mary's letters to Ellen relies heavily on the anecdotal records of women who worked at the munitions factories in the western suburbs of Melbourne during wartime, recorded and published by Living Museum of the West in *Go West Young Woman* (1985), and *Ammunition Factory* (1985). I have also used some information from the Victoria Health Department booklet *Recovery from Tuberculosis* (1952) in WELCOME TO BELLINGTON SANATORIUM (p.12).

It would be remiss of me not to thank all those who were involved with my previous book, *In the Company of Strangers: Former Patients of Australian Tuberculosis Sanatoria Share their Experiences and Insights*. To those former patients who shared with me their stories and the Victorian Tuberculosis and Lung Association who supported that project, I am indebted. The present project was greatly influenced by this earlier research.

My dear family and friends, as always, have given me their unflagging interest, support and patience for which I am truly grateful.

The Shaded Side

Part 1

1998

David wanted' to come with her. Almost insisted. He thought that she might need support. Or bring Liz, he said. But Jenny is determined to do this on her own. After all, there'd only been the two of them at her birth. Her mind toys with the same repetitive ideas. The 'what if's' have become her demons since she committed to the search.

Jenny waits in a chair in the reception foyer of the Health and Community Services offices. She shuffles in the seat. Uncomfortable. It doesn't help. There are others too who wait, others she doesn't notice. It's a busy place, people coming, going, moving to different areas. Something is lacking, a sense of occasion. Her eyes focus purposefully on the disappointing reality of the polyester-leaved plant in the faux marble tub next to the reception desk. Nothing is ever quite how it seems. She is alone.

*What if the original birth certificate can't be found?*

*What if she didn't die at my birth?*

*What if she's still alive?*

*What if she just didn't want me?*

*What if I have brothers and sisters?*

*What if she doesn't want to know me?*

Today she expects at least to discover a name, maybe two.

"Jennifer?"

"Yes. Yes. Thank you," Jenny stands, summoned to attention.

"Patricia can see you now. Room 108. On the right."

A short walk down the corridor, then into a non-descript office. The door shuts. She takes a seat. After introductions and coffee orders, Jenny and Patricia exchange small talk about the weather. Jenny's eyes are drawn to the manila folder on Patricia's desk.

"We do have some information for you, Jenny. And I'll just go through it all quite slowly and carefully."

Slowly. Jennifer has an almost uncontrollable urge to grab that file, find her original birth certificate and run her finger down, down, down to the section which says 'mother's name'. There is an urgency, now, to know.

"It will just be such a relief at last. To have it over... if you know what I mean."

Patricia has played in this scenario many times.

"Sometimes, Jenny, the truth can be difficult to accept. You may not feel relief. There might be other questions, explanations. This is perhaps only the beginning of your search, not the end."

Jennifer nods excitedly. It's easy to agree, to keep things moving. She just wants to see the documents.

Within minutes, there is the name.

February 1944

*I am in a room on my own. Through the window I see only brick walls. Brick walls are my world. Red rectangles. The nurses mostly ignore me, leave me alone. They are disgusted with me. They come in fully gowned, white cylinders of material, only their eyes are visible. They hardly speak. I miss everybody and everything. Dear God, help me. Forgive me.*

*It won't be long now. The baby will be born soon. I am so frightened about the birth but not nearly so much as what I fear after. I am so tired.*

*It was ghastly. I have named her Jennifer. She has red hair and I held her briefly. The nurses took her from me straight away. So tiny. So very soft. I hurt.*

June 1942

"Brontey?" Ellen said to the stranger who'd just wandered in to her cubicle.

"Yes. My mother couldn't decide which one to name me after - Charlotte, Anne or Emily... so it's just *Brontey*. With a y... not the dotty e," the young woman in the bright pink dressing gown said. "Bloody funny name, isn't it?"

Ellen smiled, surprised. Brontey sat on the bed, shook her frizzy black hair away from her shoulders and watched Ellen unpack her few things from the small suitcase.

"So, Ellen, how'd you get here? Old Wickham from the farm?"

"Yes. He picked me up from Ferny Station in his truck."

"Let me guess," said Brontey. "Threw you in the back of it with your suitcase?"

Ellen nodded.

"Hmm. Like cattle. Petrified he is. Petrified of all of us," Brontey said theatrically.

"It was such a cold and misty morning, by the time we got here I was so wet and embarrassed I couldn't even look him in the eye to thank him for the ride," said Ellen.

"Doesn't deserve any thanks, rotten old bastard. Matron pays him to do it," Brontey said.

Ellen took the white satin bodice from the pillow case, unfolded it carefully and laid it on the bed.

"Ooh... you're getting married?" enthused Brontey.

"No, heaven's no. Not at all. Well, not me... Mary," said Ellen. "My sister. I've spent the last four weeks at home, waiting for a bed, resting and helping Mary sew her wedding dress. She wanted to get it all organised before I left."

*Thank God we had the wedding to think about and talk about. I'm sure Mum's convinced I'm going to die. I'm relying on*

*Mary's commonsense to keep Mum's fears from overwhelming her. Mary, she's the sensible one.*

"It's going to be beautiful," Brontey stroked the shiny fabric. "I just love satin gowns."

"There are some bugle beads and seed pearls still to sew on. I'll finish it here. I'll need something to do for the next six weeks while I'm in bed," shrugged Ellen.

*Mum says she and Mary will not visit me here. I think she's quite glad that Bellington is so far from Footscray, it gives her an excuse. Mum has told everyone that I've gone to Sydney to help cousin Jessie with the children while Jack is away at the war. I wonder if she's told Jessie.*

## WELCOME TO BELLINGTON SANATORIUM

Your doctor has advised you to enter a sanatorium for treatment. Naturally, you want to know just what this means, and you are wondering what lies ahead. This information will answer many of your questions and you will find the answers reassuring.

Your treatment will take time; that cannot be helped. On the average, a patient spends two to three years in a sanatorium. Your doctors and nurses will do their best to hasten your recovery. They can help you only if you help them, by following their advice faithfully.

You will wonder what life will be like in the sanatorium. Bellington is a place of beauty, within a peaceful, friendly atmosphere. Here among the spacious gardens and parkland you will be shielded from the rush and hurry of ordinary life.

You will have sympathetic doctors, friendly nurses and cheerful fellow patients. When you are well enough, interesting activities will help you back to health. Frequent entertainments such as pictures and concerts are held. Your relatives and friends will be able to visit you regularly.

Rest, fresh air, and good food will be the main factors in your recovery.

The sanatorium will give you the opportunity to be free from all outside duties, worries, ties, and obligations. The main task it will impose upon you is that of becoming well again. Good results will depend very largely on your attitude of mind. If you settle into the sanatorium routine quickly, and follow the advice of the doctors and sisters conscientiously, your recovery will be speeded.

We wish you a rapid recovery. We will do all we can to bring it about. You may have confidence that you are in safe hands.

June 20th, 1942

Arrived in "Sydney." Not allowed out of bed. Feel quite weary, so very tired. On my own. So alone. Have to lie as flat as possible. Heavy sand-bag, 'Dolly' on my chest. Hard to breathe but somehow the weight of Dolly is a comfort. Cavities in both lungs. Holes in me. Gaping. Serious, says Doctor Harrington. Routines for everything, everything we do. Or so it seems. Revolting metal sputum-mugs.

Measurements, measurements all the time. Temperature and weight. Rest times. Meal times. Craft times. And the coughing, the horrible sound of coughing. Fills my head. Time drags. Especially of a night.

So cold here. Fresh air treatment. What would it be like to endure the winter? Misery. Thank God I'll be home by the end of July. Home. Back to normal. Normal world. World at war. Why should I complain?

The Japanese midget subs in Sydney Harbour. What if they're really even further south? All our brave boys far from home and this awful war has now reached us. When will it end? I pray and pray that it will all be over soon. I'm so scared of everything. Please, somebody, light a candle for me. Say a prayer for me.

Reading Mum's catechism. Trying to learn more chapters by heart. June 16th to June 23rd, June 30th, July 7th, July 14th, July 21st, July 28th. July 28th. What will become of me? God help me.

When God sends you any cross, or sickness or pain, what should you say? When God sends me any cross or sickness or pain I should say "Lord, Thy will be done. I take this for my sins."

3rd July, 1942

Dear Mary,

Thankyou for your letter, it was lovely to receive it, but I am so sad to hear about poor Billy O'Grady. How awful for his mother to have now lost two sons in this horrid war. I will never forget Billy and that cheeky grin of his. He was always teasing us when we were little at school, but only ever in a fun way. I don't think poor Billy had a cruel bone in his body.

Hopefully this letter will find you and Mum and your Joe all well. In the next few days you will receive a parcel of my clothes in the mail. We're not allowed to keep any day clothes here. Feel free to wear my navy hat, I know how much you like it. Perhaps you'd better get to the parcel before Mum does. I think she might burn everything in it to get rid of the terrible "Sydney" germs. I really shouldn't joke about it, should I?

The other patients are very friendly and most don't really seem very sick at all. There are a couple who visit me everyday. Margaret, a young mother, brings around the Herald of an evening and she stays for a chat. She has been here for nearly two years. I have also met Brontey, who is the same age as me and she has a great sense of humour. Her duty is to collect the mail from all of the patients. She has been here for eighteen months.

The nurses are kind and helpful, quite in contrast to Matron Steele who rules with an iron fist. Everyone is awfully scared of her. The sanatorium ("sana" we call it) overlooks a valley, and is set on a large property, with beautiful gardens and a lake surrounded by poplars and Norfolk pines.

There are four wings, each for patients at different stages. Ward one is for new patients, and we each have our own cubicle and are on full bed rest. Wards two and three are for patients on half and full "up" days. Ward four is for patients who have been here for years. Some have no

home to return to and others, like old Alice, just seem to have chosen to stay. Ward five is for the really sick patients. The building is low to the ground and open to all the weather. Only when it rains do the staff pull down the canvas blinds to protect us from the elements. I am sure I will never get used to this "fresh air treatment".

The days drag a bit because I still have to lie flat in bed, with a sandbag resting on my chest for most of the day. Doctor Harrington says that the pressure and weight of the sand bag should help the cavities to heal. I call the sandbag "Dolly"! Brontey painted a face on it of pink cupid lips and bright blue eyes.

You can imagine how bored I am. I am looking forward to being back home with you soon.

How is your sewing progressing? Well, I hope. I am sure it must be a funny sight with you and Mum working on the Singer of an evening and Joe embroidering the linen. I can just imagine him throwing the table cloth in the corner every time somebody knocks at the door. He would hate Vic or Les to catch him with his needlework! I am sure he will do a good job of it, though. Your dear Joe is such a good catch, not many girls are lucky enough to have a fiance who can turn his hand to so many different things.

I hope Mum has calmed down. It would be lovely to receive a letter from her, not that I expect she will write.

It is nearly time for lights out, so I must finish now.

Your loving sister,

Ellen

"Post this for me, Brontey. It's to Mary."

"You're lucky. I'd love to have a sister. I've just got three useless little brothers." Brontey plonked down on Ellen's bed, in the mood for a talk. "I think that's probably one of the reasons I really like it here. All the girls."

"I don't believe you mean that, Brontey. I bet you're very fond of your brothers really."

"Oh well, yes. I do miss them, they've probably changed so much since I last saw them. Mum and Dad bring me photos, because the boys aren't allowed here, but it's not the same."

"You're lucky that your parents visit you. My Mum's terrified of coming near the place. I don't expect to see her while I'm here."

*"Mum, I've got something to tell you" I tug at my woollen gloves, pulling them off as I speak.*

*"What is it Ellen?" she wipes her wet hands on her faded cotton apron. Washing quartered potatoes.*

*"I need to go away, for a while," I say carefully, hanging my navy gaberdine coat on the hook behind the back door.*

*"Go away? Where? Why?"*

*"I think you'd better sit down, Mum. It's ... not good news."*

*"Whatever's the matter?" We sit opposite each other at the kitchen table.*

*"I've just been to see Doctor Carmichael. He tells me I've got a shadow on the lung - tuberculosis," I bite my lip, determined not to cry. I pick at my nails.*

*"Tuberculosis! God help us!"*

*"I...I... have to go to a sanatorium. Just for a while. That's what Doctor Carmichael says. I'm sick, Mum. I just have to go there."*

"I can't believe you're telling me this. I can't believe it. We've never had anything, nothing like it in this family," Mum's voice rises hysterically.

"I'm sorry Mum. Please don't ..."

"What's wrong? What's going on here?" Mary hears the racket and comes into the kitchen. I thought she was at Tess's.

"Mum's just a bit upset. Everything will be all right," I say. "Oh Mum, please don't cry."

"What is it? Has somebody died?" Mary persists.

"No, nobody's died. Everything will be all right, Mum. I promise it will."

"You tell me news like this and want me to believe everything will be all right? Have you any idea what we'll face if people hear about this? If they know... that Ellen Ryan is at a sanatorium? That Ellen Ryan has that disease - tuberculosis? Don't you know what people will...will... think? They'll treat us as though we are... The shame. I can't bear it." Mum rushes to the window. Pulls down the holland blind.

"Doctor Carmichael says I have to go just as soon as there's a bed available. I might have to wait a few weeks, a month. I've given a week's notice at the Mechanics Institute."

"What did you tell them? You didn't tell them, surely?"

"I said I was needed at home for a while."

"Thank God for that."

"How sick are you, Ellen? How long... how long will you be...?" Mary fills the kettle.

"Doctor Carmichael says I'll probably just need to rest there for about six weeks and then I'll be home. Mum, it will be just like a little holiday, a change of scene. Doctor Carmichael wants you both to go down, to have a test...just in case."

"We'll go tomorrow, Mary. First thing. I'll talk to Doctor Carmichael about this. You'd be better off staying in your own home to rest, keeping away from those places. People

die in those sanatoria because they're surrounded by all those... those..."

"Germs?" Mary says. I glare at her. "Sorry" she mouths silently.

"I'm sure Doctor Carmichael will let you stay home, after I talk to him. And you're not to tell a soul, Mary. Not even Teresa. Nobody else will know about this. Do you hear me? Nobody. Get to bed, Ellen. I'll bring your tea up later."

"That's a shame," Brontey watched Ellen's face intently. "Yes, I am lucky, but my parents aren't the sort to get scared off easily. Anyway, I'd have been pretty damn miserable if they didn't visit, you know, I've been here eighteen months."

"That's a long time away from family, isn't it," said Ellen. "I'm already missing Mum and Mary. But then I'm only going to be here for a few more weeks."

"There's something you should know, Ellen. Bloody hell, someone's got to tell you. The doctors always say that you'll only be here for six weeks. That's how they get us into the place. Most of us have been told that story. Look, I don't mean to frighten you, but it's probably better if you... don't get your hopes up, that's all. Just take it day by day. Like the rest of us." Brontey paused as she saw the despondency in Ellen's eyes. "Anyway, it's not so bad here. You just get used to it after a while and sort of fit-in, like it's a boarding school or..." she shrugged.

"What? You mean you've all... ? It's just a... a... lie...?" said Ellen. "Oh, Brontey, no, no. I could never... never get used to being here. Never. The sooner I'm out of here the better. It's just awful being sick. With TB..." She bit her nails. "You've all been so kind and friendly, popping in to visit me and keeping me company. But I can't imagine staying here one moment... not a single moment beyond what I need to."

"That's the whole bloody point, Ellen. That's what I'm trying to explain to you. None of us expected we'd be here so long, but it's the nature of the illness. TB just takes a damn long time to be treated. It's *the time*, this is the thing. The only patients who seem to leave here after just a couple of months are those who are kind of wasting the bloody bed that somebody else might make better use of. Some of the older ones get sent home quickly, and some of the very sick ones don't even stay long at all. It's all because there's such a high demand for a place here. No point filling the sana with poor buggers who have really got no hope of getting better." Brontey looked down at the letters in her hand, shuffled them for a few seconds, then looked up, her eyes fiery. "Look, I'm an optimist, not a realist. And I'm determined to be. I've got more chance of getting well that way," she said. "Put it this way. The longer a patient stays here, the better they'll be in the end. It's that simple, I think."

Ellen, motionless in the bed, listened carefully to every word Brontey spoke. Brontey had been at Bellington long enough to know how things worked. Days turning into weeks, weeks turning into months, months turning... Ellen's eyes brimmed with tears of disappointment.

"I'm sorry, Ellen. I didn't mean to upset you," Brontey said gently. "But that's how I see it. Maybe I'm wrong in your case. I hope so." She placed Ellen's letter in the calico mail bag and threw a sympathetic smile over her shoulder as she and her voluminous pink chenille dressing gown left the cubicle to visit other patients.

*What if she's right? Weeks, months... years of this? God no. I beg your mercy.*

Ellen busied herself by reaching for her thermometer and she placed the cool glass stick between her lips. After the appropriate amount of time to 'cook', she viewed the

measurement, shook down the thin silver line of mercury and repeated the procedure. The reading was high.

*It's that conversation with Brontey. That's what's upset me. Made me hot. Tomorrow I'll ask for a new thermometer. Perhaps there's something wrong with it.*

She recorded the readings in her diary.

16th September, 1942

Dear Mary,

Here I am still lying flat in the bed with Dolly on my chest. Three months I've been here now and there's no talk of me leaving in the near future.

It has been so difficult. The other girls tell me that the first three months are the worst, but that of course only makes me feel more depressed about my situation. After all, once the first three months have been endured, what is there to celebrate?

It is like we're in a different world, a "kingdom", I suppose. Doctor Harrington is our kindly king, Matron Steele the wicked queen and all the sisters are princesses in our eyes. And as for us? I don't know - we're just poor, sick plebs, I suppose. Brontey would hate me to write like this.

Doctor Harrington visited me this morning and said that if I had TB in only one lung he'd try an artificial pneumothorax, but would need to send me to the Austin Hospital for the procedure. He explained it involves pushing air in between the lung and the inner wall of the chest, to force the lung to collapse. This should give the cavity a chance to heal. They tell me that the Austin is "the hospital for the dying". I'm glad I can't have it done. It all sounds too awful.

Please, talk to Mum again about visiting. I'd so love to see you....

Dear Ellen,

I can understand how disappointed you must feel about having to stay longer but you must do everything that your Doctor Harrington advises and whenever he thinks you're well enough, he'll send you home. After all, we'd rather have you really well than coming home only half better and

perhaps having to return. Mum lights a candle for you at every mass. I know it's for you, I can tell by her eyes.

I put it to Mum, about visiting, and we had quite a row. It's still "no" I'm afraid, and out of the question. She simply refuses. It's not you, of course, it's the place itself. I can't think what to say or do to change her mind. I'd come, of course I would, but it would only make Mum more angry and add fuel to the fire. Please understand. I think of you all the time. It won't be long now until you're home. We'll have a grand party that day. I miss you too...

"Who are those two?" Brontey muttered almost incoherently, beads between her lips, as she sat on the chair beside Ellen's bed, working on Mary's bridal head-piece. She had noticed the new holy pictures propped up on Ellen's bedside cabinet.

"That one's Saint Bernadette," Ellen passed the two small cards to her, "and this is Saint Therese of Lisieux. Margaret got them for me."

"I think you micks will take over this place one day. Why have you got them there? What did they do?" Brontey said, scrutinising the pale, solemn-faced images.

"They both had TB. Died of it actually."

"Oh Ellen - how awful. What good is it to have them there, reminding you of that? That's a bit macabre isn't it? Couldn't you put some other saints' pictures up instead? Or angels even? Angels are nice, like fairies."

"They inspire me, Brontey," Ellen said quietly, offended.

"It beats me how two young girls who died of TB can 'inspire' anybody," Brontey said. "Look, it'd be like me worshipping Charlotte, Emily and Anne for it. You know, the three of them died of TB. 'Consumption.' But hell, best to bloody well forget about it, I reckon. Ouch...! Bloody hell!" Brontey coughed and spluttered.

"What's wrong?"

"I've just pricked my finger and swallowed a bead!" Brontey squealed.

18th October, 1942

Dear Ellen,

It's been a lovely day and I thought I'd drop you a line. Joe went to the races on Saturday (won two pounds, yippee!) and I stayed home with Mum and clipped the hedge. I really missed having you here, Ellen, because we always do that together, even though when we meet at the middle there's always a bit of a dip or a rise. It was an awful job to do on my own. What I mean to say is that I miss you terribly. Mum's still rather glum.

The war goes on and on, there seems to be no end in sight.

I went to the Old Girls' Reunion at school this evening. It was great fun and lovely to see everybody, with music and a play and supper. Even Mother O'Millane was there. We all thought she'd died years ago! Everyone asked after you and so I told them you were staying with a cousin in Sydney. I really don't know how long I can keep this up.

Wedding plans are going well. I'll be going into town on the weekend to look for shoes.

Look after yourself, dear bridesmaid, and get well soon.

Your loving sister,

Mary

"What on earth are you muttering about?" Brontey's arms were full of cane balanced precariously on a piece of board.

"Ssh," Ellen said distractedly, "... question thirty. Which are the three powers of your soul? The three powers of my soul are my memory, my understanding and my will." She looked up to an unknown spot on the ceiling over her bed and repeated, "three powers, memory, understanding, will." She closed the small, brown-covered book and with a slightly embarrassed look answered Brontey's question.

"Catechism. I'm learning it off by heart."

"You're not!" Brontey's disdain was obvious. She dropped the pile of craft materials onto her bed.

"Yes I am. Come on, ask me. Ask me any of the first thirty questions and I bet I know the answer." Ellen passed the book to Brontey.

"Blimey, don't tell me you have to know them like your times-tables?" Brontey said, astonished.

"No. Of course not. But it's something to do," Ellen said self-consciously, playing with the fold of the cotton bedspread, "and I'm sure it'd make my mother happy if she knew I was."

Brontey flipped through the buff pages. "I hope you're not trying to convert me, Ellen. It'll never work, you know." She read aloud, "Question seven. Of which must you take most care of, your body or of your soul?"

Ellen answered without hesitation. "I must take most care of my soul; for Christ has said "What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul?"

"Doc Harrington would love to hear that one, when he's so busy trying to save our bodies. Anyway, here's another one. Question eight. What must you do to save your soul?"

"To save my soul I must worship God by faith, hope and charity; that is, I must believe in Him, I must hope in Him, and I must love Him with my whole heart."

"Right. Okay...um...how about this one. What is temporal punishment?"

"That's not in the first thirty. I'm not up to that one yet."

Brontey read the answer aloud, "'Temporal punishment is punishment which will have an end, either in this world or in the world to come.' Bloody hell. That sounds spooky. What does it mean? 'in this world or in the world to come?'" she said theatrically.

"Give me the catechism, Brontey. If you can't take it seriously, I don't want you to hear me." She rolled on her side, her back to Brontey.

"Fair enough. Sorry, Ellen. I didn't mean to make fun of it. I just can't understand all these questions and answers. Like everything's black or white, right or wrong. It's all grey, shades of grey, I think."

"I shouldn't have expected you to understand. You can't help it," Ellen said patronisingly.

"This is what I'm reading," Brontey passed the slim volume to Ellen and smiled, her blue eyes gleamed. "Have a look at it."

"*Lady Chatterley's Lover*. I thought this was banned?" Ellen said.

"It is! Anton got it for me."

"Anton?"

"Anton Gudinsky. One of my favorite Boranovsky boys," said Brontey, with an exaggerated wink.

"Oh, one of the ballet dancers..." said Ellen, hardly paying attention as she flipped through the pages, her eyes then widening by the moment as she read a passage to herself. "Brontey! You've even underlined the worst bits!"

"There's nothing wrong with it," Brontey protested. "Anyway, they're the *best* bits. Here..." She took the book from Ellen's hands and began reading aloud, dramatically pacing around the bed.

"'He took her in his arms again and drew her to him, and suddenly she became small in his arms, small and nestling. It was gone, the resistance was gone and she began to melt in a marvellous peace. And as she melted small and wonderful in his arms, she became infinitely desirable to him. All his blood vessels seemed to scald with intense yet tender desire for her, for her softness, for the penetrating beauty of her in his arms, passing into his blood. And softly, with that marvellous swoon-like caress of his hand in pure soft desire, softly he stroked the silky slope of her loins, down, down, between her soft warm buttocks, coming nearer and nearer to the very quick of her. And she felt him like....'"

"Stop it Brontey! That's disgusting," Ellen put her hands over her ears, only partly in mock horror.

"Oh Ellen, don't be such an old-fashioned prude. What I wouldn't give for a man to 'scald with intense yet tender desire' for me. Oh...sublime!" Brontey fell back on the bed, her eyes closed in rapture, her hands clasped reverently over the book on her chest. Ellen sat up, completely baffled.

"Brontey, I've never met a girl like you before!" she said.

10th November 1942

Dear Mary,

I'm now sharing Brontey's cubicle, and beside us Margaret shares with young Dot. I am an "Up Girl", for half the day anyway, and so I now have duties. I help with the bookroom, which is organized by the Red Cross. It's not quite like being the assistant at the Footscray Mechanics Institute, but at least I'm surrounded by books and it's an excuse to get away from the others and be on my own for a while.

Dolly is still a fixture in my bed, a substitute teddy bear now rather than the medical aide she started life as.

I've adapted to the routine of the sanatorium and the way that each day has a predictable structure. It has become the rhythm of my life. Breakfast at eight, crafts or reading from nine to eleven, then there is the compulsory rest hour before lunch. Afternoons are free until four o'clock, newspapers passed around at five, tea at six, lights out at nine. In between there are times for taking temperatures, weigh-ins of a Sunday night, radio broadcasts, Doctor's and Matron's regular ward rounds, mass in the hall on Sundays, visiting hour on a Sunday afternoon (the highlight of the week), Sunday night films in the hall and the occasional concert party performance. It all amounts to "waiting to get well". It's a world of its own in the sana, with plenty of gossip, schemes and plans.

Sometimes I can almost convince myself it's a better world in here than outside. Safer, somehow, for us than for you. We've all been talking about Leonski and most of the girls were pleased to read of his hanging yesterday. They think the world's a better place without him. I must tell you, Mary, I feared for you before he was charged. Three murders in three weeks - how horrible for those women.

I get lonely at night, and sometimes lay awake for hours, thinking of you all. There is no more terrible sound in the whole world than a trolley rattling along the corridor in the middle of the night, on its way to the morgue. At least I don't hear it often. Whenever a patient dies, very little is spoken about it. There are things we don't talk about...

"Ready Brontey?" said Dot, smiling cheekily, her blonde curls bouncing as she burst into Brontey and Ellen's cubicle.

"Where are you going?" Ellen said.

"You're so suspicious, Ellen," Brontey looked warily at young Dot, her partner in crime.

"I know you two well enough to know you're plotting something. What have you got under that dressing-gown, Brontey?"

"Nothing," Brontey lied, pulling it tight around her. Ellen reached out and flipped open the front of it.

"Brontey!" she squealed, "You're dressed!"

"Ssh. Not so loud, we don't want Matron running in here wondering what the racket is all about," she complained, tugging the gown back into place. "We're going out of here for a while. Nobody will notice we're gone. If anybody asks where we are just tell them we're outside in the grounds with our visitors."

"And where will you really be?"

"We're going to the fair at Belgrave," said Dot, her face flushed with excitement. "My brother's meeting us there with one of his mates. We'll be back before you know it."

"You're crazy, Brontey. Matron will have a fit if she finds out."

"We're relying on you to make sure that she doesn't."

"But what if somebody sees you?"

"They won't. We'll be careful, Ellen. Don't worry. It's just a bit of harmless fun. Say one of your prayers for us that we don't get caught," Brontey winked. "We'll bring you back some fish and chips."

Ellen shook her head in disbelief, "Fish and chips?"

"Yes, there's a shop in Belgrave sells beaut fish and chips. We'll bring some back for you and Marg."

"Oh Brontey, you're quite crazy," Ellen despaired.

"I know. Blessed are the risk-takers! Toodle-loo," she said in high spirits.

Ellen watched the two young women walk purposefully towards the trees by the lake. In their dressing-gowns, they looked like moving trees covered in spring blossom, blending in with the garden. They were soon out of view, then, a minute later they emerged, transformed in their day clothes. Arms linked and heads down, Brontey and Dot walked briskly up the long curved driveway towards Bellington's main gate.

"Good luck to them," Margaret was by Ellen's side, laughing at the escapees.

"Why didn't you go with them?" Ellen asked.

"If I went out that gate, love, I'd never come back. Never," Margaret said, suddenly serious.

"How have they managed to keep a set of clothes here?" said Ellen.

"Young Nurse Sweeting was married not so very long ago. May, it was. And a few of the girls were allowed to go and see the wedding at St Michael's in Ferny Creek. Needless to say, the clothes Brontey and Dot sent for and wore, they just 'forgot' to send home again."

"Trust Brontey."

"Yep, trust Brontey and anything Brontey does, Dot'll follow. She's like a silly little puppy dog, that one."

"We had the best afternoon, Ellen, just the best," young Dot was almost breathless with excitement.

"Did anybody miss us?" Brontey asked.

"No. I don't think anybody noticed you'd gone," Ellen answered as Brontey thrust a newspaper parcel of soggy fish and chips into her arms.

"Mmh. They smell wonderful," Ellen said.

"That's because life is wonderful," Brontey philosophised.

"She's in love, can't you tell," sniggered Dot happily as she pinched a thick, golden chip from the pile in Ellen's lap.'

"In love?" Ellen laughed, "That was quick!"

"Yes, life is wonderful, Belgrave is wonderful," Brontey waltzed around the cubicle, "the fair was wonderful, Dot is wonderful, but most of all Dot's brother is the most wonderful of all... Raymond is absolutely the most wonderful..."

"Oh, shut-up with your nonsense, Brontey," Margaret laughed.

"I can't. I feel like I've been injected with... with...bliss, pure bliss," Brontey raved as she grabbed Dot to dance madly around the cubicle with her.

"All this because of a boy!" Margaret shook her head disapprovingly.

"Not a boy, Marg, he's a man. All man," Brontey hammed it up, her eyes rolled in ecstasy.

"Look at the colour in her cheeks, Ellen. If you didn't know any better you'd think the poor girl had a fever, wouldn't you?" Margaret teased.

"Yes, I'm quite sure if Matron saw you now she'd think you were ill and put you back on full bed-rest," Ellen said. They were still laughing when Sister Jury came in to the cubicle, her eye-brows raised at the noise and the high jinks. Ellen quickly stuffed the parcel of fish and chips under the wrap of her dressing-gown and the girls stopped their dance.

"Well, well, well, what's going on here?" Sister Jury said.

"Nothing, Sister, nothing at all." Margaret answered matter-of-factly.

"I just wanted to let you know that you're not to go down to the hall for tonight's film until eight o' clock instead of seven thirty," Sister Jury said. "Doctor Harris wants to speak to you over the radio." She looked around

the cubicle and sniffed suspiciously. "He has a very important announcement to make," she continued, obviously distracted, then paused, "That's funny, I smell fish and chips!"

Ellen blushed guiltily.

"Can you?" said Margaret, "Now how can that be? We never get fish and chips here."

"I swear, I can smell... fish... and... chips," Sister Jury walked around the cubicle, as though playing hide-and-seek, her long, thin nose sniffing the air. Ellen froze, Dot almost giggled, Brontey glared at her silently, then Margaret spoke, full of false bravado.

"Well, Sister, you just let us know when you find 'em. What I wouldn't do for a feed of hot fish and chips, but it beats me how anybody would get 'em in here," she said.

Sister Jury looked from one to the other. With a quick shake of her head, she was off to the next cubicle.

"She reminds me of our old English pointer, Charlie, sniffing at a scent on the wind!" Margaret laughed.

"She knows!" Dot covered her face in her hands in terror.

"Oh, she doesn't know anything," Brontey said scornfully.

"Yes she does, she knows, and she knows about us sneaking out, and that's what Doctor Harrington's going to talk to us about."

"Don't be such a scaredy cat!" Brontey insisted.

"I bet somebody found our dressing gowns," Dot's eyes were round as saucers.

"Where did you put them?" said Margaret.

"We rolled them up into a bundle and put them under one of the trees near the lake. Nobody would have seen them, and nobody saw us," Brontey attempted confidence.

"It's your own fault if you get caught. Fancy leaving them there. You're a pair of dills. That's where Doctor

Harrington goes when he's looking for birds," Margaret said.

"Don't tell me!" said Dot.

"You know that without me saying anything. You've seen him over there, whistling and carrying on, trying to get a photo with his trusty old Leica. I can just imagine it now," said Margaret. "He was probably over there after you left your dressing-gowns rolled up. Probably took a nice little photo as evidence. He knows all of us by our dressing-gowns, you know. It would have taken him all of three seconds to work out what was going on."

"Rubbish," said Brontey. "Take no notice, Dot. Margaret's just trying to put the fear of God into us. Sorry Ellen. Look, Dot, you dill, our dressing-gowns hadn't been touched. They were in exactly the same place as where we left them. They were hidden, Margaret, we didn't just leave them out anywhere, where they'd be seen."

"But it is unusual for Doctor Harrington to talk over the radio on a Sunday night, Brontey," Margaret enjoyed teasing them.

"Mmh. We'll just have to wait and see. Nothing we can do about it now," said Brontey. "Hey - how was her face, about the fish and chips!" They all laughed.

"What's tonight's film anyway?" Brontey said. She munched away on some chips.

"'*Their First Mistake*'," said Margaret.

"Oh no, that sounds like an omen," shrieked Dot.

"Bloody hell, Dot, don't panic. It's only a Laurel and Hardy. Nothing too ominous about that," said Brontey.

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"Mum, Lizzie's stupid. She says that Aunty's strange. She says that none of her Aunties live outside the house. She says why doesn't Aunty sleep in one of the bedrooms. That's what Lizzie says. I hate Lizzie. She took my skipping rope. She went and hid it in the mulberry tree behind the convent. I was late back to class and Sister Veronica told me off. And it had pink all over it."

"You mustn't be late to class, Jenny. Here, pod this bowl of peas for me and count by threes as you go."

"Pop, pop, three, pop, pop, six, pop, pop, nine, pop, pop, twelve..."

## Part 2

"I didn't believe it at first, Father," Ellen said as she folded the altar cloth, carefully matching corners.

"Well my girl, it's true. Quite true. Matron told me weeks ago and I thought you'd have all known by now," Father Foley said. "There's not enough room at Chartwell now they want to make it a military sanatorium, so they're going to bring some of the ambulatory boys down here to use part of ward five."

"That's what Doctor Harrington said," Ellen replied. "I've noticed some workmen there in the last few days - but nobody told us about it until last night," Ellen packed the cloth onto the overburdened shelf in the cupboard.

"You'll be out of a job, lass. Mark my words. I'll have a real altar-boy on Sundays before the month's out. Any wonder Matron said nothing about it. Some of the women would have gone quite mad with excitement to think that they were sharing the premises with men," Father Foley laughed.

Ellen placed the bells and candles into the cupboard, along with the crucifix and statue of Joseph. She helped Father Foley lift the large plaster statue of Mary and they carefully positioned the benign blue-dressed figure into the cupboard for another week, until once again the hall would be transformed into a makeshift chapel, and the statue would be displayed for the devotion of Catholic patients. With a wink, Father Foley left Ellen to finish tidying up.

Ellen rushed back to the ward. "You'll never believe it, Brontey," Ellen whispered as she prodded the lump in the bed.

"What?" Brontey rolled over onto one fat shoulder.

"Father Foley's known for weeks about the men."

"True? Then it's not some trick Doctor Harrington's playing on us?"

"They've run out of room at Chartwell, so some of them are coming here. That's what all the work in ward five's about."

"Well - praise the Lord and pass the ammunition! That'll keep Matron on her toes."

23rd November, 1942

Dear Ellen,

There has needed to be a change of plans for the wedding. Much to my shock and disappointment, Joe has been called-up and will be leaving for the Air Force within the month. I can't believe it, Ellen, and I know that it's an awful thing to say, but I was happy that his job at Mitchell's was designated essential services and that he didn't have to join. I don't know what I'll do without him.

So now the wedding has been put forward to Friday week and I will be 'Mrs Mary Grant' sooner than I had planned.

Ellen, I do wish you could be allowed to attend the wedding. Is it at all possible? I am so disheartened by all this. At least I have my lovely gown to wear and we'll still honeymoon at Erskine House in Lorne for the weekend. Poor Elsie married Ron last week under similar circumstances and had to wear her good navy suit. There simply wasn't time for her to borrow or make a wedding dress....

"Come on, Ellen, we won't get caught," Dot whispered, following Ellen from the bookroom back to the ward.

"No. I'm not going sunbaking and neither should you," Ellen strutted down the hall.

"But we won't get caught. Brontey's got it all worked out."

"Won't get caught? That's not the point. It's the sun. You know as well as I do that it's not good for TB."

"Ellen says we shouldn't," said Dot, looking to Brontey when they reached the cubicle.

"It's wrong," Ellen faced Brontey. "Sneaking out to sunbake. I can't understand why you'd take the risk."

Brontey finished brushing her hair. "Sometimes I think Matron and Doc Harrington just make up stupid rules to annoy us. If the sun is so bad for TB, then how come they've got sanatoria in Perth and up near Cairns? They

wouldn't have put them there if the sun really was bad for TB patients." Brontey jabbed the hairbrush in the air. "You know, sometimes I think they haven't much of a clue. Just shove all us poor buggers away from everyone, keep us cooped up in sanas, cross their fingers and hope for the best."

"Is that so, Doctor Brontey?" said Ellen. "I'm still not coming with you."

"We're just going to do a bit of sunbaking. Not burn ourselves to a chip in hundred degree heat. Nothing like that, Ellen. I've worked out a plan so that we don't get caught."

"I don't have any bathers with me. What will you wear for sunbaking? Surely you're not all planning to go *au naturel*?"

"Da da," Brontey threw off her dressing-gown and revealed her ample pale body wrapped tightly in a white towel from her chest to her thighs.

"Lucky the towel fits," said Ellen.

"One size fits all," laughed Brontey as she pirouetted on her toes. "Go on, Ellen, come with us. We've even talked old Alice into it. Don't you have the urge to feel the sun on your back?"

"Not today, thank you very much. I thought Alice had more sense. Dot, she's going to get you into big trouble one day, I've warned you," Ellen folded her arms across her chest.

"Cover for us, won't you? If any of the nurses are looking for us, just say we're ...

"... 'having a quiet wander in the grounds', that's so original," Ellen said scornfully.

"Purleez little darlin'," Brontey feigned an American accent.

"You've been watching too many films, Brontey. I'll just tell the sisters straight out that you can all be found down behind the staff quarters, with no clothes on, and smoking!"

"You wouldn't!" Dot peeped out the cubicle to check

that all was clear.

"Don't be long or I just might dob you all in. You're all quite mad."

"I'll grab that book before we go," said Brontey, winking to Dot as she picked up her *Lady Chatterley's Lover* from the bedside cabinet.

"Oh, no, Brontey. You're not going to let Dot read that disgusting stuff, surely," said Ellen.

"Yes I am," Brontey grinned. "It's time young Dot had a bit of education. She should be a bit more worldly at her age."

"When I get out of here, I've got to make up for lost time," said Dot happy to follow Brontey like an eager little lap-dog.

30th November, 1942

Dear Mary,

I am unable to come home for the wedding. Dr Harrington says no. It's just impossible...

"They're here! They're here!" Brontey rushed into the ward, face flushed, hands flailing with excitement.

"For God's sake, love, calm down. You'll frighten the poor boys away before they even get through the door," Margaret's eyes were fixed on her hand of cards. "Gin. Hah - another game to me."

"It's all right for an old married woman like you, Margaret, but what about us? This is exciting for us *single* girls."

"Brontey, stop staring at them! You're so obvious," Ellen looked up from her cards.

"That's why I'm standing here."

"Have a look at her. Vivien Leigh!" Margaret shuffled the cards, ready for another game.

"Ellen. Ellen, quick. Come here. There are some nice looking blokes amongst them. Look, look... the one in the maroon dressing gown. Isn't he gorgeous. Ah...he's waving at me. Waving at me!" she bounced excitedly on the spot.

"Pretend you don't notice him."

Brontey pouted and posed, then waved. Matron glared. The men cheered. The man in the red dressing-gown gave a wolf whistle. Matron directed the men across to the foyer and threw Brontey one of her unmistakable looks of disapproval.

"Bugger Matron! She's never known what it's like to spend two years cooped up in a sanatorium where the only young blokes you get to meet are some other girls' husbands or fiancés - not that too many of them hang around the TB long - or somebody else's brother. And most of them haven't been much chop."

"I thought you liked *my* brother, Brontey," said Dot, her fingers nimbly tying knots in yet another macramé bag.

"Of course I like him Dot..."

"Scared him off though, didn't you, with all your nonsense. You're the reason he volunteered!" laughed Margaret.

"It's all right for you, Margaret. You've got Jim and all the kids. I bet you can't even remember what it was like to be young and fancy free."

"I remember. Boys don't like girls who throw themselves at them."

"I should play hard to get?"

"No! Brontey, if I was in your shoes I'd be prancing and preening for the boys. Another hand Ellen?"

"No thanks Margaret. I know when I'm well and truly beaten. I think I'll wander down to the bookroom. I feel like some peace and quiet after all this excitement."

"Don't blame you, love. Anybody else like to take me on?"

Ellen took a quick look at the shelves, moved a few books into their correct section, decided the books were in order and then settled herself in a chair, feet tucked up into the seat. She was totally absorbed in reading a collection of Somerset Maugham's short stories, when a young man wearing a blue woollen dressing-gown walked through the doorway of the bookroom.

"Excuse me," he said with a shy grin on his pale thin face.

"Oh...hello," Ellen said.

"I'm looking for Ellen? The altar-boy? I mean..." he blushed, pink cheeks against unruly bright red curls.

"I'm Ellen," she smiled self-consciously.

"Oh sorry. You're not ...I mean... what am I saying...Look, I'm Robert. Rob. Father Foley told me to track you down. About Mary's cupboard. He said you'd know what it means."

"Yes. Of course. You must be the carpenter."

"That's right. Or at least I used to be." He leaned against the desk. "Seems my reputation got here sooner than I did. Over at Chartwell they used to get me to do a few small odd jobs around the place."

"Between Father Foley and Matron you might find you're kept awfully busy here too."

"I really wouldn't mind. Keeps my hand in and helps the time to pass."

"Come with me and I'll introduce you to Mary," Ellen picked up her book and they walked down the hall together.

"This is the chapel," she said.

"Doesn't look much like a chapel." The hall was empty, other than for a piano, piles of seats stacked against the walls and a large old wooden cupboard near the stage.

"No I suppose it doesn't, but on Sundays it's the chapel, for the rest of the week it's the hall and on Sunday nights it's the theatre. Sometimes we have visits from performing groups, too. And when it's not the theatre, it's the craft room."

"Oh - is Mary in charge of the crafts, then?"

"No! Mary's in charge of much more than crafts....*this* is Mary" Ellen laughed as she struggled to open the door of the large cupboard.

"Hah! *That* Mary. Forgive me Mary," with exaggerated apology, Robert bowed slightly as he rubbed the head of the plaster statue.

"This shelf's the problem. It's about ready to break. And there's nowhere else to keep Mary," Ellen explained.

"Any wonder. She's just too heavy for it. Do you think you could help me lift her out so that I can take a better look at it? I think the wood might be full of borer."

"All right. I'll take her head and you can carry the feet."

Just as they had manoeuvred the statue from the cupboard, Matron Steele was by their side.

"What are you two doing with Mary?" she said, perplexed.

Ellen and Rob looked at each other and laughed.

"She's passed out on us, Matron, and so we're taking her over to the window for some fresh air," Rob said. Matron smiled and helped them lift the statue over on to the stage as he explained, "The cupboard needs fixing. Father Foley asked me to have a look at it."

"You must be Robert," Matron's face lit up. He winked at Ellen, "See what I mean?"

"Matron Steele," she nodded. "It's nice to have an extra handyman here. Not that we'll call on you too often for your services, but if you're able to do a few small odd-jobs from time to time we'd appreciate it. It's all part of your occupational therapy, isn't it, really?"

"Yes, Matron. I don't mind at all."

"I'll let you get on with it. Work out what you need and pop a list in to my office. I'll try to get what I can. No promises of course, you know how difficult it is to get building materials these days."

"I understand, Matron, and I'm used to improvising."

Matron nodded and left, not before calling over her shoulder, "Ellen, as soon as you've finished there, you'd best make your way straight back to the ward. It's nearly rest time."

The unspoken "don't dilly-dally" embarrassed Ellen.

"Matron has spoken. I don't want to get you in to any trouble, Ellen. Sounds like she rules with an iron fist. You'd better go. I'll work out what I need and ask one of the domestics to help lift Mary back. Thanks for your help."

"Oh. All right then, I'll um... leave you to it," Ellen smiled as she walked through the hall door. She was well gone when Rob noticed her book left on the stage.

"Where've you been, I went looking for you ages ago," Brontey said, suspicious. "I wanted you to roll-up my hair before rest time."

"I've been talking to one of our new patients. One of our nice new patients."

"You rat! Trust you to get in first! Which one? Not the maroon dressing-gown I hope!"

"No - not him. I was talking to... to...now what was his name...".

"Stop teasing me, Ellen. Never mind his name. What was he like?"

"Not too bad, I suppose. Not too bad at all. I'm so tired, Brontey, all the excitement..." Ellen faked a yawn, rolled on her side, and pretended to sleep. Brontey groaned.

That evening Doctor Harrington broadcast to all the patients over the PA system.

"Welcome to the fifteen new patients from Chartwell to ward five. I trust you'll settle into Bellington easily, and won't find it so very different to the treatment you are used to." The scratchy, static sound filled the wards.

"For obvious reasons, I need to set down some rules. There is to be no fraternising amongst the male and female patients."

Brontey moaned, "For obvious reasons that's why we want to fraternise!"

"Shh, Brontey...listen."

"It's most important for you all to understand that is what we expect. There may be some occasions when you will meet, such as at the theatre nights, and we'll keep the audience segregated. The women patients will sit together and the men will sit together...elsewhere. This really is the most sensible solution. Men are not permitted to visit the women's wards and vice versa."

"Bloody Doctor Harrington and his ideas of 'sensible'", Brontey said miserably.

"Come on, Brontey. You have to try to see it from his point of view. This place would be bedlam if he didn't set down some rules about it," Ellen said.

"I'm sure I can get around it somehow. I'm going to meet Mr Maroon Dressing-gown whether Doctor Harrington likes it or not. You know the old saying - where there's a will there's a way."

"I already feel sorry for Mr Maroon Dressing-gown. He hasn't a clue what he's in for!" Ellen laughed.

"I can't let you be one up on me," Brontey complained, as Margaret came into their cubicle. "She's absolutely gloating about Rob or whatever his name is."

"Gee you're slow Brontey. Ellen's only doing it to get the better of you. She's certainly not as man-mad as you are," Margaret said.

"That may be the case, but I make no apology for it. I'm just hot-blooded, that's all I can say."

"You must have given your poor parents the horrors when you were at home! They're probably relieved to have you here, out the back of beyond, so you've got no opportunity to play up."

"I have given Mum and Dad a few nightmares over the years. Not that I'm fast or anything. Actually Margaret, if the truth be known I'm all talk and no action."

"That's how a girl ruins her reputation, you know," Margaret said with all the wisdom of maturity.

"Reputation! I think mine was gone years ago!" said Brontey.

"What was gone where?" Dot joined them.

"My reputation, Dot. I'm just telling Margaret it was gone years ago. Not a decent shred remains."

"You're awful, Brontey. I'm sure you say half these things just to shock us. I bet you're really quite tame with boys if the truth be known," said Ellen.

"Do you just? Well, what about you Ellen. Have you ever done anything to shame the family name?"

"As a matter of fact, no. Although if you asked my Mum she'd probably answer differently. But nothing to do with

boys... men. Having TB, being here, that's the most dreadful thing I've ever done to the family."

"Mum, I've got something to tell you"

"What is it Ellen?" she wipes her wet hands on her apron.

"I've got tuberculosis. I have to go to a sanatorium. I'm sick, Mum."

"I can't believe you're telling me this. I can't believe it. We've never had anything, nothing like it in this family," Mum screams.

"I'm sorry Mum. Everything will be all right, Mum. I promise it will."

"Have you any idea what we'll face if people hear about this? If they know... that Ellen Ryan is at a sanatorium? The shame. I can't bear it." Mum rushes to the window. Pulls down the holland blind. "Nobody else will know about this. Do you hear me? Nobody," she screams.

"Why do you feel you have to take any blame for that? It's not your fault you caught it," said Brontey. "None of our faults. It's just the most rotten bad luck. I'm glad my parents don't put any blame on me. I refuse to bear any guilt about this. No fear. No despair. I'm not evil because I've got this illness. Neither, for that matter, is TB. But I feel sorry for you, Ellen. It's not fair what your Mum's doing. Making you feel guilty about being sick and not visiting or writing or anything. That'd break my heart to be treated like that, break my heart," Brontey said.

Ellen's eyes welled with tears and her face reddened.

"Oh Ellen, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

Brontey rushed over and hugged her.

"I know you didn't, Brontey. But it does hurt at times. I feel like an outcast. I never wanted to get this rotten disease. At least Mary writes."

"That's some consolation for you love. She must be strong minded. I'd love to meet her one day," said Margaret.

"And I'd love you to meet her. But it won't happen while I'm in here, that's for sure. The idea of her coming here for a visit really is absolutely out of the question. If Mum found out she'd never forgive Mary or me. Not much of a life having your two daughters on the wrong side of you."

"Ellen, there's somebody to see you... at the door," Dot's excitement was nearly palpable. For a glorious instant Ellen thought her wishes may have come true and that her dear Mary may have arrived. In a whisper, Dot continued "It's one of the men!"

All eyes turned towards the doorway of the ward as Robert waved to Ellen. She put down her sewing and walked towards him, still able to hear Brontey's loud whisper "Didn't he hear Doctor's orders? Lucky Ellen."

"Hello," she said shyly, self-conscious of the other eyes watching the encounter.

"Hello Ellen. I wanted to return your book. You left it beside Mary, on the stage."

"Oh. Thank you, Robert. I wondered what I'd done with it. You really needn't have bothered. If someone finds a book, they generally just take it back to the desk at the bookroom. Whoever's lost it knows to look for it there."

"I know. Sister Jury told me," he smiled. "But I wanted to give it back to you myself. It seems we share the same taste in books, I've read this too. I'm a bit of a fan of Somerset Maugham. Perhaps we could have a chat about the book sometime." He paused as though he expected her to answer.

"Yes, of course. I'd like that," Ellen blushed.

"Good. Anyway, I'd better go. Goodnight Ellen." She watched him for a moment as he turned and walked back to ward five.

"He's a brave fellow, Ellen. Surely he heard Doctor Harrington's broadcast about no visits to the women's wards," Brontey stood beside her.

"He didn't really visit the ward, Brontey, he just stood at the door."

"That's splitting hairs if you ask me. We all know what Doctor H meant."

"He was just returning a book I'd left in the chapel, that's all."

"Have a look at you, love. You're blushing!" Margaret said.

"Margaret, don't embarrass me. It's not my fault he brought the damn book back."

"Not your fault at all, is it Ellen, if he finds you so... enchanting, irresistible... probably you're the love of his life and ..." Brontey raved.

"Settle down, Brontey, don't be ridiculous. He is rather nice, though isn't he?" Ellen said.

"Of course he is, love, but with the lack of males we've had since we've been here, a male baboon would probably be thought of as quite nice!" Margaret joked.

"I think I'll go off to bed and read. Too much excitement for one day," Ellen enjoyed her new found importance.

"Sweet dreams, love" Margaret said.

Ellen opened the book. A piece of notepaper written on in unfamiliar writing was tucked between the pages of the story, *The Happy Couple*.

*Tomorrow I want to start work on Mary's cupboard. Any chance you might be able to help me? I'll be there about nine.*

*P.S. I agree with W.S.M. We are all "Creatures of Circumstance," aren't we?*

The note was unsigned. Ellen read it over and over, tucked it into the pocket of her dressing-gown, then settled into her bed with her latest letter from Mary.

"It's nice to see you again, Ellen."

"Thank you." Something was different today. There was an edge that hadn't been there yesterday.

"I was wondering if you'd be able to manage it." Rob said.

"I needed to come up here anyway to check on a few things. One of Margaret's sons makes his First Holy Communion soon, and I told her I'd check to see if Father had any nice holy pictures or little medals that she could send him."

"There's a lot of paraphernalia for you micks, isn't there?"

"Oh - so you're not Catholic?" Ellen said, a hint of disappointment in her voice.

"No. I'm callithumpian. Surprised?"

Ellen laughed. "I've heard the term before. That's how Brontey describes herself. I'd have thought Father Foley would have found a good *Catholic* carpenter to fix Mary's cupboard, that's all. Somebody whose heart would have been in his work," she joked, enjoying the casual camaraderie.

"My heart's in my work, Ellen. Don't you worry about that," he looked at her frankly.

"The only thing I'm worried about Rob is your faith," Ellen replied with a mock pious voice.

"Lost any faith I might ever have had since I've been at Chartwell," Rob said, as he measured the shelf and marked the piece of timber on the saw-stool with the pencil from behind his ear. "Some of the awful things I've seen - young boys dying in the prime of their life, blokes' wives leaving them because they've got TB... not much evidence of a kind God there Ellen," he said as he sawed the timber. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I don't mean to offend."

Ellen shrugged. "That's funny, I've seen the same awful things here, but in a way that's made me have more faith than ever before. At least I know I've got more to pray for."

"But are your prayers being answered?"

"I just know that if I didn't have my faith, I'd probably drop my bundle and that'd be the end of me," she said.

"Yes - I can understand what you mean. I've seen it time and time again. Once patients drop their bundle, that's it. No chance for them to get better then," he tapped at the rotten shelf and eased it from the cupboard. As he passed it to her he said, "Oh well; Ellen, if praying works for you, maybe I'll give it a try."

"So does that mean I can tell Father Foley I've converted you?" she smiled.

"No - not likely," he laughed. "But there can't be too much harm in saying a few prayers. What with the war and everything that's going on, there's certainly plenty to pray about."

"Yes. That's for sure. I can hardly believe what's happening."

"Anyone close to you...um...from your family...in the war, Ellen?" Rob pried.

"Yes. Joe's joined the air-force."

"Joe? Is he your..."

"No, no. Joe's my sister's husband. No other men in my family - Dad died not long after the First World War and we have no brothers."

"What about you, Ellen. Are you... engaged... or anything?"

"No, Rob," Ellen giggled and wished she hadn't. "Are you?"

"No. Who'd take me on in this condition?" he looked her directly in the eyes.

*I would.*

"Now, I'll just get you to hold this level with the shelf, thanks Ellen," Rob changed the subject as he passed Ellen the spirit-level. "It's a bit awkward trying to fix this without pulling the whole thing to pieces."

8th February 1943

Dear Ellen,

I have a 'new job. Last week I started work at the munitions in Gordon Street. Now Joe is away I feel I should do my bit for the war effort. I went down to the new employment office opposite the post office in Nicholson Street, and before I knew it had been signed on for the late shift.

They're putting on people by the hundred. I've caught up with many of the old girls from school and new girls start every week. Women are leaving the other factories to work at the munitions because the pay's so much better.

We wear navy serge uniforms and special shoes with no nails in the soles. We're not allowed to wear jewellery or bobby-pins in our hair, or to eat or smoke (of course) in the "Sections". That's what they're called. Every "section" is for a different job. We're supposed to wear this little orange badge - our security pass with our number engraved on it. Sometimes girls forget it and they just pin on a little piece of orange peel and flash it. It's exactly the same colour and nobody really takes any notice.

I'm working on the caps for the .303 cartridges. Brass sheets come down a roller, then they have to be slid across and lined up between the gates, the sheet locked in place. Then I start up the machine which stamps out all the caps. The noise in the section is terrible. We have to watch how we lift so we don't "do" our backs. All I hope is that every one of the bullets has a go at Hitler.

Last Saturday night I went to the church social. There was a band and supper. I didn't have time to make a cake so I just took a plate of sandwiches. It was 50-50, a fun night, but I wished my Joe was there. Lent begins next week and I haven't a clue what to give up. Mum and I are off to confession on Friday.

God Bless You,

Mary

10th March 1943

Dear Mary,

I have some wonderful news. No, don't get your hopes up about me coming home, there really is no talk of that. The news is that I have met somebody very special. We have had some patients sent here from Chartwell Sana, which is now operating as a military sanatorium. One of those patients is Robert Atkins. He and I are becoming something of a couple, I think, and I couldn't be happier about it.

It's awful of me to be gloating about a young man when most girls' boyfriends and husbands are away at the war. Have you any news from Joe? We are all knitting madly for the boys, but I've given up on gloves. I can cope with turning the heel on socks now that Margaret has shown me about six times, but fingers in gloves really are too much for me. What with Brontey usually ear-bashing me with some nonsense I can hardly concentrate and my last attempt produced a funny looking thing with three fingers. I've kept it to show you one day. Knitting gloves is not for me, I'm afraid.

Anyway - on to more important news. Doctor Harrington has given strict instructions that the men and the women are not to mix. Needless to say, this is one rule that some of the girls are determined to break. Rob and I seem to get around it with some reason or other why we need to see each other. Can you believe he even comes to mass on Sundays in the hall even though he's not Catholic?

You'd like him, Mary, I'm sure. He's very kind and gentle natured and he's tall, with lovely brown eyes and fair skin. He's got red hair, curly bright red hair and I couldn't imagine him any other way. Rob's twenty three and has been at Chartwell for over two years. His family is from Ballarat, so he's used to the cold. He used to work as a carpenter and wants to be a builder one day.

I am raving, now, but you can see he makes me happy (even in this strange place). Something about Rob is different to any boy I've ever met - it's as though he really "knows" me - and it's not just because we're going

through this same thing with the TB and the sana treatment. It's more than that. He really knows me. Completely.

Brontey sends her regards and guessed that I'd be writing you about my "great romance". She's so jealous that it's me and not her. Poor Brontey. She was quite interested in one of the other patients but frightened him off with her ardour, I'm afraid.

I hope you and Mum are well. How's your job at the munitions? Do write and tell me everything that's going on.

Love always,

Ellen

"Did you finish it already?" Robert asked, as Ellen handed him his book. The bookroom was their accidental-on-purpose meeting place. "Isn't it great?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "I read it with a torch under my blankets after lights-out, like a naughty schoolgirl. But then I'd never have come across *Dubliners* at school. The nuns wouldn't have allowed it."

"I'm sure they wouldn't," Robert laughed.

"For that matter, I'd never come across it at the Mechanics Institute either. Actually, I'm beginning to wonder if you might be a bad influence on me," she smiled teasingly.

"Maybe I am. Which one did you enjoy the most?" Robert flipped through the pages.

"Um... they're all good, really good, but mmh.. the one about the boy who sings *Lass of Aughrim*, and Gretta, who always loves him, even when... *The Dead*, that's the one I think, that's left the most impression."

"It's my favourite too... 'One by one they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dimly with age,'" he quoted, eyes closed, his hand over his heart.

"You know it by heart!"

"Just that bit," he said. "That's real love, what Gretta and Michael Furey had. Bad luck for Gabriel, eh?"

"I can't help but feel sorry for her. I mean, she loved him so much, even years after his death," Ellen said. "The party, it reminded me of some of our family get togethers. Quite typical really."

"Yes, we have the same sort, too. Always one of the old aunts wanting to sing around the piano, and somebody has too much to drink, and all the food. Just the same, really."

"But Rob, how did he know, James Joyce I mean, how could he have known, how Gretta felt? That surprised me."

"Why should you be surprised about that? That a man can understand how a woman must feel?"

"Yes, that's it. I think that makes James Joyce pretty special. That he'd want to bother to try," she explained clumsily.

"Ellen, would you like a man to understand how you feel?" Rob said softly, holding her hand.

"It would depend on the man," she teased and kissed his cheek softly.

"What if the man was me?"

"That would be just fine." Ellen reached over and held him tenderly. How she loved everything about him. Rob rolled his chair closer to hers, took her hands in his and gazed into her pale thin face.

"Be my Gretta, Ellen. Be my Gretta and I'll be your Michael Furey," he implored, staring into her soft grey eyes. She smiled, touched his face and smoothed his brow with her finger.

"Pass me the book," she said softly. Quickly finding the page, she then read, "*I can see him so plainly... Such eyes as he had: big, dark eyes! And such an expression in them - an expression!*" You're my Michael Furey, Rob, you're my Michael Furey." They kissed.

"I'm going mad," Robert said softly.

"Going mad?" she smiled.

"I'm thinking of you all the time. I want to be with you all the time. It's driving me crazy organising these silly opportunities to meet."

"I don't want to drive you crazy, Rob."

"Ellen, I think you're ...I'm mad about you. It's stupid for me to pretend otherwise." Rob held her close, the woolly fibres from his dressing-gown tickled her face.

*And I love you, Rob. I love you, I love you, I love you.*

"Would you marry me, Ellen? Promise me you'll marry me when we get out of here."

"I will, Rob. It's all I want." There was not a moment's hesitation. Rob gently shut the bookroom door and they kissed and held each other.

"Rob. I'd better go, love, before we get carried away and do something we might regret." Ellen pulled away from him and

sighed. She hastily rearranged her nightie and tied her gown firmly in place. He held her hand as she slowly walked from the room and only at the last minute let go of her soft fingers.

"There's nothing I'd regret," Rob murmured quietly as he slumped back into the chair.

1952

"See my dolly, Aunty? See my baby dolly Lizzie gave me?"

"She's beautiful, love, isn't she. My, you've had a nice birthday. What are you going to call her?"

"I'm going to call her Bessie. Mummy says that's a good name and I'll always remember Lizzie gave her to me."

"Bessie? That's a lovely name."

"'cos Lizzie's real name is ..lizbeth, and that's like 'Lizzie Bessie', isn't it Aunty? That's what Mummy said."

"It is, E-liz-a-beth! What a good idea."

"And I'm going to look after her like a real mummy. Because I'm a big girl now. Eight's big, isn't it Aunty?"

"Eight's very big."

"Do you want to have a nurse, Aunty? You can be Bessie's aunty, too."

"Can I? I'll have a nurse. Thank you."

"I'm going to be a good mum for Bessie, Aunty."

"Of course you will, dear. Love her always."

"Always and forever, Aunty, that's what mum's do, isn't it? Always and forever."

"Yes. That's what mum's do."

*Always and forever.*

1943

Love was a magic tonic for Ellen. Her eyes sparkled, she gained a few pounds in weight and her see-sawing temperature stabilised. Dr Harrington was so pleased with her progress that he allowed her to be on "full-days". With a new found confidence in her health, Ellen began to be quite careless about her temperature-taking routine.

The time dragged now in only one respect - the time away from Robert. They met daily in the bookroom and discussed their plans for the future. "When we're better..." and "After the war" being the two provisos on everything they looked forward to.

They decided that they'd live in Ballarat. Robert would take a few acres of the family farm where he'd build their home and they'd combine potato farming with his building work. The idea of setting-up home in the country appealed to Ellen. Although she had always lived in busy Footscray, she had grown to appreciate the peace and quiet of the countryside since her time at Bellington.

"Ellen, there's one thing we haven't talked about that I've been thinking of," Robert played gently with Ellen's soft fingers, while they sat alone in the bookroom. They were poring over Home Beautiful magazines and wondered whether to save for chintz curtains and floral axminster carpets or the more modern, uncluttered styles featured.

"What? I thought we'd covered everything."

"No, we haven't," he reached over and kissed her gently on the top of her head. "I've been thinking about religion. It's really important to you isn't it?"

"Yes. It is. I've been wondering when we'd get around to this," Ellen's heart beat a little faster.

"Well, I've made a decision. I'm going to convert."

"Are you joking?" she said warily.

"No, I'm quite serious, at least I think I am," Rob smiled.

"Oh, Rob, that's what I've been praying for!" Ellen wrapped her thin arms around him joyfully. "Are you sure? I don't want to think that you're only doing it for my sake."

"Look love, put it this way. I'm not very religious, it's just never been that much of a part of my family's life. Not our way. But I just think it might make life easier... no, not easier, it just might be... better for us if I become a Catholic."

"It would mean an awful lot to me, Rob," Ellen enthused.

"Anyway, it sounds like you're so involved with your Saint John's - I suppose it will be Saint Pat's in Ballarat - that I reckon if I want to see you, I'm going to have to be part of it too. You know - if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

"Rob! That's terrible. Don't you let Father Foley hear you say that or he won't have a bar of it."

"Father Foley - he'll be pleased, I suppose. Another member of the flock. I'll have to talk to him about this. What do you think he'll do, Ellen, give me a baptism of fire?"

"No. Don't be ridiculous," Ellen laughed excitedly. "This will be fun," she said.

"Fun? What could be 'fun' about it?" Rob shook his head, baffled.

"I can be your tutor."

"My tutor?"

"Yes! Look, you'll need to know the catechism, Rob, for a start," she took the small book from her pocket.

"Hang on, hang on," Rob laughed, hands raised in mock surrender. "Just because I'm going to convert doesn't mean I'm prepared to be brainwashed by all that heeby-jeeby stuff."

"Heeby-jeeby is it? We'll see. You just talk to Father Foley, he'll set you straight about that. You'll need to learn some of the catechism, and some of the prayers."

"Ellen, I don't want to be a priest, just a normal bloke who happens to be a Catholic," he laughed. "Now, come with me."

"What? Why are you changing the subject, Rob? Are you getting nervous?"

"Me? Nervous? Not at all. C'mon, I want to show you something." He grabbed her hand and at the doorway looked furtively left and right. Quickly, Rob led Ellen down the corridor into the empty hall and over to the piano.

"Listen to this," he said, then, still standing, picked out a folk tune with one finger, as he hummed softly. "*Go back from these windows, and likewise this hall, Lest dapping in the sea, you should find your downfall. I am a king's daughter, and I come from Cappa Quin In search of Lord Gregory, and I can't find him. Do you know what it is?*"

"I haven't a clue," Ellen shook her head.

"Yes you do. Listen. *The rain beats on my yellow locks, and the dew wets me still, My babe lies cold in my arms; Lord Gregory let me in.*"

"Oh, it's Gretta's song. Michael's song. How do you know it?"

Rob nodded, "One of my old aunts used to sing it constantly," he said, still playing, then he sang quietly. "*Lord Gregory is not here, and henceforth can't be seen; He has gone to bonnie Scotland to bring home his new queen.*

*Oh remember, Lord Gregory, on that night in Cappa Quin When we both changed pocket handkerchiefs, and that against my will.*

*For yours was pure linen, love, and mine but coarse cloth; Yours cost a guinea, love, and mine cost one groat.*

*Go back from these windows, and likewise this hall, Lest dapping in the sea, you should find your downfall.*

*Do ye remember, Lord Gregory, on that night in my father's hall, When you stole away my fond heart, and that was worst of all? Go back from these windows, and likewise this hall, Lest dapping in the sea, you should find your downfall.*

*A curse on you, father, and my curse has been swore*

For I dreamt the Maid of Arran came rapping at my door.  
Oh, lie down, you foolish one; oh lie down and sleep,  
For 'tis long ago my weary locks were wetting in the deep.  
Oh, saddle me my black horse, the brown and the bay;  
Go, saddle me the best horse in my stable this day.  
If I range over valleys, and over mountains wild,  
Till I find the Maid of Arran, and I'll lie down by her  
side."

There was one topic Ellen and Robert deliberately avoided talking about. Children. Dr Harrington made it quite clear in his radio broadcasts that it was inadvisable for women who had suffered TB to become pregnant. He explained it was a real stress on the body that seemed too often to result in the women "breaking-down" with TB again. Both of them were aware of this, both had been thinking about it, but neither of them were yet able to talk about it. Ellen prayed for guidance.

*O God, give me wisdom. Send her out of Thy holy heaven, and from the throne of Thy majesty bid her come, that she may be with me, and may labor with me, that I may know what is acceptable with Thee. For she knows and understands all things, and shall lead me soberly in my works, and shall preserve me by her power.*

Ellen and Rob's romance was the worst kept secret at the sanatorium. The good-natured teasing of the other women patients had now extended to the nurses, who enjoyed conspiratorially sending their written messages to and for them.

Brontey teased Ellen mercilessly. "Ah - so you and Rob have been exchanging confidences in the bookroom again, have you?" she said, very knowingly.

Cheeky Nurse Sweeting suggested to Ellen "Why wait until you're both discharged? Father Foley could marry you in the chapel."

Ellen laughed, "You're such a romantic. As much as we'd like to, Nurse, could you really imagine the look on Matron's face if she heard such a notion? Dr Harrington would be furious, too."

"Phooey!" Nurse Sweeting hung the temperature chart back on the bed rail. "They'd probably be relieved to have it all out in the open. Of course they know about you two. Surely you can't really believe they haven't a clue?"

"No. Not too much stays secret around here. You know that better than I do. But we couldn't be so... brazen to

go to Father Foley to marry us, as much as we want to. We wouldn't want to insult Doctor or Matron in any way. Besides, could you really imagine a wedding here? What would I wear - a white dressing-gown? And have a fleet of the patients for bridesmaids? I don't think so."

"Pity, I'd have loved the excitement," the young nurse said.

"If you're after excitement, read the newspaper," Ellen thrust *The Sun* towards her. "The Japs have had another hiding in the Bismarck Sea."

Nurse Sweeting sat on the side of the bed. "'Only two thousand, seven hundred survivors...'" she read aloud, shaking her head. "You know," she said softly, laying the paper in her lap. "I'd much rather talk about weddings."

10th April 1943

Dear Ellen,

How is your Robert? Do write more about him, it's so exciting to think you have a romance. There's not much news to tell about dear Joe. I receive few letters from him and those that arrive are censored. It's awful trying to make sense of them with little squares and rectangles cut out. All I have to tell you about is my work.

Some of the women are married with young children. I do feel sorry for them. They have to leave their littlies all day with their mothers or somebody who is able to mind them, and then when they get home after work at night they are so tired. I can't imagine how they have any energy left for their kids.

Can you believe that some of the women even want to be supervisors? What about when all the men come home? War changes many things.

There are lots of girls from the country working here who have been sent by Manpower. I've made a new friend, Vera, who is from Gippsland. She's boarding at a hostel that's been built for country girls in Gordon Street. We work the same shifts and travel to and from work together. It's good to have some company on the tram, it's so awfully dark of a night with everything blacked out.

Some nights I have tea with Vera at the dining-room of the boarding house and sometimes she comes home and has tea with us. Mum likes Vera, she's good fun and knows all the new modern dances...

It was five thirty in the morning. Margaret spent every Saturday morning sitting near Bellington's main doorway. The open view of the dawn across the valley gave her the perfect opportunity to anticipate her morning greeting from her family. Her sister's family had a weekend shack on the other side of the valley which Jim and the children visited every Friday night. Margaret kept a vigil, waiting until just after dawn, when the children used an old dressing-table mirror to catch the sunlight and reflect it across the valley towards Bellington. On Saturday mornings the four children flashed a morning hello to their mother, who they hadn't seen for over two and a half years.

"I wanted to talk to you alone," Ellen's voice was croaky with tiredness.

"It must be something important then, love," said Margaret quietly.

"It is. I'm after some advice," Ellen sat on the floor beside her.

"What's the problem?"

"Oh Margaret, what am I going to do? You're the only one I can speak to about this, but I don't really know where to start."

"Whatever's the matter?"

"It's this business of babies that Doctor has warned us about. How can I marry Robert if I can't have children without making myself ill with TB? I do so want to be a good wife, and have babies, a family, like you and Jim. Rob will want children, all men do."

"Look love. I know what you're saying. But you could adopt a child, couldn't you? There's always some poor little mite needing a good home. There's lots of girls can't have babies for all sorts of reasons, and a couple of my friends have adopted children."

"It's not the same though is it?"

"They love them just as much as if they'd been their own. It's what's in the heart that counts, Ellen. Not whether or not you've gone through the pregnancy and birth."

"Margaret, I'm frightened. The thing is, I'm Catholic and I can't do much to not have a baby, unless we just don't do 'it.' I don't think there are too many men go into a marriage thinking that they can't ... they can't... you know."

"Ellen, you've heard us speak about Jean who was here until a few months before you came. She's had a baby, and they reckon it was some kind of a miracle, her TB healed up and she's been just fine ever since. I reckon you should just let things ride for a while. You and Rob will sort it out. Remember, he loves you so much. You believe in miracles don't you?"

"Yes. I do. But I never expect them to happen to me," said Ellen. "Ah - isn't it beautiful!" The sun began to lift over the horizon, a yellow coin. A streak of lemon lit the sky.

"Beautiful sunrise. That's a miracle too, love, and it just works out that way, every single day. You know what, Ellen? I've always been a firm believer in just letting things be. Some things you can't help and some you can. Some you do your best to work out a certain way and they still seem to happen differently to what you plan. You've really just got to go along with it. Things have a way of working out in the end, even if it might not be the way you'd plan at the beginning."

"You're probably right. Thanks for listening, Margaret. Now I think I'll leave you in peace and go back to bed for a while," Ellen yawned. "I've laid awake all night worrying about this so I'll grab a couple of hours sleep before breakfast."

It would be a while before Margaret's children sent their message across the valley. She tried to imagine their little faces and could barely do so. How she missed them all. It was the mothers in the sana that suffered the most, she was sure. The young brides missed their husbands and the engaged girls missed their fiances. The young girls complained about wasting their youth as they waited to get well again. But the mothers, they knew they suffered the

most. Away from their children who needed them, they were missing out on their life's work. Margaret found it hard to count her blessings and felt terribly sorry for herself. Just as she wiped a tear from her eye with the cuff of her dressing gown, there was a brilliant flash from across the valley. The flashing, their code, continued for about ten minutes, becoming quite erratic at times as Margaret imagined the children fighting over whose turn next it was. Margaret felt she could almost hear little Stevie saying "It's my turn, Daddy, it's my turn Daddy," and Owen, her older boy, helping him with the clumsy old mirror.

Ellen and Robert made no secret of the fact that they met every morning before the rest hour in the book-room and then again of an afternoon before tea. In fact, they were glad that the patients knew about them - even if it meant they had to cope with a fair amount of teasing - because the other patients now refrained from visiting the bookroom while they were there. Everybody, it seemed, enjoyed their romance.

If the weather was fine of an afternoon, they'd stroll around the grounds separately until they met hidden amongst the copse of ornamental trees by the lake. That was their favourite place where they could almost pretend they were like normal young lovers meeting in a park.

"You and Rob seem to prefer the shaded side of the lake for your rendezvous," Brontey paused during a game of checkers.

"Ah hah... shady business on the shady side," teased Margaret as she jumped two of Ellen's counters.

"We just like to keep out of the sun. That's all," said Ellen smugly, as she took three of Brontey's counters from the board. "You know that the sun's no good for TB. We're just looking after ourselves as Doctor Harrington says we should."

"Just keeping out of sight," persisted Brontey. "I wonder what Doctor Harrington would say if he stumbled across the two of you one afternoon, smooching - I mean 'exchanging confidences' - while he was stalking some strange bird."

"You never know, Ellen, he might take a few pictures of you two love-birds instead," laughed Margaret.

"No need to worry about us. We keep a look out," Ellen smiled.

## Part 3

Sister Jury came to Ellen and Brontey's cubicle just after breakfast. "Matron would like to see you in her office, Ellen, just as soon as you can," she said abruptly, checked their temperature charts and left as quickly as she came.

"Matron knows about us," Ellen said to Brontey. "I know she knows."

"And I know that you know that she knows," Brontey laughed. "You might as well hurry up and see her to get it over and done with. Actually, I'm surprised she hasn't sent for you sooner. You can expect her to be at her most disapproving best."

Ellen brushed her hair; put on her bravest look possible and within a minute was seated in Matron's austere office.

"Ellen. There are some disturbing rumours. About you and Robert."

"Yes Matron?"

"I can't pretend any longer that I don't know you and he are 'romancing.'" Matron said the word as though it was thoroughly distasteful. Ellen blushed, but boldly looked Matron in the eye.

"Yes Matron."

"Ellen, you know the rules."

"I'm sorry, Matron. We don't mean to make any trouble."

"I know that you are very fond of him - Robert's a most likeable young man - but you need to...to... take care."

"I'm aware of that Matron. We're trying to be as discreet as possible, but it's awfully difficult."

"Are things quite serious between you?"

"We're planning to marry," Ellen sighed, thrilled and relieved to be able to say the words. Make them real. "Just as soon as we're both well enough to leave here," she smiled self-consciously.

"Oh Ellen, if you're planning a future together there's something you really ought to know," Matron's gentle tone was one seldom heard. "Rob's prognosis isn't good, Ellen."

His is one of the really bad cases. Just when he seems to make some progress, he goes right back to square one. Doctor Harrington has had to speak to him last night about reviewing his treatment. It's not good news, I'm afraid. Robert starts back on full bed rest tomorrow. Has he told you that he's been having some haemorrhaging? He's ill, Ellen. Very ill. There can be no talk of marriage."

*No talk of marriage. No talk of marriage. No talk of marriage.*

"I can't believe it," Ellen whispered. "He's getting better. We're making plans. You're just saying this to frighten me, to ... to stop us!"

"No Ellen. That's not the case at all."

"But he must be getting better."

"Robert is more ill now than he's ever been. Some patients are like that Ellen. TB's such a strange illness. It doesn't seem to matter how much treatment Robert has, he eventually breaks down again and when that happens his condition becomes worse than ever."

"Matron, but he can't be that ill! It's ...it's impossible."

"I'm sorry Ellen. This must be quite a shock, but it's in your best interests to know the truth. If you love him, you'll let him concentrate and focus on his health. I wish I could give you my blessing and say that you'll both be well and gone from here by Christmas, but I'm sorry, that's not how it will be."

Brontey and Margaret were busy with their canework when Ellen came back to the ward. Without taking her eyes from the tray she was working on, Brontey asked "So have Matron and Doc Harrington slapped the wrists of the star-crossed lovers?"

Ellen burst into tears and threw herself onto her bed and sobbed quietly. Margaret and Brontey rushed to her.

"Ellen, whatever's the matter?" said Margaret.

"Oh Margaret, Matron's just given me the most awful news. She says that Rob's ill, really ill, and there's just no hope for us to marry."

"Poo to Matron," Brontey said angrily, "She's just jealous. Don't take any notice of her."

"What did she actually say, love?" Margaret said gently, seated on the bed beside her. Ellen repeated the conversation word for word.

"So that's it. According to Matron I should just... just... I don't know. Stop loving him? But I can't do that, how on earth can I? If Rob's as sick as she claims, then the only thing I can do is to love him more than ever."

"I think you're right, love," Margaret chose her words thoughtfully. "Let's hope Rob's not as sick as Matron seems to think he is, for both your sakes, but I think he needs you and needs to know you're there for him - whatever the future holds."

"Go and wash the tears off your face, get down to the bookroom and have a talk with him about all this," Brontey was always one to face things head-on.

"That's a good idea, Ellen. Try not to let him see you're upset and go and meet him. Rob's probably waiting there for you now," Margaret said, "Remember love, things have a way of working out."

Ellen waited at the bookroom, but there was no sign of Rob. Perhaps he had been warned by Doctor Harrington not to meet her there again. Ellen was just about to make her way back to her ward when Nurse Sweeting slipped into the room and nervously shut the door behind her.

"Ellen, I shouldn't be doing this, but Rob sent me."

"I understand. He's been warned off meeting me hasn't he?"

"Warned off? I don't know anything about that at all. He's really sick, Ellen, and is back on full bed-rest. There's been a bit of haemorrhaging."

"I know. He's all right though, isn't he?"

"Um...look. He's awake and he wants to see you."

"I'll have to go and see Matron ..."

"No don't. That's what he thought you'd do. He wants to see you alone, Ellen."

"How can I?"

"The other blokes are playing cards down the other end of the ward and Matron's done her rounds. I can sneak you in now, but only for five minutes. Go outside and wait next to the verandah outside his room. I've pulled the blind down already so you won't be seen, then I'll let you in."

"What if we get caught?"

"Look Ellen, Rob needs to see you. Just let me worry about that if it happens."

Nurse Sweeting hurried in one direction and Ellen in the other as they left the bookroom. Within a minute, Ellen slipped between the canvas blinds into Robert's cubicle. He lay propped up on pillows in the semi-darkness, his face sweaty and pale against the white linen. A frail smile crossed his mouth as Ellen held him tenderly.

"You really are sick, aren't you Rob?"

It was an effort for him to talk. "Of course I am. That's why I'm here," his grim humour sounded pathetic. "Just hold me, love."

"You've been haemorrhaging?"

"A bit. It's not so bad."

Ellen lay on the bed, held him tight and choked back the tears.

"Hey! What about the rules?" Rob said, his mouth against her soft, brown hair.

"I'm not worrying about the stupid rules and I don't care what Doctor or Matron would say. What have we got to lose?"

"Ellen, you mean everything to me. I should never have ... It's not fair on you. It's been so bloody selfish of me." He spoke tiredly, angry with himself. "You'd be better off without me, love. You realise that don't you?"

"Sh," she whispered, and kissed him all over his face, his eyes, his hair. Sad kisses. "Don't waste your energy saying such nonsense. Just rest." Nurse Sweeting stood at

the entrance of the cubicle and nodded to Ellen that it was time to leave. "I'll be back again later, darling. And I'll be praying for you until this bleeding stops."

"You're a funny girl, Ellen. You and your praying. Father Foley would be proud of you."

"I'm not doing this for Father Foley, Rob, I'm doing it for us. There's no other way I know to help."

"You're helping just by being here for me, Ellen. You're a girl in a million."

"I don't know about that, love, but I'm your girl and I'm going to pray."

Ellen took the blue cut-glass domed votive candle from Mary's cupboard and set it on her bedside cabinet beside her crucifix. She knelt beside the cabinet, chanting her prayers with a whispered, practised reverence and focussed on the flickering flame.

*Hail Mary full of grace,  
the lord is with thee  
Blessed art thou among women  
and blessed is the fruit of they womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary Mother of God  
Pray for us sinners  
Now and at the hour of our death  
Amen*

Her Hail Holy Queens, Holy Marys, Our Fathers - all for Rob's bleeding to stop. In the back of her mind was Saint Jude, the patron saint of hopeless causes. Ellen remembered old Sister O'Millane's advice. "Pray to any of the saints whenever you want to, girls, but only pray to St Jude when you need to. When nobody else answers your prayers." It wasn't time to implore St Jude's help. Not yet.

"Brontey, do you know what I wish?" Ellen said quietly in the dark night silence from beside her bed.

"What do you wish?"

"I wish there was a chapel here."

"There is a chapel, Ellen. On Sundays, when Father Foley comes," Brontey mumbled, sleepy and confused.

"I mean a proper chapel. One that's open all the time. With holy water and a tabernacle and an altar...so I could pray properly."

"You're praying properly, Ellen. I'm sure God's listening to you just as much as he would if you were praying in a real chapel."

"Do you think so, Brontey? What about Mary, what about Saint Teresa? Do you think they can...hear me?" she asked anxiously. There was an edge to Ellen's questions, a strange fearfulness.

"I'm sure they're listening to you, Ellen, try not to worry too much," Brontey said awkwardly.

"I... I can't stop worrying. There's got to be... more I can do for him, Brontey, but I can't seem to... to think what it might be," Ellen whimpered. "The only way I feel I can help is to pray, to pray my heart out, if that's what it takes."

"Get some sleep, Ellen. You sound... exhausted. Things won't seem so bad in the morning. Just get a good night's sleep." She heard Ellen climb into bed.

Brontey lay awake for a few minutes, thinking about her friend's dilemma while Ellen prayed. Eventually Ellen fell into a disturbed state of half-dream, half wakefulness. She was surrounded by the contorted images of angels and devils who tormented her.

*Only sinners break the rules and sinners all get punished.*

The angels sang shrill songs of glory.

*God will answer your prayers. Fear God and ask for mercy.*

Much later in the night Brontey woke. Ellen was kneeling again beside her simple altar, quietly whispering prayers, as the blue candle light cast an eerie flicker around their cubicle.

For the next few days Ellen slipped in and out of Rob's ward whenever one of the young nurses or domestics gave her the nod that it was "all-clear". In between times, Ellen prayed for the haemorrhaging to stop. She clutched her glass rosary beads to her chest, and repeated the pattern of prayers over and over again, taking little interest in any of the day to day matters of the sana.

"I'm worried about her, Margaret," Brontey admitted. "She's not doing anything else than praying, except for having her meals."

"It's beyond me, love."

"I don't really know what to say to her. It's as though she really thinks all this praying is going to make a difference."

"That's what faith is all about, Brontey."

"I suppose so. But it's - I don't know - it seems sort of weird. Can't you say something to her, Margaret?"

"I don't understand it, Brontey, even though I'm Catholic. I've never been as devout as Ellen."

"You think that's all it is? Devotion?"

"Perhaps," Margaret shrugged, unconvinced. "Maybe that's the right way for her. I don't know I have the right to interfere. It's just ... oh, I don't know, maybe Ellen knows something I don't," Margaret said.

Ellen kneeled at her bedside cabinet, late in the evening, her eyes closed and head resting in her hands from which hung a set of black rosary beads. She was oblivious to the night-time murmurings of the other patients conversing quietly after lights-out and the soft footsteps at her side.

"Ellen, excuse me Ellen," said Nurse Sweeting gently. She patted Ellen on the shoulder. Ellen, chanting her rosary, stopped suddenly then looked up fearfully at the young nurse's face. "It's all right Ellen. The haemorrhaging has stopped. You can visit him for a few minutes if you like. He's sleeping peacefully."

Rob had regained some colour in his cheeks and Ellen was convinced that the crisis was over. She kissed his forehead gently, "I love you Robert," she said. She watched him for a few minutes. His now calm breathing set up a rhythm that somehow mesmerised her. She looked at the face of the man she loved, his damp red curls flattened against his forehead, a patch of colour above the jaw-line of each cheek. With his three-day whiskery stubble, somehow Rob seemed more fragile than ever. Her love for him engulfed her in the stillness.

Ellen returned to her ward ever more optimistic. Her prayers had been answered. It was a symbol from God that Robert would be all right and that He approved of their love. Ellen's prayers became less desperate and turned towards thanksgiving.

*Margaret was right, things have a way of working out.*

*Blessed be God. Blessed be His Holy Name. Blessed be Jesus Christ, true God and true Man. Blessed be the Name of Jesus. Blessed be His Most Sacred Heart. Blessed be Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar. Blessed be the great Mother of God, Mary most holy. Blessed be Her Holy and immaculate Conception. Blessed be the Name of Mary, Virgin and Mother. Blessed be St. Joseph, Her most chaste spouse. Blessed be God in His Angels and in His Saints.*

Rob stayed confined to bed and the days passed slowly for Ellen. The crisis had passed, the seriousness of his health was not mentioned in their notes to each other and they pretended it had never happened. Ellen put to the back of her mind the conversation she'd had with Matron and wrote only of their plans and dreams for their future, determined to convince herself that if Robert followed Doctor's rules, eventually he would be well.

Ellen missed the excitement of their visits at the bookroom and the lake. The other women's gossip held no interest for her, so she read, prayed and bartered with God, and planned the colours for her kitchen in the house she and Rob would eventually build in Ballarat. She wanted to sneak down to ward five and visit him, but was reluctant now to disturb him when he really needed to rest.

Ellen had been pre-occupied sketching a plan for their garden since tea-time and was now lying awake, after lights-out, thinking about all the herbs she'd grow outside their kitchen. "You know, Brontey, one of the lovely things about having a bit of land at Ballarat will be the space to have a good garden," she spoke quietly in the darkness. There was always a murmur of talk in the women's ward well after lights out. "There's never been much room in the back-yard in Footscray for more than a few vegetables, but Rob and I will have a beautiful garden with herbs and vegetables and pretty flowers. It will be good for us too, out in the fresh air."

"It's good to hear your plans, Ellen," Brontey said. She didn't add how pleased she was that the votive lamp had been taken back to the hall cupboard. Ellen was back to her old self. "You've really become interested in gardening and plants since you've been here, haven't you?"

"Yes, I love having that little plot outside. I suppose I never took much interest in it before I came here. Mum always did it at home and she isn't the kind of person to let others dig around in *her* garden."

"I'm quite the opposite. I don't think that I have a green thumb at all. Those little pansy things I planted all died."

"It helps if you remember to water them, Brontey," Ellen said scornfully.

"Yes, I know. I just plonk things in the ground and then forget about them. I'm not too good on the tender-loving-care!" Brontey was renowned for her lack of prowess in the garden, in fact it had become quite a joke among the women how her little gardening plot was a haven for rare species of weeds. They both laughed quietly and then stopped suddenly when they heard the sound of gravel thrown against the canvas blind.

"Ellen, it's me!" Rob called to her softly from the other side of the verandah's canvas blind, "Michael Furey!"

"Michael Furey?" asked Brontey, "Who on earth's Michael bloody Furey?"

"It's Rob! It's James Joyce! Oh, never you mind Brontey," said Ellen joyfully. "Rob? Is that you? What on earth are you doing?"

"Hurry up. Matron's doing the rounds and if you don't come out now, she'll catch you."

"Catch us, don't you mean."

"Meet me over near the lake. Hurry."

Ellen pulled on her dressing-gown and slippers and quickly packed the bed with pillows, standing back to view that the scene and the mound could actually pass Matron's torch-light scrutiny. Her heart beat loudly.

"What do you think you're doing?" Brontey said in disbelief.

"I'm going to meet him of course. Oh Brontey, we haven't seen each other for a week... it seems even longer. There," she said excitedly under her breath as she crumpled the blankets around the pillows, "that should fool her."

"Good luck," murmured Brontey.

Ellen hastily made her way out of the dormitory, and into the dark grounds, towards the lake.

"Rob? Where are you?" she whispered loudly.

"Right beside you," and he wrapped his thin arms around her and drew her to him for a tender kiss.

"I can't believe that you were so close to me and I didn't know you were there," Ellen returned his hug and buried her head into the familiar softness of his well-worn dressing gown.

"Ellen, I'll always be beside you. Wherever you are, I'll be with you." They sat on the park bench, still holding each other tightly.

"You're feeling better. I knew it. I prayed and prayed and I knew that the bleeding would stop. I knew everything would be all right. You see darling, God answers our prayers. He listens. God knows about us, how much we love each other, about our plans and our..." she stopped suddenly. "Whatever's the matter?"

"Ellen, my treatment's not working. Doctor Harrington visited me today and said that my lungs are in worse condition now than they've ever been." Rob knelt in front of her, his head buried in her lap, holding her close.

"But... but the bleeding's stopped, hasn't it? Look at you...you're so much better than you were last week. Look how much stronger you are. If you were *really* ill you surely couldn't be out here with me now," Ellen spoke too fast, her words tumbled in fear.

"I'm very sick, Ellen. It's only a matter of... Look. There's nothing and nobody here at the sana that's going to be able to make any difference to me."

"What does Doctor Harrington say you're to do?"

"Full bed rest. I can't cop it any longer, Ellen. I've been in treatment now for nearly three years."

"You just have to do what Doctor Harrington says, love. You've been through it before, all the more reason why you should understand that you can cope with it again."

"But I can't, Ellen. What's the point? Just when things start to look good for me, I'm back to square one. I can't take it any more."

"What choice do you have, Rob?"

"None. But I can't bear for my life to go on like this. I'm twenty four years old. I should be fighting in the war, not lying in bed in a bloody sanatorium - in the middle of nowhere - battling a damn war against TB. I've lost it, Ellen. All hail the conquered hero. I just can't fight any more. I surrender."

"You'd be no good for the country fighting in this condition, love. Come on, Rob, you've just got to..."

"Ellen, can't you see? There's no point going back to the beginning again. I'm not going to get better. Never. At least not this way. Unless some scientist invents a magic cure and I don't think that's likely. I'm one of the hopeless ones, Ellen, and nothing, no matter how much time I spend lying on my back and taking my bloody temperature, it's not going to make me well."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"I don't know. But I'm not going to live my last days in this place. That's what I've decided. Come away with me, Ellen. Damn them. Come with me."

"Come with you? Rob, wherever you go, they'll find you and bring you back. You can't just run away."

"I'm going to," he said, determination in his voice. "Come with me, Ellen. You'll be all right. Dr Harrington says you're coming on well and that you'll be home by Christmas. What does it matter? Look. I've got a cousin who lives in Gembrook. She'd understand. We can go there, it's not far from here, and I've worked out a way we can get there. Mr Wickham, he could...."

"But Rob, you're too sick. You've just got to stay here. We can't..."

"I can't, Ellen. I'm going mad," he said, excited and angry.

"But you might... die...if you go away. Your only chance to get well is to stay here and follow the rules."

"Rules! I'm just so bloody sick of the rules. And how have they helped me? I've made up my mind, Ellen. What's the point of staying here. This isn't living."

They held each other tightly in the darkness. "I love you Ellen, I need you. Having to sneak around the place to be alone with you ...it's hopeless. You love me, don't you? Come with me. We've nothing to lose."

"Nothing to lose! Rob - I want to be your wife. If you leave like this we might never live out our dreams. I can't come with you. Stay, Rob. Show me that you love me enough to stay. It's your only hope. Our only hope, Rob. Please, dear God, you've got to see that you're not thinking sensibly."

"Ellen, I'm no good to you as a husband if I'm here. For God's sake, I told you what happened to Stevie and Kev. Their wives couldn't put up with it anymore and left them. I couldn't expect you to marry me and have me an... invalid... stuck out here. What sort of a life is that for either of us?"

"Don't talk like that. I'll love you whatever happens. That's what love's all about. You don't have to be well for me to love you."

"I don't want your pity, Ellen. I've had enough of people feeling sorry for me," Rob said. "Come with me, Ellen. What does it matter how long we have together. Maybe we'll have a couple of years. Maybe there'll be a miracle and we'll grow old together. But at least we'll have lived. This isn't living. I love you Ellen. I need you. I need to be able to love you...properly. Not like this. Not like some naughty schoolboy sneaking out at night. I can't do this anymore."

"You've made up your mind, haven't you?"

"Yes. I'll go crazy if I have to stay here any longer. I can't take any more of this life."

"Do you realise what you're saying, what you're thinking?"

"I do. Come with me Ellen. Together, everything will be fine. I know it will."

"Rob, I can't believe what you're asking me to do. I don't know what to say. It's impossible. It's...it's mad," Ellen began to cry.

"Hold me, Ellen. Don't let me go. Don't make me do this on my own. It's you...only you that I want. If you come with me, I know everything will work out. I love you Ellen. I love you and I want you so much - more than anything. If I stay here any longer I'll go mad. It's my only chance, Ellen," Rob said, kissing her, a frantic urgency to his voice. "Please, darling, come with me. I can't bear the thought of not being with you."

"It's all too fast, Rob."

"Too fast? You know how I feel. You know how much I love you, Ellen. You mean the world to me. I'd do anything, anything for you. If you love me you'll do this for me. I'm begging you, Ellen."

"It's no solution, Rob," she whispered sadly.

Rob sobbed as they held each other tightly, Ellen crying and kissing and holding him all at once.

"Hold me, just hold me," he said, his hands between her dressing gown and the thin cotton nightie. For the first time they were really alone and the only thing in the world that mattered was their love - not routines, not rules, temperatures and weights. The real world stopped as the stars shone on them.

*'... and suddenly she became small in his arms, small and nestling. It was gone, the resistance was gone and she began to melt in a marvellous peace. And as she melted small and wonderful in his arms, she became infinitely desirable to him. All his blood vessels seemed to scald with intense yet tender desire for her, for her softness, for the penetrating beauty of her in his arms, passing into his blood. And softly...'*

It was much later when Ellen crept quietly into her cubicle.

"You've been crying," Brontey made the statement sound like an accusation. Ellen was surprised her friend was still awake.

"Yes," she answered quietly, taking the extra pillows from her bed.

"Whatever's the matter?"

Ellen flung her dressing-gown onto the nearby chair and climbed into bed. She didn't speak. There was a secret now that Ellen couldn't share.

*How did that happen? How did that happen?*

She turned her back to Brontey, conversation over, then laid awake for hours and re-lived it all, attempting to make some sense of the events there by the lake.

*We've done nothing wrong. Nothing at all to be ashamed of. Nothing. But it must never happen again, not until after we're married. Should I go with him? Could I? What do I have to lose? Dr Harrington's already told me he's pleased with my condition. What would Mum and Mary say if we ran away from Bellington? Oh, Mary would think it all madly romantic - that would really appeal to Mary. But Mum? How could I explain everything to Mum? Would she be prepared to listen? Would she even want to know? Surely a girl deserves to have her mother's blessing when she plans to marry.*

*Footscray seems a long way away. Home. How can I ever return to Footscray after all this time and all that has happened? Would Mum greet me with welcoming arms? Maybe home might no longer be the weatherboard house in Essex Street, the little house around the corner from St John's, the shops on Barkly Street and the...*

Ellen drifted into a light sleep, her exhausted mind re-running the events of the evening as though part of some bizarre film projected on Sunday nights in the hall -

pausing, rewinding, madly fast forwarding. Through it all she heard her mother's voice, shrill and forbidding.

*You want to run away to marry a man who's dying of TB?  
I can't believe you're telling me this. I can't believe it.  
We've never had anything, nothing like it in this family.  
How could you do this to me? How could you shame me like  
this?*

*Have you any idea what we'll face if people hear about  
this? If they know... The shame. I can't bear it.*

*Tuberculosis! God help us!*

*Nobody else will know about this. Do you hear me? Nobody.*

*I'm sorry Mum. I'm so sorry. I love him. Everything will be  
all right, Mum. I promise it will. I promise, I love him. I  
promise.*

"Brontey's coming, Brontey's coming," Jennifer called excitedly from the front gate, then immediately ran to the tram stop. It was Aunty's birthday and the traditional visit had been organised for weeks.

"Hello, little Penny Jenny! Where's my kiss?"

Jenny giggled, stood on tip-toes and planted a friendly kiss on Brontey's cheek. Brontey hugged her.

"Why do you call me Penny Jenny?"

"Because in the sunlight your hair shines like a coppery coin," said Brontey, fumbling in her pocket and flipping a penny high in the air which Jenny caught.

As they walked from the tram-stop, Jenny hoped that all the neighbours saw them, particularly Lizzie.

Brontey searched through her voluminous leather bag, found a violet crumble in its purple and gold foil, and a small nic-nac for Jennifer. She always seemed to know exactly what Jennifer loved, whether it was a special set of colouring pencils, a beaded coin-purse, or a tiny brooch to wear under the lapel of her blazer where the nuns couldn't see it.

Too soon they were at the house and Mum shooed Jenny away so Brontey and Aunty could have their visit in private.

12th May 1943

Dear Ellen,

No news from Joe, I'm afraid. But no news is good news, as Mum keeps reminding me and work keeps my mind on other things. There are all different sorts of people at the munitions. What I mean is, all walks of life. We've got nurses, teachers, housewives and even prostitutes. Mum would be horrified if she knew I was writing this. One was selling French letters to the setters. I thought they were balloons and the other girls laughed their heads off. Needless to say, she only lasted three days. The supervisor caught her and asked her what she thought she was doing. Can you believe she said she was selling them because "a man's passion is seven times stronger than a woman's"! Ellen, it's an eye-opener for me. I've had more education here than I ever had at St. John's.

One of the girls is married with a child and her husband's at the war. She goes dancing with the American soldiers and they shower her with gifts. I don't know how she could do it. There are so many things that are difficult to get now, there are coupons for everything, but this girl gets real stockings, real suede shoes and heaven knows what else from her Yankee boyfriends. I asked her the other day how could she go out with these men while her husband is away at the war and she said she "talks but doesn't touch". I miss Joe terribly, but I'd never go out flirting with other men.

In our section there's a cupboard lined with soft green felt that the finished bullets are kept in. Sometimes the girls take it in turns to sleep in the cupboard. You can just imagine the goings on when one of the supervisors comes past asking where is so-and-so! I hate to think what might happen if we get caught! We have lots of laughs and the girls get up to quite a bit of mischief. Tell Brontey there'll be a job at the munitions for her when she's well!

You wouldn't believe what the women's changing rooms are like. The hangers for our day clothes are suspended on ropes and when we've changed into our uniform we have to

send these hangers up to the high ceiling - they're on a system of ropes and pulleys - so they're well out of the road. It's a very odd sight, all these clothes hanging up above our heads and the ropes everywhere.

Last week I was on early shift and a group of us organised to go to the dance at the Orama. Some of the girls brought their evening dresses into work, and left the munitions all dressed up. Let me tell you, that raised a few eye-brows. It was a fun night. Your lavender-blue shantung has been worn nearly every second night for the past three weeks to one or other of the dances. All the girls love that dress and I let anybody who it fits wear it in exchange for coupons. Vera wore it to the Orama on Tuesday, Merle wore it Thursday to the Trocadero, Saturday night I wore it to the Orama and on Monday young Josie wore it to the Palais. Josie's tiny, so it was pinned-up at the hem and through the back to pull it in on her. One of the boys she danced with was pricked by one of the pins. Needless to say that was the last she saw of him...

Ellen woke late next morning. Her first thoughts in her still sleepy state were to wonder if the events of last night had been real or part of her crazy dreams. What would Robert be thinking. Would he be sorry or glad? The only thing she knew for sure was that they now shared the most special secret. She was convinced they'd find some solution to his health problems, after all, they had each other and they loved each other.

Brontey had left a plate of toast for Ellen on her bedside cabinet. Ellen took a single bite of the cold toast and decided she had no appetite for it. She climbed out of her bed, opened the canvas blind to let the morning light into their cubicle and threw some crumbs to the waiting sparrows. Their little greedy bird-chatter of thanks was a pleasure to hear and freed her mind temporarily from her concerns.

While still feeding the birds, Brontey sidled up to Ellen and said, "I'm pleased to find you awake at last. You look very smug this morning."

"Do I?" Ellen said casually and whistled to the sparrows.

"Yes. You do," Brontey sat on Ellen's bed. "What happened last night - with you and Rob...what did you get up to out there?"

"Brontey, you're so suspicious! And absolutely ridiculous!" Ellen said dismissively, throwing the crumbs to the birds.

"You and Rob rendezvous in the middle of the night, out by the lake, and you don't think I should be suspicious?"

"I don't think it's very fair of you to interrogate me like this. Gosh, you'd make a good matron, Brontey. Ever thought of taking up nursing when you're out of here?" Ellen said with more bravado than she felt.

"Don't try changing the subject with me, Ellen," Brontey said slowly. "I know you too well. Just remember. I've lived next to you for months. We've had every minute of every day together. I know you better than your sister knows you. Better than you know yourself. And I know

something happened between you and Rob last night, something very important. You can say whatever you like, Ellen, but I know you better than you think I do."

Ellen felt the colour rise to her cheeks. "Brontey, I have nothing to tell you. Excuse me." She grabbed her book from her bedside cabinet as she walked determinedly out of their cubicle.

Brontey, stunned that Ellen had refused to impart the evening's events, called to her back "Just remember - the walls here have ears," she announced dramatically. "You're bound to get caught you know, sooner or later."

Ellen turned and faced her, "Get caught what?"

"Just get caught," Brontey said, suddenly wary.

"You know what, Brontey, I'm so happy about it I couldn't care less."

"Aren't you worried?"

"Worried about what?"

"What might happen."

"That's a bit cryptic, Brontey. What do you mean ... 'What might happen.'"

"I mean, does it ever occur to you that as much as we are all pleased as punch to see you and Rob so blissfully happy, you've got to realise that you are breaking the rules and Doctor Harrington *could* choose to throw you out of here."

"My word, Brontey, I do believe you're jealous! That's what it is, you're jealous, you poor old thing," Ellen spoke smugly.

"You're right," Brontey laughed, "I'm mad with jealousy. It should be *me* who has this exciting romance. I bloody deserve it! I'm sorry, Ellen. It's none of my business. Go on, off you go to the bookroom. I'd run away from me if I were you."

Ellen busied herself shelving all the books that had been randomly piled on the desk in the bookroom. After a few helpful words to young Dot who was searching for a book about Paris, "I'm going to go there, Ellen, just as soon as

this war is over and I'm going to drink champagne, and wear a beret, and go to the Louvre, I am, really I am. Brontey says it would be good for me, and to practise my French...", Ellen soon had the room to herself.

She found great comfort in being surrounded by books, a familiar reassurance. She did her best thinking and planning in the quiet bookroom, using the skills from her work at the library of the Footscray Mechanics Institute.

*Perhaps he's embarrassed about last night, feels as though he's done something wrong. Maybe he regrets it. I don't. Not at all. I wish I could see you, Rob. I wish I could hold you and tell you how much I love you. We'll work everything out. I know we will.*

Ellen finished tidying the books and then sat in one of the comfortable arm-chairs for a few minutes, basking in the gentle sunlight that streamed through the window. She enjoyed the pleasure of it all - the sunlight, the peace, the love that enveloped her - then Matron was by her side. The door shut quietly behind her.

"Good morning, Matron."

"Hello, Ellen." There was an ominous look on Matron's face. "How are you this morning?"

Ellen blushed guiltily, her resolve of a few moments ago instantly abandoned, "Fine Matron, thank you."

"Ellen, I think you should visit Robert. He would like to see you."

"Oh?"

"He's very, very ill, Ellen. He's had a bad night. There's been more haemorrhaging."

Ellen gasped. "He'll be all right, though, won't he? He's had haemorrhages before?"

"Look, Ellen. He's really ill and very, very weak. You need to know how serious it is. You can visit him, Ellen, just for a few minutes. Nurse Sweeting will go with you." The young nurse waited quietly by the door.

Ellen wanted to run, to run as fast as she could down the long corridor to the men's wing and into Rob's arms. The restraint required for her to walk up that corridor with the young nurse took every ounce of self-control she could muster. Her mind was frantic, her hand covered her mouth as tears stung her eyes. The muttered praying began instinctively as she walked.

*Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest my sins above every other evil because they displease Thee, my God, Who for Thine infinite goodness art so deserving of all my love; and I firmly resolve by Thy holy grace, never more to offend Thee, and to amend my life. Amen. Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest my sins above every other evil because they displease Thee, my God, Who for Thine infinite goodness ...*

Nurse Sweeting wordlessly led the way down the hall towards the men's ward. Instead of turning right into ward five, Nurse Sweeting directed Ellen left, to the duty room beside the nurses' station. Ellen instantly comprehended the significance. Her thoughts spun wildly.

Robert, alone in the duty room, lay pale faced, coughing fitfully, his eyes large, tired and frightened.

"It's my Gretta," he said sadly.

Ellen rushed to him, fell to her knees and took his hands in hers. She cried and prayed, her voice raised in barely controlled hysteria.

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul. Jesus, Mary and Joseph assist me in my last agony. Jesus, Mary and Joseph may my soul depart in peace with you...*

"Ssh, Ellen. Ssh," Rob chokingly tried to calm her. She sobbed, crouched over his frail body beside the bed. Nurse

Sweeting put her arm around Ellen's shoulder and stayed with her until she controlled her distress.

Ellen sat in the chair beside the bed, looked frantically from the nurse to Rob, searching for answers, for explanations and reassurances. Rob was feverish and not quite lucid. He coughed fitfully and the hideous blood gurgled from his mouth. Grabbing the metal sputum cup, he spat into it and wiped his mouth with a towel. There was a pitiful glumness in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Ellen. I'm so sorry," he whispered. His auburn curls hung damp and flat against his forehead.

"Oh Rob, I can't believe this is happening," she lay her head on his chest and began to cry.

"I can't fight this anymore, love. I've tried and tried and I just can't go on."

Nurse Sweeting left the room.

"But you've got to, my darling. You've got to fight it for my sake. You know I love you. You've got to get better and... and... when you are, we'll go away... just as we planned... lots of fresh air...we'll have the farm. Oh God. Rob I'll look after you. Just get through this. Tell them.. tell them to move you back to the ward. You don't need to be in here. The bleeding will stop - it has before - just...just...don't give up, my darling. I'll pray to Saint Jude. Saint Jude will..."

"Ssh, Ellen. Ssh. It's hopeless for me. Can't you see that? I'm not going to get better this time, my darling." It was such an effort for him to speak. "If there was any way, any way at all that I could, I would," he paused for more breath. "It breaks my heart to think I'm going to leave you. But it's nearly over for me, you've got to understand that, love."

"No, no it's not true. It can't be. Not now. Not after what we've..."

"Ellen, darling..."

"No. God couldn't be so cruel. I love you Rob. I've proved that. We're meant to be together, to have a life

together. Not this. It was never meant to be like this. What will I do?"

"Listen to me, Ellen. You must be careful. Do everything that Dr Harrington says. Everything. You've got a good chance at getting well, having a life," he spoke earnestly, lovingly. "Don't waste it, Ellen. Promise me you'll keep all the rules."

"No. If it's going to be this way, then I don't care about getting well. What have I got to live for? I need you, Rob. I love you. It's not fair." Ellen looked around the room, somehow suspecting the walls had ears. "God's punishing us, Rob. He's punishing us for..." Ellen's hysteria was in danger of spilling over as Nurse Sweeting came back into the room with Sister Jury.

"Ssh. Promise me, Ellen. Please," Rob pleaded.

Ellen nodded slowly. "I promise," she said and burst into tears. Nurse Sweeting put her arm around Ellen's trembling shoulder. Sister Jury said, "Rob's very tired now Ellen. He's had enough. Best now if Nurse takes you back to your ward."

Ellen held Rob's hands in her own, not willing to move. Nurse Sweeting guided her gently away from the bed. Their hands parted with unbearable sadness.

Nurse Sweeting walked slowly with Ellen to the women's ward, quietly calmed her and helped her into her bed. Ellen dragged her blankets up over her head, blocked out the world, all sense of time and the caring stares of Brontey, Margaret and the others. She was absorbed entirely in her misery.

*God is punishing us. If only it had never happened. It's my fault. It's all my fault. I should never have let it happen.*

*O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with*

the help of thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin.

Please, God, let him live. I promise you I will never, ever break the rules of your church again. Saint Jude, help me. I beg of you Saint Jude, by your divine love of the Lord, help me. Dear God show us your mercy. Deliver us from our sins and free us from your harshest punishment.

I have been so weak, I have sinned so badly. I am wicked and have brought on God's punishment. Rob is dying. It is God's punishment. It is my fault.

O most merciful Jesus, lover of souls, I pray Thee by the agony of Thy most Sacred Heart and by the sorrows of Thy Immaculate Mother, cleanse in Thy Blood the sinners of the whole world who are now in their agony and are to die this day. Amen. Agonizing Heart of Jesus, have mercy on the dying.

O Angel of God, to whose holy care I am committed by the divine mercy, enlighten, defend and protect me this night from all sin and danger. Amen.

Visit we beseech Thee, O Lord, this habitation, and drive from it all the snares of the enemy. Let Thy holy Angels dwell herein, to preserve us in peace; and may Thy blessing be upon us forever, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age.*

Just after two in the morning the trolley squeaked slowly down the corridor towards the sana morgue. That noise, that horrible noise. Ellen would never forget it. She spent the rest of the night clinging to Dolly, madly praying, unable to think, waiting for somebody to come tell her the awful news.

*O most merciful Jesus, lover of souls, I pray Thee by the agony of Thy most Sacred Heart and by the sorrows of Thy Immaculate Mother, cleanse in Thy Blood the sinners of the whole world who are now in their agony and are to die this day. Amen. Agonising Heart of Jesus, have mercy on the dying.*

"Ellen." She had no idea how long Father Foley had been sitting beside her bed. She could hardly believe that she needed to be woken, seeming to have spent the whole awful night crying, fearful and praying for forgiveness. Had he been watching her sleep?

Ellen's face remained hidden, pressed into Dolly under the blankets. "He's dead. I know," she said flatly. She couldn't bear to meet Father Foley's eyes.

"Yes, Ellen. Rob died in the middle of the night."

She sobbed. "It's my fault, it's all my fault."

"Ellen, it had nothing to do with you. Nothing at all, girl. It was in God's hands."

"We loved each other, Father. We made plans. Why? Why did God do this to us?"

"Ellen, if I only knew those answers. God works in mysterious ways, girl. It's not for us to know why."

"I just can't believe it. I had no idea Rob was so sick."

"It's an awful illness, Ellen. You know the way it is for some people, they just can't seem to recover, no matter how much treatment they get. Rob gave me some things to give you."

"You saw him? Before he..."

"Yes. He asked Matron to call for me, Ellen. He said he wanted to die a Catholic. That it was the only thing he could do for you. He loved you very much, Ellen. So I baptised him and gave him the last rites."

"Rob asked you to baptise him?"

"Yes - it seems you've been on a mission, without even knowing it."

"I knew, Father, we'd talked about it," Ellen said. She felt little comfort.

"Look, girl. It was what he wanted, believe me. It brought him some peace at the end." He paused. "He wanted you to have these." She lifted her head from her blanket cocoon. Father Foley passed her Robert's pocket knife and his well-thumbed copy of *Dubliners*. A loose paper fell from the middle of the book onto the bedspread. She picked up the folded paper and read it. She could hear Rob's voice. She could hear his clumsy style of picking out the melody on the hall piano. His voice was there, part of her, singing softly.

*"Go back from these windows, and likewise this hall,  
Lest dapping in the sea, you should find your downfall."*

*"I am a king's daughter, and I come from Cappa Quin  
In search of Lord Gregory, and I can't find him."*

*"The rain beats on my yellow locks, and the dew wets me  
still,  
My babe lies cold in my arms; Lord Gregory let me in."*

*"Lord Gregory is not here, and henceforth can't be seen;  
He has gone to bonnie Scotland to bring home his new  
queen."*

*"Oh remember, Lord Gregory, on that night in Cappa Quin  
When we both changed pocket handkerchiefs, and that against  
my will.*

*For yours was pure linen, love, and mine but coarse cloth;  
Yours cost a guinea, love, and mine cost one groat."*

*"Go back from these windows, and likewise this hall,  
Lest dapping in the sea, you should find your downfall."*

*"Do ye remember, Lord Gregory, on that night in my father's  
hall,  
When you stole away my fond heart, and that was worst of  
all?"*

*"Go back from these windows, and likewise this hall,  
Lest dapping in the sea, you should find your downfall."*

*"A curse on you, father, and my curse has been swore  
For I dreamt the Maid of Arran came rapping at my door.*

*"Oh, lie down, you foolish one; oh lie down and sleep,  
For 'tis long ago my weary locks were wetting in the deep."*

*"Oh, saddle me my black horse, the brown and the bay;  
Go, saddle me the best horse in my stable this day.*

*"If I range over valleys, and over mountains wild,  
Till I find the Maid of Arran, and I'll lie down by her  
side."*

Question 256 What is Baptism?

Answer: Baptism is a Sacrament which cleanses us from original sin, makes us Christians, children of God and members of the Church.

Q301: What is the Sacrament of Extreme Unction?

A. The Sacrament of Extreme Unction is the anointing of the sick with holy oil accompanied by prayer. Oil of olives is used. The words said by the priest while applying the oil to the eyes, ears, nostrils lips, hands and feet of the sick person are:

*By this holy anointing, and of His own most tender mercy, may the Lord forgive thee whatever sins thou hast committed by thy sight. By this holy anointing, and of His own most tender mercy, may the Lord forgive thee whatever sins thou hast committed by thy hearing, thy smell, thy taste, thy speech, thy touch and thy walking. Amen.*

## Part 4

The following days passed in a haze of misery for Ellen. She avoided everyone. On the day of Rob's funeral she picked a small posy of flowers from her little garden plot for Nurse Sweeting and Nurse Jenkins to take to the service in Ballarat. There was no possibility Ellen could attend. Doctor Harrington and Matron would never allow her to leave the sana for his funeral, and, anyway, how could she have faced Rob's family? The day of his funeral would not be the time to burden them.

Ellen had no appetite, toyed with the plates of food Brontey brought to her in bed, and immersed herself in silent prayer for forgiveness. At other times she relived her guilty memories, unable to extricate herself from blame. Robert's pocket knife, engraved with his initials on the metal cover and his book were her only mementoes of his love.

"Damn it! My fingers are so cold I can hardly feel what I'm doing," Brontey threw the broken length of cane into the basket beside her and rubbed her hands vigorously.

"Let me," Margaret wove the cane, deftly zigzagging it between the uprights. "It's freezing, Brontey, isn't it?"

"They still haven't melted," Brontey pointed to the verandah where icicles hung from the hems of the raised canvas blinds. "Miserable. Miserable place, this."

"My bed's all damp again."

"Mine too. Horribly cold night. I swear I heard more teeth chattering last night than I did coughing!"

"Doesn't help raise the spirits, does it?" Margaret pushed the cane tray to Brontey. "Miles and miles of grey bleakness." They both looked out over their vista of the Dandenong ranges swathed in fog and misty rain. "Is she awake?"

"I don't know," Brontey rested her chin in her hand. "I'm worried about her, Marg. She's still not eating. It's been two weeks and still her meals are barely touched. She

spends her days buried beneath the bed covers, or else kneeling and praying."

"It's getting worse and gone on long enough," Margaret shuddered. "Let's speak to Sister Jury."

"Ellen," Margaret pressed gently on her shoulder. "Ellen, love, we want to talk to you." Ellen looked up from her pillows with a vacant stare. "We're worried about you, love. We think you're not looking after yourself very well."

"Ellen, you're not eating, not talking, not doing anything. It's not... not... healthy," Brontey stroked Ellen's hair gently.

"I'm all right. Don't worry about me."

"No. No you're not," Brontey sat beside her on the bed. "Look at you. You're not looking after yourself properly." Ellen shrugged.

"Margaret and Brontey are right," Sister Jury squatted beside her. "Even Matron is concerned about you. This is no way to behave Ellen. You'll only make yourself more ill."

Ellen's eyes showed that she didn't care. Sister Jury decided to have another go. "Ellen, I was with you the last time you saw Rob. You made him a promise. You promised that you'd do everything you could to get better," she said quietly and clearly. "...keep all the rules, follow all Doctor's instructions. Do it for Rob, Ellen. Keep your promise, that's what he'd want you to do."

The mention of his name brought on a fresh bout of tears, but Sister's reminder of the promise touched Ellen. It was true, she had given her promise.

"I know you're right," she said. "It's just so hard for me to want to go on, to get better. What have I got to look forward to? I feel so alone, I wish it was me who ..."

"Ssh," said Margaret, "That's enough of that. You're young, Ellen, you've got a life ahead of you. If you truly loved Rob, you owe it to him to do your best to get better."

"You're right," Ellen sighed. "I know you're right."

The conversation had the desired effect. Ellen took on the challenge to recover with the same diligence she'd given to prayer. She ate her meals, weighed herself regularly, charted her temperature more frequently than was required, slept during rest hours and devoted herself to wellness. In between times she prayed, thought of Rob and wondered what she would do with her life when the time came to leave the sanatorium.

The thought scared her. She'd been at Bellington for almost exactly a year now, and there was some kind of security in this strange environment that wouldn't be guaranteed back in the outside world.

*I'll be a stranger when I go home. A stranger. Everything in the world will be different.*

*Here there's no need for decisions about what to eat or what to wear, where to go and what to do, no shopping, no housework, no job, no commitments. And Mum. Will she ever be happy with me? Proud of me? Nothing can ever be the same.*

Gradually Ellen joined in the conversations with the women in her ward. She took up her craftwork again and read, but she was very different now, more introspective, more serious, as she focussed almost obsessively on improving her health.

"How fantastic!" Brontey clasped the letter to her chest and kicked her feet in the air causing a flurry of sheets and blankets.

"What are you so excited about?" Ellen laced a leather wallet.

"The Boro boys and girls, they're coming here."

"And who might the Boros be?" Margaret said.

"Borovansky. The dancers, ballet dancers. They're doing a short season at His Majesty's and they've contacted Matron and offered to do a performance here...in a few months time."

"In our hall?" Dot looked up from the cross-word puzzle.

"No, you bloody dill, up and down the corridor. Of course it will be in our hall," Brontey said triumphantly.

"Well, I wonder how all that came about?" Margaret looked at Brontey and waited for an explanation. "Wouldn't have anything to do with you and Shortie, would it?"

"Don't call him that!" Brontey protested. "Let's just say I planted the seed of a suggestion to Anton, just the seed, and out of the goodness of his heart he's organised it."

"Who's Anton?" asked Dot in her nobody-tells-me-anything offended voice.

"Surely you know about Anton?" teased Margaret. "He's one of Brontey's admirers. And one of the dancers. Pity he's such a squirt, Brontey. I don't think he could ever play the romantic lead in a ballet convincingly. His head would be on the same level as the girls' bosoms!"

Dot shrieked and covered her face with her hands.

"Margaret! That's a terrible thing to say!" Brontey threw her pillow at Margaret. "Anton's a wonderful dancer, one of the best in the country."

"So you keep telling me. Looks like we'll be able to judge for ourselves soon."

"That's going to be beautiful," Dot hugged herself tightly. "I've never been to the ballet in my life."

"Aren't they game to come here?" Ellen said quietly.

"Ballet dancers are known for their fearlessness, Ellen," Brontey said, sarcasm in her voice. "There's no reason why they should be scared to come here. It's not as if we're going to hold them down and cough our horrid little germs all over them."

*It's different for Brontey. So different somehow. She could never understand the way it is for me. For Mum. The way we think. For people like us, having this disease means more than just being sick. It means even more than worrying what the neighbours think. It's so awful. Sick means disease means dirty means poor. Brontey's free of it.*

"Don't be revolting," Margaret disapproved.

"A ballet. Here. Aren't we so lucky?" sighed Dot.

"Yes, Dot, I reckon we're the luckiest group of girls in the whole wide world," Margaret's eyes rolled.

"Oh - you don't have to make fun of me all the time!" Dot said. "Brontey, tell us some more stories. About the theatre. It sounds so exciting."

"That reminds me, Dot. I've got something for you," Brontey rummaged in her cabinet and produced a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. "Mercolised Wax. Compliments of Madge Elliot."

"Madge Elliot, truly Brontey, Madge Elliot the actress?" Dot greedily unwrapped the parcel.

"Mercolised Wax? What in heaven's name is Mercolised Wax?" said Margaret.

"Yes - Madge Elliot the actress. The people from Dearborn Cosmetics let her have as much as she wants. Tell me you're joking, Margaret. Everybody's heard about Mercolised Wax. There's an ad in every program for every show with one of the girls...look." Brontey passed Margaret the program for *The Girlfriend*, which had recently played at His Majesty's Theatre.

Margaret read aloud "'Miss Madge Elliot is one of the

beautiful stars who uses and recommends Mercolised Wax, the world-famous face cream and also the Dearborn cosmetics. If you value your appearance, you too should use Mercolised Wax. It will make a marked improvement in your complexion and the Dearborn cosmetics will make your face glow with a natural looking beauty.' What nonsense!" Margaret passed around the program. "You're either born with good skin or you're not. No sense spending good money to rub that gunk into your face. Mercolised Wax!" she said with derision, "You girls would believe anything."

"Don't take any notice of the sour old girl, Dot. It's all yours," enthused Brontey.

"I can't wait to tell everyone that Madge Elliot sent it for me," Dot said turning the jar over in her hands. "Maybe I should never open it, you know... treasure it always."

"Don't be a bloody dill, Dot. I'll never ask Madge for anything for you again if you don't use it."

"Okay. Beauty parlour time. How about a manicure, Ellen?" Brontey said.

"Oh, all right then," said Ellen.

"If you set my hair, then I'll do your manicure," said Dot.

"Time for me to leave you young lovelies," said Margaret. "I'm off to write a letter to Jim and the kids."

"Not so fast, Margaret," said Brontey. "I've got something here for you too."

"And what might that be Brontey?"

"Tannalite," Brontey said.

"Tannalite," Margaret repeated flatly. "And what on earth might "tannalite" be? I'm almost afraid to ask."

"It's for grey hair," Brontey looked Margaret square in the eye. Dot and Ellen exchanged a wary glance.

Margaret waited for Brontey to offer more explanation.

"'Tannalite for grey hairs: harmlessly restores grey hairs to their natural colour,'" Brontey read from the box, then glanced up cautiously.

"Well, what are we waiting for? C'mon Brontey, Tannalite me. If there's one thing I hate it's going grey while I'm in my early thirties."

26th September 1943

Dear Mum and Mary,

I do hope you are both well. I write to tell you that Doctor Harrington is very pleased with my progress and there is talk that I could leave here at Christmas. I would love to spend Christmas with you, it would be a dream come true.

Mum, Doctor Harrington says that my sputum is consistently negative. That means there's no way that anybody can catch the disease from me. I know everyone always says that TB can't be cured, it can only be arrested, but I assure you that with a good routine of plenty of rest at home and good food there's every reason to believe that I won't break down with the disease again. My temperature has stabilised and I've put on five pounds.

Doctor Harrington broadcasts over the radio weekly about being very careful how to live when we leave here so that on our return home we pose no threat of infection to others. There really will be nothing to worry about.

I would love to see you if it is at all possible for you to visit. It's a very strange life out here away from family and friends, and I miss you both terribly.

Mary, I am making a pair of moccasins, size nine, for Joe for Christmas.

Love to all,

Ellen.

*I need you. I am lost. My heart is broken.*

*How is Mum? What does she think of me? Does she think of me? Is she still angry? I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. What is the world like, my old world. I'm beginning to forget your faces, places, Footscray, St John's. Can you still hear the trams rattle by? How are the dahlias? I'm losing the threads. Everything's changed. Nothing's the same.*

Home for Christmas? Is that what she writes? I can't have her here, Mary. Not with all the family around. It wouldn't

be right. Everyone would be petrified of catching it from her. Ellen can't come home for Christmas.

But, Mum...

25th October, 1943

Dear Ellen,

Thankyou for your letter. It was good to hear from you and the great news that you might be well enough to come home for Christmas. Mum wonders if you would be better to stay at Bellington until the new year. There will be so many people around here and such excitement that I'm sure she's concerned it might not be helpful for you to be plunged into the Christmas cheer.

I thought I was going to lose my job last week. One young girl who works on the gauges is only thirteen years old. She wasn't well, and I reckon she's too young to work anyway, and the forelady timed her and said she was taking too long at the break. Well, I just saw red. Mrs Hooper reported me to the Section Manager who said he'd have to move me out of that section. I told the other girls what happened and they downed their tools and out they went! There was a big meeting out the front and before I knew it, I was back.

I'm now on the executive of the Munition Workers Union and am a delegate to the Trades Hall Council. Mum doesn't know what to make of it all, and I can only wonder what Joe will think. Mind you, I think he'd expect me to be doing this.

We had a rather special visitor at work one night last week. Believe it or not, a very important party came through with Field Marshall Montgomery.

All sorts of things are organised to raise money for the Red Cross. It's surprising that some of the ideas take off. At lunchtime we have spinning wheels out in the grounds. The girls can have a little spin for threepence. We're even planning a girls football match to raise money. Most of us know nothing about Australian Rules, but the main thing is raising the money....

*From The Footscray Mail:*

Footscray residents were shocked and saddened to hear of the death of long-time resident, Mrs Elsie Ryan, on Monday night. Mrs Ryan died as a result of burns from a fire earlier in the evening at the family home in Essex Street. It is suspected that the bedroom caught alight when Mrs Ryan fell asleep whilst reading by candle-light during the brown-out. Mrs Ryan was alone in the house at the time of the blaze. Neighbours, alerted by the smoke, managed to prevent the fire from spreading to other rooms.

"Oh dear God." Ellen began to faint. Matron guided her to sit in the chair. Mary's face was white and tired.

"I'm so sorry, Ellen," said Matron. "I'll leave you two alone for a few minutes." She shut her office door gently behind her.

Ellen immediately grabbed her rosary beads from her dressing-gown pocket and began to pray. Mary hung her head in her hands and cried softly.

"What are we going to do, Ellen?" Mary said eventually and looked for advice from her older sister.

Whimpering, Ellen whispered. "Our Father, who are't in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..."

"Ellen... Ellen...? Can you hear me?" there was no response. "What's wrong with you Ellen?"

Ellen continued to chant. Mary bent down and gently shook her sister's shoulders.

"Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive..."

Mary rushed to the door, relieved that Matron waited in a chair just outside. "Matron... there's something strange. I don't know but..."

Matron summed up Ellen's behaviour in an instant. "She's in shock, Mary. The bad news, it's all been too much for her. I'll need to get her back into a warm bed. Nurse Jenkins," she called and the young woman came immediately. "Ellen's feeling poorly, had some awful news and is in shock. Get her into bed and keep an eye on her. I'll be down to check on her shortly."

Matron turned her attentions to Mary. "I'm sorry, dear. Ellen will need to rest a few hours. Perhaps I could get you a cup of tea?"

"Thank you Matron," Mary sniffled. "I just didn't expect Ellen to react this way at all."

"I think that, given the circumstances, and the fact that - can I speak frankly - Ellen has had to face some ... difficulties in recent months, I'm not surprised." Matron looked directly into Mary's eyes, intentionally cryptic.

"But she'll be... she'll manage. Given time. I do believe, in her own way, Ellen's a survivor."

Mary nodded. "Matron, the funeral will be held at Saint John's in Footscray on Thursday afternoon. Would it be at all possible for Ellen to attend?"

"I'm sorry, dear, but I do feel it would be most ill-advised. Ellen's emotional response to upsets is quite extreme and for TB patients that can be dangerous. I'm sure you'll understand that in Ellen's best interests she can't possibly attend."

"Yes Matron," Mary said. "I would like to see her before I leave."

"Of course, dear. Come with me." Together they walked to the ward.

"I'm so pleased to meet you at last, Mary, but these are such awful circumstances. I'm terribly sorry," Brontey said, subdued, as she hugged Mary briefly.

Ellen lay motionless in her bed, her eyes stared at the ceiling.

Just before tea time, Matron visited Ellen. She was not particularly surprised to see Ellen kneeling beside her cabinet, the votive lamp alight on it, her eyes closed in fervent prayer.

"How long has she been doing that?" Matron asked Brontey quietly. Ellen ignored them.

"Oh Matron, she's been on her knees for hours. It's not good. I'm really worried about her."

"Ellen, Ellen dear... I'd like you to pop back into bed. There's a good girl." Matron tucked the blankets around Ellen's neck. The frightened look in Ellen's eyes was unmistakable. Ellen continued to mutter her prayer.

"You've got to look after yourself, dear. Here, let me take your temp." Matron placed the thermometer in Ellen's mouth and after the required time removed the stick and patted the young woman's shoulder with the assurance that she'd soon feel better.

As soon as Matron left the cubicle, Ellen reached for the thermometer and again took her temperature. She copied the measurement into her diary as had become her habit. For months now, her temperature had been slightly higher than normal.

"Aunty, Aunty," Jenny ran from the corner, her socks hanging down loosely around her ankles, the waist ties of her white-collared summer dress trailing like loose reins behind her. Brontey waved happily from further down the street.

"It was soooo... beautiful....you should've come with us," enthused Jenny as she threw herself into Aunty's waiting arms at the gate."Now I know what I want to be when I grow up, an Ice Follie dancer. And afterwards Brontey took me to the... What was it Brontey?"

"The American Candybar and Soda Fountain," Brontey said breathlessly.

"Yes, the American Candybar and Soda Fountain and I had an ice-cream soda and everyone was all dressed up and we had Fantales during the show, didn't we Brontey? And the show, and the music - everything was beautiful. Where's Mum? I want to tell her all about it," Jenny's eyes shone with excitement.

"Your mother's out the back, cleaning out the chook-shed."

"Thanks Brontey, thankyou, thankyou, thankyou," Jenny threw her long arms ungraciously around Brontey's neck and hugged her.

Brontey laughed, and tugged on the girl's red pig-tails, "My pleasure, darling, and we'll do it again next year for your birthday. Make sure you tell your Mum all about the Viennese ball."

"I'll remember. And the devil, that was the best bit, and the fires of hell!" Jenny laughed as she ran off.

"Maybe we'll even get Aunty to join us next year..." Brontey added.

She ignored the suggestion. "Now come inside and tell me all about it," Aunty said. The two women, one tall and bright like a bird, the other shorter and mousey, linked arms as they walked down the path to the house.

Ellen devoted herself to her personal health project. She ate heartily and monitored her results conscientiously. Sometimes she thought she must have been eating too well, experiencing occasional sickly bouts of nausea. Every week she seemed to gain a little more weight at the Sunday night weigh-ins.

"We're all going to have to diet when we leave here," laughed Margaret. "They try to fatten us up on all this good food. I've never eaten so well in all my life."

"Cream, butter, eggs and lashings of milk - nobody in the sana needs to worry about rationing," said Brontey.

Ellen read everything she could about the disease, requesting medical books for the bookroom. She believed that the more she understood about TB, the better prepared she'd be to manage the rest of her life. Besides, focussing on her health kept her mind occupied so that the distressing thoughts of her future would be held at bay. She felt like a detective searching for clues, but nowhere in the literature did she find discussion of the symptoms she now experienced.

One warm early-summer night, as Ellen undressed for bed, Brontey blurted, "Have a look at you, Ellen! Talk about put on some weight! If I didn't know better I'd reckon you were pregnant, you fattie!"

Ellen's face flushed scarlet. She felt numb and speechless, unable to think of a retort as the meaning of Brontey's words sunk in. With her back to Brontey, she reached to turn out the light.

*Forgive me Lord. I am full of sin. Forgive me.*

Q122. Why is it called mortal sin?

A. It is called mortal sin because it kills the soul and deserves hell.

Q124. Is it a great evil to fall into mortal sin?

A. It is the greatest of all evils to fall into mortal sin.

Q125 Where will they go who die in mortal sin?

A. They who die in mortal sin will go to hell for all eternity.

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

*Hail Mary ...*

Father Foley leaned back into the uncomfortable wooden chair and stretched his arms and legs as far as the confined space of the make-shift converted confessional cupboard permitted. He was about to leave "the box," set up in the corridor outside the hall, confident that all the patients who sought absolution had been in to bare their souls. A few minutes passed since the last filed out with his quota of prayers for penance and a gentle guiding word of advice, then the door on the other side of the dividing purple cretonne curtain quietly opened and then closed.

He heard the person kneel in front of the curtain and, once settled in the darkness, a familiar voice spoke.

"Bless me... bless me, Father... for I... I have... sinned," Ellen whispered.

Father Foley recognised the disturbed voice.

"It has been many weeks... months... since my last confession, Father," she said. "I... I have mortally sinned. I have sinned against God. The sin of the flesh. I have given in... given in to corrupt inclinations and passions." Ellen began to cry. "I need your help. Father, I am in trouble."

"What do you mean, girl, what kind of trouble are you in?" Father Foley said.

"I am... I am having a baby, Father. A child. My child. God help me," Ellen sobbed quietly.

The priest sat in quiet prayer for a minute. "This is a very serious matter in the eyes of God and in the eyes of the church," he said. "Does your family know of your predicament?"

"No Father."

"Why haven't you told them?"

"My mother told me that because I brought this terrible disease into the family, she would refuse to have anything to do with me. And now she has died. And I can't tell Mary. The shame of it... I am a disgrace. I can't tell anyone."

"What about the father?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"He is dead, Father. I loved him. I loved Robert with all my heart and I thought that our love - and God's power - would save him. Heal him. But he is dead."

"You need to talk to Matron or Doctor Harrington. This is most important, Ellen. You must do this very soon. There could be some risk, girl. I don't know."

"Yes Father."

"You will have a heavy road to travel and will need to ask for God's forgiveness and his help. But he is a kind God, Ellen, and a forgiving Father. He will not abandon you."

"I am scared, Father. I am so scared. It's a mortal sin. I will go to hell for all etern... "

"Ssh Ellen. Ssh. When you are at your most fearful, girl, remember that God loves you. If nothing else, he loves you. Wherever there is His love there is an answer. If you are truly sorry for your sins, remember the Lord will grant you His forgiveness. God bless you. Pray to Mother Mary for her help and guidance."

"Thank you Father," Ellen sniffled.

*Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. I absolve thee.*

Q292 Is sorrow for our sins, because by them we have lost heaven and deserved hell, sufficient when we go to confession?

A. Sorrow for our sins, because by them we have lost heaven and deserved hell, is sufficient.

"I loved it, I loved it, I loved it," Dot hugged herself happily outside the hall after the long-awaited Sunday night' ballet performance.

"I told you it would be great. Nothing like a bit of culture," Brontey enthused smugly, nose in the air.

"I was beginning to think we might never see your famous Borovansky show," Margaret patted Brontey's shoulder.

"I know. They'd already booked twice with Matron and had to cancel, they're so busy. Lucky for us about the actors' strike. That's the only reason they managed to come," said Brontey.

"Wouldn't you love to be able to get into town to see that picket line?" Nurse Sweeting puffed as she caught up with them walking back to the ward. "I'd love to get into Exhibition Street and get all their autographs."

"Anton reckons that Gladys... Gladys Moncrieff... was *heckled* by the other actors when she turned up at His Majesty's," laughed Brontey. "Can you imagine it?"

"About Anton, Brontey," Margaret linked arms with her. "I take it all back. He dances so beautifully."

"Oh - changed your mind now you've seen him in tights, eh?" Brontey nudged her. Dot squealed, delighted.

Ellen paused outside Doctor Harrington's office. His light was on, as usual.

"I'll be with you in a minute, Brontey. Just need to speak to Doctor Harrington about my eye."

"Your eye? What's wrong with your eye?"

"That sty. It's still a bit inflamed," Ellen blushed nervously and rubbed the slightly inflamed alibi.

"Fair enough. I'll wait for you."

"No. No don't. The... the girls are going to... to have a game of checkers. You don't want to miss out," Ellen blinked too fast. They stood looking at each other uncomfortably for a moment.

Brontey turned abruptly to catch up with the others. "The game's as good as over," she whispered to herself.

Ellen tapped lightly on Doctor Harrington's door, and waited for his cheery "Come in".

"Hello, Ellen," he said, tired and surprised to see her. "How are you?"

"I'm... I'm. I have something I need to talk to you about, Doctor," Ellen blushed nervously. Just to say such a thing to Doctor Harrington embarrassed her.

"Well sit down, girl."

Doctor Harrington removed the reading glasses perched precariously on the end of his nose, and swivelled in his chair to face her. She turned self-consciously towards the open door, at which he announced "I think we might just shut that, shall we?" He gently closed the door and took his seat at his desk opposite her.

"Tell me what's on your mind, Ellen." She began to cry. Doctor Harrington fumbled in the pocket of his old tweed jacket, searched for his handkerchief and offered it to her.

"Oh Doctor Harrington, I've been so foolish," she shook her head in desolation. Gathering her last vestige of pride, she looked him squarely in the eye and said as evenly and controlled as she possibly could. "Doctor, I'm having a baby, and I don't know what to do." A minute of silence filled the office.

"Well, that's not the sort of news I hear very often here in the sana," Doctor Harrington said. He waited for her to gain some composure. "But as awful and frightened as you may feel, Ellen, believe me when I say that it's not the end of the world." Ellen sat with her hands over her face. Shamed and tired.

"How can you be sure that you're expecting a baby, Ellen? I do need to ask this."

"I'm sure. Rob and I..., Doctor. Robert Atkins." Absolutely no surprise showed on the Doctor's face.

"Poor Robert," he nodded his head sympathetically.

"We sneaked out, only once, Doctor, just to be alone. We met in the garden after lights out."

"You'd not be the only patients to do that, Ellen. I'm hardly shocked."

"The night before Rob died. It... happened. I know I shouldn't have ... I can hardly believe that it did. I know it's my own fault. God's punishment."

His gentle voice comforted her. "I do wish you'd come to see me earlier. Up on the couch, Ellen. We'd better just check this out properly."

Ellen meekly climbed onto the couch, opened her dressing-gown and turned her face away as Doctor Harrington gently pressed on her swollen belly.

"I estimate you to be well and truly into the third trimester, Ellen. About seven months."

"Will I be all right, Doctor? After all you've said about babies and TB I'm quite petrified."

"Sometimes these things are a bit unknown. Although it's a stress on a woman's body that we advise against, I must admit I've known of women to have babies while their TB is still a problem and for some unknown reason their condition becomes... better than it's ever been." Hardly the time to fill the poor girl's head with scare stories, he thought, even if he did paint a far more optimistic view than he truly believed. "The baby is a good size. Here, feel its back." He guided Ellen's hand down the right side of her belly, "and here is your baby's head."

*My baby. My baby. My baby.*

Doctor Harrington rubbed the bowl of his stethoscope to warm it, then placed it firmly low on her belly. "Well, it's a strong and healthy heartbeat that your baby's got there!" After all these years he marvelled at the stirrings of human life with the same pleasure as a recent medical graduate.

"Really Doctor - you're not just saying that?"

"No, Ellen. The baby seems to be just fine."

*My baby. Rob's baby. Our baby is well.*

"Now, how do you feel, Ellen?"

She lay on the couch, her eyes searched the blank ceiling for words. "I feel strange. I feel heavy. And the baby moves so much," she said quietly. "Sometimes, if I get up quickly I feel faint. And a bit sick, but not so much now as a few months ago."

"Well dear, all those things are pretty well to be expected during pregnancy. In fact, I'd almost go as far as to say that you're having a perfectly normal time of it."

"Perfectly normal!" she repeated in a whisper.

*Perfectly normal to be a patient in a sanatorium and pregnant? Perfectly normal to be pregnant and for your baby's father to have died? Perfectly normal to be having a baby with no marriage, no wedding, no blessing by the church?*

"Who else knows about this, Ellen?" Doctor Harrington said, "Your sister, um Mary? Have you told Brontey?"

"Nobody. I haven't told a soul. Except Father Foley. He told me I must speak to you."

"Father Foley was right." How on earth had she managed to keep all this a secret in this place, he mused. Her shame must be dreadful. "Look. I think this is enough for tonight. You look very tired and understandably so. I'd like you to go up to your ward and get some sleep. We'll talk again in the morning. There are quite a few things which we need to discuss and certain arrangements will have to be made."

"Thankyou, Doctor," Ellen said, exhausted, as he helped her down from the couch.

"What did you tell Brontey you wanted to visit me for?" Doctor Harrington said.

"Oh dear! My eye. This sty. It's nothing really but I couldn't think of any other excuse..."

"It's nearly better, Ellen. Tell her we've been bathing your eyes in salty water, if you like. That'll explain the

redness. And that I want to check them again in the morning. Come at ten. We'll talk further then."

"Thankyou Doctor Harrington. Goodnight." Ellen, overwhelmed with tiredness, made her way to her ward. She ignored the inquisitive stares of the women playing checkers, immediately turned off the light in her cubicle and went to bed.

Ellen woke early. She worked on the moccasins she promised for Joe, punching holes through the lambskin to take the corded thread, determined to keep her mind occupied until the time of her appointment with Doctor Harrington. No matter how hard she tried, she could not get the holes on the uppers and the soles to match.

"What's the point in pretending!" she said aloud to herself. "How on earth can I concentrate on slippers!" She reached for her diary from underneath her mattress, and wrote frantically.

*I am going to see Dr Harrington this morning. God only knows what he will suggest for me. How can I have the baby here? I don't want to go anywhere else. And then, what to do? I've heard that they take the babies from the mothers as soon as they are born. That's what Margaret said. Will I come back here? Who will look after the baby? It's becoming very awkward with Brontey. I'm sure she knows. She gives me strange looks sometimes and says little things. I don't know. I hate not telling her, but it seems that I've kept it a secret all this time, and now it makes it even more difficult. For so long I thought that by not telling anybody, somehow the whole problem would just go away. I've been so stupid. What would they all think of me if they knew? There are times when I'm sure that all the girls are talking about me. I feel so cut off from everybody, everything. Perhaps I should just get it over and done with. Tell them all. I'm so ashamed.*

*The baby has a strong heart. If only mine was stronger.  
What am I going to do? How can I be a mother, how can I  
raise a child?*

*Dear Rob, if only you were here. I loved you so much. I am  
surrounded by people but I feel so alone. I have nobody.*

By a quarter to ten Ellen had tucked the blue-covered diary back under her mattress and packed away the moccasins, picking fluffy brown remnants from her bedspread. She brushed her hair and tidily arranged her dressing-gown while she waited. As she walked down the corridor to Doctor Harrington's office, she hoped that the dear, wise doctor had somehow organised a foolproof master plan for her future.

"Come in, Ellen. How did you sleep?"

"Good morning, Doctor Harrington. I slept well. I think all the crying last night wore me out." She bravely bestowed on him a fey smile as she took her seat.

"Well that's good. Most important for you to be sleeping well and eating well, of course."

"Yes Doctor."

"I'm wanting to hear about your plans, Ellen. Obviously certain arrangements will need to be put in order - the sooner the better, naturally. What have you decided to do about your baby?"

This was not the way Ellen had anticipated the conversation. "I don't know. I guess I've been putting off for so long having to face up to this... I don't know what my plans are," her red-rimmed eyes were round with surprise. She pleaded, "I was hoping you would tell me what to do."

"Ellen, I can't do that. These decisions must be your own. Certainly, there are some practical considerations which I can advise, but your plans for your baby... they must be your decisions."

"I don't know where to begin." Ellen shrugged.

Doctor Harrington stroked his chin slowly. "Let's just talk about what needs to be done in preparation for the birth. Ellen' - do you have much... um...knowledge about labour and birth?"

"No, Doctor. Not really. All I know is that it hurts. My mother was not one to talk about such things."

*Birth. It sounds horrific. Doctor says that a few weeks before the baby is due, I should go to the Queen Vic Hospital in the city. They'll put me in a room on my own, away from the other pregnant women. I so hoped he'd be able to deliver the baby here at Bellington. And then, as soon as the baby is born, they'll take it from me. Maybe it's for the best. He says I should stay at the Queen Vic for at least a fortnight and then they'll bring me back.*

*I'm not going to be allowed to feed the baby. TB can get into the milk so I'll have to take something to dry up the milk and wear bindings. Doctor Harrington says I have to decide what to do with the baby. There's a Salvation Home for Orphans. Or there's adoption. Or it could go somewhere until I get well. If I ever get well. If, if, if. There's so much to think about, so many decisions I'm going to have to make on my own. Decisions for me and the baby. I wish someone would just wave a magic wand and sort everything out.*

*Today I feel awful. I'm short of breath. Temperature is up. I am flushed in the face and so very tired. How can I possibly have a healthy baby when I'm so sick?*

*I can't concentrate on Joe's slippers, and it's nearly Christmas. I should be making baby clothes but that's impossible. All I can do is pray. God forgive me. God help me.*

"So - how did you get on about your... eyes?" Brontey's eyebrows arched. She made the question sound more like an accusation than a query.

"Doctor Harrington says they're looking much better, but they still need bathing in salt water. And he wants to see me again next week." Ellen said, looking out at the gardens.

"I'm surprised he doesn't just get you to bathe them yourself. They're not looking too bad. In fact, I think they're quite back to normal."

*She knows. I'm sure Brontey knows.*

"Well thank you for your considered opinion, Doctor Brontey. I didn't know you cared," Ellen spoke too loudly, and briskly nodded. "Tell me, what plans have you and Margaret been whispering about?"

"Not whispering, Ellen. There are no secrets between us. I thought that was the way of this place. No one has any secrets." It was right on eleven o'clock, and the bell sounded for rest hour. Brontey pulled back her bed-cover. She watched Ellen's every move.

"I thought it was more that no one has any privacy," Ellen said glaring at her. She rolled on to her side, conversation over, shut her eyes and welcomed the blackness.

"By the way, Ellen. I'm moving into Margaret's cubicle next week," Brontey spoke quietly in the dark. "Doctor Harrington says she'll need the company. Dot's going home."

"Oh. That's nice," Ellen said quietly.

*Suspicious Brontey. It would be better, easier, to have the cubicle to myself.*

Brontey lay awake and thought about the friend beside her. There were things she knew about Ellen, things she hadn't been told, but for the first time ever Brontey kept her knowledge to herself.

## Part 5

1943

Dot left with excited promises to visit and write to all the patients and Brontey prepared to move into Margaret's cubicle. She gathered her prized possessions into a fruit box - theatre posters and photos, her cosmetics and magazines.

"Have you heard the news, Ellen?" she picked up a photo and packed it.

Ellen put down her newspaper. "What news?" she muttered, her thermometer in her mouth.

"Doctor Harrington. They're transferring him to a sana in New South Wales!"

"What?" Ellen quickly removed the glass stick. "They can't do that!"

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Anything. Not that.*

"That's what they reckon they're doing, and we'll get somebody new here. Isn't that awful?"

"Dreadful! Surely he doesn't want to go," Ellen said carefully, determined to mask her alarm. She shook the glass stick before inserting it again between her lips. Her hand trembled.

"No. Apparently not. Nurse Jenkins says he's really disappointed."

"What will we do without him? He's been here for so long. Bellington really wouldn't be the same with him."

"Of course. It's just the pits. Can you imagine how upset some of the long-termers will be? Poor Alice, she'll be devastated."

"There must be something... something that we could do to keep him here."

*Something. Anything.*

"I reckon we should let the bloody department know how we damn well feel. If they only knew how much he meant to us all, I'm sure they'd let him stay," Brontey said.

"Do you really think they'd change their decision?"

"I don't know, but we'll bloody well try. I think I'll call a ward meeting about it."

"Really, Brontey..."

"What have we got to lose?"

All the patients of ward three gathered around Brontey.

"Who's upset about this idea to transfer Dr Harrington?" she said.

"I am."

"Me too."

"We all are."

"Especially me," Alice said loudly. "I've been here the longest."

"You go, Brontey, go talk to him about how we feel," said Margaret. "He can't go. Let them get someone else!"

"He's out there," Alice pointed to the garden, close to tears. "Birdwatching."

"Go and find him, Brontey," ordered Margaret.

"You can't. It's not the right time for patients to be out in the grounds," Ellen said.

"Come off it, Ellen. Bugger the rules! Yes. I'll go now - he can find his purple chested bed-thumper another day," Brontey marched off.

"Excuse me, Doctor Harrington."

Startled, he dropped the binoculars from his face and turned to face her.

"You're leaving us! We've just heard and we don't want you to go. We're very, very upset - and angry - Doctor Harrington. Why should it be you that goes to Wentworth Falls?" Brontey stood with her hands on her hips.

"Between you, me and the gatepost, Brontey, so am I. I don't want to go."

"Bellington would never be the same without you."

Doctor Harrington smiled. "I'd dearly like to stay and see the X-ray room up and running, but there's not much I can do about it," he shrugged. "Unfortunately, there are simply not enough doctors. So many are caught up in the war. Everybody's making sacrifices."

"It's not fair. Some of those poor old patients in ward four will just...just...give up the ghost if you're not here. That'll be the end of them. If it wasn't for you, old Alice..."

"If there's anything I can think of that would encourage the department to change their mind, I'll do it. You tell the women not to worry too much."

"Surely there's something we can do. The patients, I mean," Brontey said.

Doctor Harrington laughed in his quiet way. "You'd make a good trade union rep, Brontey. I think you'd be a real stirrer! Back to the ward now, leave me to my birdwatching in peace." He unintentionally planted the seed of an idea in Brontey's mind.

"Rightio, Doc," she said, suddenly cheery. She flounced back to the building, her pink dressing gown billowing in the breeze. Flushed with the combination of excitement and the brisk walk in the fresh air, Brontey announced smugly to the women waiting in the ward, "I've got a plan."

Word of Brontey's scheme quickly spread through the wards.

"No thank you. Please take it away," every patient said when dinner was brought to them. "I'm on a hunger strike."

Those ambulant patients in the dining room sent their untouched plates back to the kitchen, then banged their spoons on the tables and chanted "We want Doctor Harrington, we want Doctor Harrington."

The domestics and nurses gathered around. "Right," said young Nurse Jenkins, "I think this is newsworthy. 'Patients revolt.' I can see the headlines now. I've got to let Bert know." She ran from the dining-room.

Eventually Matron Steele clapped her hands and shouted, "Now, now, that's enough. You've had your fun. I won't have any more of this behaviour."

Doctor Harrington, who had emerged from his office at the sound of the din, stood in the doorway of the dining-room, both humbled and delighted by the patients' burst of solidarity.

Margaret called out, "Matron, don't tell us to stop - you should be joining us. Do you want Doctor Harrington to go?"

"Of course I don't," Matron walked up to Margaret, "but carrying on like rabble-rousers won't help you, let me assure you of that. Now. This is entirely inappropriate and I insist you either carry on in a more appropriate manner or else I'll have to impose some disciplinary measures." With every word Matron's face became more flushed.

"If you don't mind, Matron, I'd like to address the patients," Doctor Harrington calmly walked into the centre of the room.

"Certainly, Doctor."

"Look, I'm really touched by what you're trying to do here, and I've just passed one of the nurses who is going to try to get your hunger strike reported in the newspaper!" his mirth bubbled very close to the surface. "So if getting some attention is what you're after, I think you've probably achieved what you set out to do."

"It's not attention that we want, Doc," called Margaret, "It's you. We don't want you to leave. We're your patients, our needs should come before the department's."

"Quite so, Margaret," Doctor Harrington said, "and I am touched by your... your loyalty, but believe me whoever takes over my position will be as entirely committed to you, and to Bellington, as I am."

Brontey stood on a chair, shook her wild frizzy black hair from her shoulders and said, "All right everyone, Doctor Harrington has spoken. We'll stop banging on the tables but keep up the hunger strike - at least until it gets into the papers."

A general murmur of agreement sounded through the room, Matron and Doctor conferred and Nurse Jenkins returned and walked briskly to Brontey.

"Bert says to keep it up for another day, and he'll get a report about it in the Sun," Brontey's fist triumphantly pumped the air as she relayed the message.

"No names, please," called one of the men. "My family and friends think I've been working in the country for the past twelve months, not in a TB sanatorium."

"Mine think I'm up north in the Army!" somebody else called.

"Well we're fighting our own war here, aren't we?" Brontey said dramatically.

Contraband food was pooled and shared among the patients carefully, Brontey having ordered that "rationing" would be imposed as there was no telling how long the peaceful demonstration would need to continue.

*Blessed Virgin Mary, I beseech thee in your holiness to help me. I pray that Doctor Harrington can stay here. I implore thee, don't let them take him away from me, not now, not in my time of need. Who else can I turn to? Hail Mary full of grace, the lord is with thee...*

Within days, a letter from the Health Department arrived, encouraging the patients to drop their demonstration with the promise that the transfer would be "reconsidered" and "temporarily postponed."

*Thank the lord. Thank him for his intervention. Thank him for his mercy and kindness. God bless Doctor Harrington. God bless him.*

24th January 1944

Dear Ellen,

Joe is now home and he is at the Heidelberg Hospital until he recovers. He is not as badly knocked about as some of the poor boys, but it is still a shock for me to see my darling unable to walk at the moment because of his injuries. He won't be returning to service but as soon as he is able, can go back to his old job at Mitchells.

You can understand how very busy I am at the moment. I am working six days a week at the munitions. Last Saturday night some of the girls from work went to the Grand to see Mrs Miniver. It was fantastic. There were lots of A.I.F. around and they looked so happy to be back, but of course it only made me feel more sorry for myself and Joe. I do hope he is able to come home from hospital soon so that we can at last begin a "normal" married life. Heaven knows what "normal" means while this awful war continues...

"Matron and I have discussed the matter, Ellen, and we think it best if you go to the Queen Vic straight from an appointment with me in my office one morning," Doctor Harrington explained. "We'll arrange a transfer by ambulance. No need to make any fuss...."

*No goodbyes. No explanations.*

Brontey sat on the verandah, reading a magazine. She watched as Ellen was wheeled to the waiting ambulance.

"Brontey," said Matron, by her side. "Ellen has had to go to the Queen Vic Hospital in Melbourne. She'll be gone for quite a few weeks... for some treatment... I should expect. Doctor Harrington has some concern about her condition."

"She'll be all right, won't she Matron?" This is all a game, Brontey thought.

"I expect so, dear. But it's better for her to be there for now." Matron said. She wasn't sure what Brontey knew or guessed. Secrets were very hard to keep private in this place and she knew that Ellen and Brontey were as close as sisters.

"I'll be sending Nurse Sweeting in shortly to empty her bedside cabinet. We'll store Ellen's things in the meantime. There'll be another patient admitted tomorrow and she'll go into her cubicle."

"But Matron, Ellen will be back, surely?"

"Yes Brontey. Most definitely. There's no need to worry yourself unduly. But I can't have a vacant bed so for the time she's away somebody else can be admitted. You've got to remember, Brontey, there are so many people out in the community with TB and not enough beds to go around."

"But what about when Ellen comes back, Matron?"

"I quite expect that by then one of the other patients may be about to leave. You know Margaret's been on full days for some time now and I'm sure she's told you that Doctor Harrington says just as soon as her husband can

arrange some help with the children she'll be right to go home."

"Yes, of course. Margaret's been speaking of nothing else."

February 1944

"Ellen? I'm Erica Middleton, hospital almoner," said the middle aged woman with the very tight perm and smart grey suit.

"Yes, yes... come in. I've been expecting you."

"How are you feeling, dear?"

"I'm well, thank you," she replied automatically, realising the nonsense of her words as soon as she spoke.

"Quite comfortable are you?"

"Yes."

"I've just checked on baby in the nursery. She's sleeping soundly and the nurses say she's been very settled. Feeding well."

"Is she? Do they?" she said, embarrassed.

"Now dear, I'm sure you've given a lot of thought to what you want to do with the baby. I understand from my correspondence with Doctor Harrington that there is nobody in the family who is able to take her. Is that correct, dear?"

"Yes. Nobody."

*Nobody. Nobody. Nobody.*

"Right. Well it's time we had a talk about your options. What are you planning to do?"

"I don't know... I'm... I'm so sorry... I don't know," she whispered, staring at the red bricks.

*There are three choices. I can send Jennifer to the Salvation Army home for babies, give her up for adoption or let her go to Mrs Wilson. Mrs Wilson is the wife of a superintendent at Heatherton sana, and she cares for some children of women with TB who have nobody else to turn to. She has a girl who helps with the children. Erica says Mrs Wilson is a beautiful, kind person. Erica says this will give me some time to plan for the future. I wish somebody else could make this decision.*

*I still have to wear the bindings to stop the milk. My body feels as though it belongs to somebody else. It betrays me. Everything is punishment.*

*Erica will take Jennifer to Mrs Wilson's home tomorrow and I will return to Bellington. It is all arranged.*

"I was wondering when you'd be back," said Brontey cautiously. "Better?"

"No. Not' really," Ellen spoke quietly, organizing her holy pictures and crucifix on the bedside cabinet.

"I've got news. Margaret's going home. Next weekend," Brontey said. She moved around the cubicle, trying to see Ellen's face, shocked at how thin and tired she looked.

"After all this time? Is she frightened?" Ellen said quietly.

"Frightened?"

"I know I would be." Ellen knelt, ready to pray.

21st March, 1944

Dear Ellen,

I hope this letter finds you comfortable and making good progress. Jennifer is growing like a little mushroom and has put on 18 ozs in the past month. The other children love to fuss over her and bring me nappies and bottles when they are needed. We all find it such a pleasure to have a little baby in our home.

She cries a little at night, wind I think, and cooled boiled water seems to help her settle. She sleeps well. Jennifer loves her bath of a morning and the other children gather around to watch. She is such a dear and really no trouble at all.

I do thank you sincerely for trusting me to care for her until you are well enough to do so.

I remain

Yours faithfully,

Gwenda Wilson

23rd April, 1944

Dear Ellen,

I hope you are making good progress. You will no doubt be happy to hear that Jennifer has grown so much in the past month. My husband says she is "thriving."

She wakes for only one bottle during the night now which is very pleasing, and generally our day starts at about half past six in the morning with her wanting her bottle.

Young Johnny, who is four, takes special pride in nursing her, and sometimes he gives Jennifer her bottle. Of course I stay right beside him when he does so, but he is careful and gentle with her.

We take the children for a walk to the park every day (weather permitting) and while the other children play on the swings and slides, Johnny likes to push the pram and look after "Jenfa" as he calls her.

Everyone says what a beautiful baby she is which is absolutely true. You should be very proud of her. I will write again next month.

I remain

Yours faithfully,

Gwenda Wilson

20th July, 1944

Dear Ellen,

Thank you for sending the little lambskin bootees for Jennifer. My husband received them from Dr Harrington last Wednesday and I'm sure you will be pleased to know that they fit her perfectly, with just enough growing room to see her through the winter months. They are very well made.

Jennifer has had a good month. Last week she had a snuffle as did the other children, but it lasted not more than two days and other than being a little disturbed with her sleeping there were no other ill-effects, I assure you.

I enclose a photograph of Johnny and Jennifer taken recently at the park.

My husband has also taken to Jennifer very affectionately. He thinks she is a such a sweetie, and enjoys nursing her of an evening. I do hope your condition is improving, Ellen. I daresay that the longer we have Jennifer in our care the more we will miss her when she leaves us. Mind you, she is a treasure and do not be hasty to leave Bellington because of my words. It is so important for you to get well so that you are able to look after her properly and give her a good life which you both deserve.

I remain

Yours faithfully,

Gwenda Wilson

3rd October, 1944

Dear Ellen,

Jennifer is well and happy. She has become a very important person in our lives. We love her very much, I assure you.

I would like to visit you soon as there are some thoughts I need discuss about the future. I have taken the opportunity to arrange with Matron that I should visit next Tuesday afternoon at three, to allow us to speak privately.

Do contact me if this is not convenient for you, otherwise I look forward to meeting you then.

Yours faithfully,

Gwenda Wilson

Matron made the introductions and then excused herself, leaving her office to the two women.

"Please, 'call me Gwenda," she said, well-spoken and friendly.

*What does she see? Am I as horrible as I feel? She seems such a lovely woman. I owe her so much.*

"I wanted to talk with you about Jennifer," a nervous edge crept into Mrs Wilson's voice. "About her future. What are your plans, Ellen?"

*Plans, plans, plans...*

"I plan to get well... get well, that's what I have to do... and I'm working on it Mrs Wilson, Gwenda, I'm doing my very best, and then I will... I'll take the baby, I'll take Jennifer home with me," Ellen said quietly, her words raced.

"Home? To Footscray? Back with your family?"

"Well... yes... I haven't decided yet where we will live."

"But you'll need some support for her, Ellen. It could be quite difficult, in many ways," she said seriously.

"I am aware of that, Mrs... Gwenda, and I will be forever indebted to you for your help over this time. God knows how Jennifer - and I for that matter - would ever have managed without your kindness. I thank God every day for your kindness, Mrs Wilson. I do, Mrs Wilson, I thank God for your goodness. I've done nothing to deserve such kindness."

"It's I who should thank you, Ellen, for trusting me to look after Jennifer," she paused, then looked directly in Ellen's eyes and added earnestly, "I adore her."

Ellen sat still, quiet, waiting.

*Strange to hear you speak of her. Strange. She is more your child than mine somehow. In so many ways, I don't even know her.*

"And that is why I wanted to speak to you. You see Ellen, Doctor Wilson and I are soon to move to New South Wales. My husband is to take over the running of Wentworth Sanatorium in the Blue Mountains."

Ellen stared.

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph, forgive me my sins. Lord, help me.*

"Ellen, we must go by the end of the month. It's one of those things. The department, they've been putting off this decision for so long... even Doctor Harrington I believe, at one stage..." Mrs Wilson took a deep breath. "There's not a thing I can do about it," she shrugged. Paused. "I want to ask you to consider allowing Doctor Wilson and myself to... to... This is difficult... very... We'd very much like to keep Jennifer."

"Keep her?"

"To have her...um... Ellen, what I am asking is for you to allow us to adopt Jennifer. Formally. Permanently."

"Adopt her," Ellen said flatly.

*Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for me.*

"We love her very much, Ellen, and we wonder if it might be better all round - if you understand what I mean - for you to allow her to stay with us. She would want for nothing, Ellen. I can assure you of that." Mrs Wilson pleaded. "We would only ever do what was in Jennifer's best interests."

"I'm sure that would be your intention," Ellen could hardly believe what she was hearing.

"You see, the thing is Ellen, I've grown to love her so very much that my husband... and I do agree with him... he believes that either I should ... we should... adopt her so

that... I can... or else, you see, I can't take her with us. You would need to make another arrangement."

"But Mrs'Wilson, Jennifer is ... is ... my child. Poor child. She is all I really have." Ellen whispered.

"Would you think about it Ellen? I beg you, take some time to consider the idea?"

"Yes Mrs Wilson. I will pray for God's guidance."

*Adoption. The only sensible thing to do. Illegitimate.  
Think of the child.*

"Happy Birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Jennifer, happy birthday to you." Sixteen claps for sixteen candles.

"Sweet sixteen and never been...?" a boy's voice dares as others laugh.

"Shut-up!"

There is a soft knock at Jennifer's bedroom door then her mother comes into the room. Jennifer stands in front of the mirror, feet first into her new dress.

"I could hardly wait for them all to go, I've been wanting to try it on for hours!" Jenny attempts to zip up the back of the new blue dress.

"Here, let me," her mother says softly.

"I love it, Mum," Jenny says. She twirls in front of the mirror. The skirt rustles as it balloons.

"Good. You look gorgeous. You've had a good day then?"

"Terrific. Thanks Mum," Jennifer plants a quick appreciative kiss on her cheek.

"Jen, now you're sixteen, there's something I need to tell you. Sit down love," she pats the bed beside her.

"What is it?"

"Darling, I want to tell you something about yourself that I hope and pray you can understand," she says anxiously.

"What?" Jennifer smiles, slightly confused.

"Jenny, you are so special," she takes Jennifer's hands in hers, inhales deeply and speaks carefully. "You know that Dad and I love you very, very much. And what I'm going to tell you isn't meant to worry you or frighten you in any way."

"What is it?"

"Jen. You are adopted."

13th October, 1944

Dear Mary,

I hope you and Joe are both well. You must be busy, I imagine, running the home as well as working long hours at the munitions. It's good to know that Joe is coping with working again at the office at Mitchell's. It must be a comfort to have him at home with you at last.

These days my condition is fluctuating. Some days my temperature is up, some days I feel very weak. Sometimes I feel there's a beast laying on my heart, suffocating me. I am easily out of breath and still only on half days. It's God's will, I suppose.

Mary, I am in a desperate situation and I need your help. I cannot write to you of my predicament but beg you to visit me. There are things that have happened to me which I cannot write about and I have a problem which I need to discuss with you. Only you. Please, dear Mary, be so kind and generous to visit me.

You do not need to worry about catching this awful disease, no matter what fears you may have. Dear Doctor Harrington has been very clear in instructing all of us how to protect others from infection. There really is no danger to others.

Mary, it is so very important that I see you. Visiting time is Sunday afternoon between 3 and 4. If you could only understand how important it is for me to see you, I know you would not let me down.

Forgive me, Mary. If there was anybody else in the world I could call on, believe me I would. I have never meant to hurt you or cause the trouble and shame that I have.

Please, dear Mary, visit me. As soon as you are able. I pray it will be soon.

Your loving sister,  
Ellen.

"Are you going to tell me who it is you're expecting?" Brontey hated not knowing.

"I'm not sure, Brontey, whether I'm going to have a visitor or not."

"But you hope to don't you?" Brontey said as she wound rollers into Ellen's hair. "Ellen, you've been here for over two years and nobody has been to see you. And you wonder why I'm inquisitive?"

"You're a busybody. Ouch. Please don't ask me questions," Ellen passed her another roller. "Believe me, if I do have a visitor tomorrow, you'll be the first to know."

"You've become so secretive, Ellen," Brontey said. Her hands rested on her friend's shoulders. "You've become a very mysterious young woman."

Within moments of the bell registering the commencement of visiting time, Mary was beside Ellen's bed, hugging her awkwardly.

"Thank God you came," Ellen cried softly.

"How could I not come?" Mary said gently, "I've been worried sick about you ever since I got your letter."

"We need to get out of here Mary. I'll call for a wheel-chair and we can go out to the grounds."

"Don't bother, Ellen. You look comfortable in your bed. We can talk here can't we?"

Ellen looked up to see Brontey at the entrance to the cubicle.

"Mary! It's you!"

"Hello Brontey. I believe you're off home very soon?"

"Yes - and I can hardly wait to get out of here and back into the real world. Another month and my days here are done."

Ellen picked furiously at her nails. Every second was important.

"That will be lovely for you, Brontey. I'm sure your family are delighted," said Mary.

"Of course they are," Ellen said. "Now Brontey, I'd like some time alone with my sister, please." Mary and Brontey looked at each other with mild embarrassment.

"Oh...yes. I only wanted to...," Brontey's eyes searched Ellen's face for some kind of clue. "Goodbye Mary. Lovely to see you." She nodded and retreated from the cubicle.

"There's no way we can talk in private here," whispered Ellen. "I'll call for a wheel-chair."

Mary pushed the wheel-chair towards the lake, oblivious to the beautiful spring weather and the grounds in all their blossomy glory. She filled the silence with noisy talk about Joe, how much she missed their mother, and the goings-on with Vera and the other women at the munitions. There wasn't another soul nearby when the sisters reached the lake. Mary helped Ellen from the wheelchair to sit on the park-bench. They sat together for a minute in silence.

"What's wrong, Ellen?" Mary asked tentatively. "Has Doctor Harrington given you some bad news?"

Ellen shook her head.

"Not really, Mary. I'm getting on all right, I suppose. Not getting any worse. Doing all the right things... now."

"What is it then?"

"Oh Mary, I don't know where to begin," Ellen began to cry softly.

"Whatever's the matter?" Mary said.

"I... I... Mary this is so difficult to tell you. I'm so ashamed. I've been such a fool."

"What on earth have you done, what's happened?"

"Do you remember me writing to you about the men, the patients from Chartwell who came here?"

"Yes. I remember the letter. You wrote that some of the girls were teasing you about one of them. Rob?"

Ellen nodded.

"Then your letters stopped for a while and you never mentioned him again," Mary paused. "I guess you..."

"Rob died," Ellen hung her head, "Suddenly."

"Oh no, I had no idea. I thought it must have ..."

"I loved him Mary. You've got to understand that," she grabbed her sister's hands. "Oh God, how I loved him." Ellen took a deep breath. "There's so much I have to tell you."

"Mrs Wilson wants to adopt her?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Ellen. If only you'd told me earlier. How could you have gone through all this on your own?"

"I couldn't have told you, Mary. I'm so ashamed. I've disgraced myself terribly. I've sinned, Mary, a mortal sin."

"To think you've gone through all of it alone, except for Dr Harrington and Matron. I can't believe you managed to keep it a secret from the other girls - particularly Brontey."

"Brontey has her suspicions. I'm quite sure. There have been times when I've wanted to confide in her, but I can't.

"You must have loved Robert very much, Ellen."

"If only you'd met him, Mary, you'd have loved him too. I adored him and the only link I have to him now is ...is the baby."

Mary nodded.

"She's all I have, Mary. But what can I do? Mrs Wilson cares for her, loves her, and could give her a wonderful life. I know that. But she's mine, Mary. She's my only reason to get well."

"I understand."

"But I don't even know her. Other than for these couple of photos Mrs Wilson sent me, I don't even know her." Ellen took the small photos from her dressing-gown pocket and passed them to Mary.

"She's a darling. To think I have a little niece. It's almost unbelievable," Mary said, as she peered at the photos. "You poor thing."

"What can I do? God knows how long I'm to be here. I couldn't take her from Mrs Wilson now and send her to the Salvation Army Home. I just couldn't do that to the poor little mite. It wouldn't be right. I don't know. I don't know what to do, God help me, Mother Mary help me. I pray to Saint Jude..." Ellen said, agitated. "...and how could I look after her. Even if I get better. What would people say? But maybe I won't. Maybe God will keep me here

forever. Maybe that's his will. His will be done, thy kingdom come. I'm glad Mum's gone, Mary, this would have broken her heart. The shame. They'd all know. They'd know what I've done. It would be awful for us all... Oh Mary, tell me what to do?"

Mary sat silently in thought for a few minutes while Ellen held her head in her hands and prayed quietly.

"Ellen, Joe and I could adopt her," Mary spoke slowly and quietly, trying to let the significance of her words sink in.

Ellen looked at her sister with hope in her red-rimmed eyes.

"It would be the best thing all round. She'd be part of the family where she belongs. You wouldn't have to worry about her anymore and could concentrate on getting better," Mary began to believe the wisdom of her words.

"Would you do that for me?" Ellen whispered, humbled.

"Yes. I want to do it. For all of us. Let me talk to Joe."

"What will Joe say, Mary? I'm so ashamed - you'll have to tell him everything."

"I will, Ellen. But he's a good man. If he knows how much it means ... I'm sure he'll understand. It's the best idea all round. There's just nothing else I can think to do. Pray that he understands," Mary squeezed Ellen's hand. "I'll come out again next Sunday and tell you what's been decided." Mary offered Ellen the photos.

"No. You take them," Ellen pleaded as she pressed them into Mary's hands. "Show them to Joe."

Visiting time had long finished when the troubled sisters returned to the ward.

"Yes, it's been a very busy week, Ellen. And very productive," Mary said, as she parked Ellen's wheelchair in the shadow of a Norfolk pine beside the lake. Mary sat on the grass beside her.

"I'm so sorry, Mary," Ellen said quietly. "I'm putting all this responsibility onto you and Joe. Changing your lives. It's not fair of me. It's all just so dreadful."

"Ssh. What's done is done. We've got to think carefully about the future. I must say Joe's even quite excited about the prospect of having a little one around," Mary smiled bravely.

"Does he hate me, for being so weak and for causing so much trouble?" said Ellen.

"No, Ellen. You should know Joe better than that. We've been to the department for some advice. This is very hard for me to tell you, Ellen, but... it's for the best," Mary said, nervously pulling out single blades of grass.

"What did they say? That it wasn't possible? Surely...."

"No, Ellen. The adoption can be arranged. Don't worry about that. In fact, the advice is that it should be *formally* arranged as soon as possible." Mary took a big breath and proceeded, ready to voice the awful counsel which seemed so logical at the time it was given.

"Well then, that's what we'll do. It's the only way," said Ellen.

"Ellen, they advise that it is best for the child, for Jennifer, when she's old enough, to be told. Told that she is adopted."

"Oh."

"They say it can create awful problems in the future if the child finds out somehow and has never been told." Mary watched Ellen's face intently for signs of despair before she continued slowly. "And they advise that when the child, when Jennifer, is old enough to ask questions about her ...um...natural parents, that she be told in a particular way that won't cause her ... um... unnecessary distress."

"Go on."

"For her future, in case she ever asks questions about her birth and everything."

"Oh no! She must never be told. May the Lord save us and protect us. Jennifer must never know. It wouldn't be fair to shame her with the truth. For God's sake, Mary, she can never know. She doesn't need to know. It's not her fault."

"Of course it's not her fault, it's nobody's fault." Mary's hands trembled. She shut her eyes for a moment before continuing. "The counsellor from the department says it's best in these sorts of circumstances to protect the child."

"And I agree, Mary. It's Jennifer's best interests that I'm concerned about."

"The counsellor strongly advises that the truth could be ... dangerous. I hate to say these things to you, Ellen, I feel I'm adding insult to injury."

"So what should she be told, if she ever asks?"

"The counsellor said that adoptive parents sometimes tell their children that...that their natural parents loved them very much....and..."

"And?" Ellen nodded.

Mary spoke slowly, "that their father died in the war and their mother... their mother died during childbirth." Mary bit her lip.

*Her father died in the war and her mother died at her birth.*

Ellen's startled eyes darted from one to the other of Mary's. "She will never know. It's the only way. Thank God in His infinite mercy. Thank the Lord," Ellen said quietly. She was silent for a moment. Her eyes stared at her feet. "It's the only possible way. I understand. It's God's will. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done."

"Will it break your heart, Ellen?" Mary said softly.

"God only knows," Ellen whispered.

I dreamed of the Archangel Gabriel. The Dear Lord sent him to me. He told me that Mary had a child. That Mary was a mother. That she was a mother of the child although she didn't bear her. I saw them. I saw Mary with Jennifer. The Madonna and baby Jesus. The Archangel Gabriel said it was the only way. That God would bless them both, to have faith in the Lord. And then the angel sang. Thank the Lord.

28th October 1944

Dear Ellen,

Joe and I have been to collect Jennifer from Mrs Wilson. She is such a dear little girl with soft auburn curls. Mrs Wilson was rather upset to say goodbye, and Jennifer clung to her for what seemed ages. She was a little confused for a couple of days, and we have explained to her that Mrs Wilson was minding her for us and that we are to be her Mummy and Daddy. How much she understands is hard to tell. At least we are not complete strangers as we have played with her at Mrs Wilson's on Tuesday and Thursday afternoon to get to know her a little. We do love her already.

Her cot is in our room for the time being, as it has all been quite a rush. Joe is going to paint Mum's room lemon and I will make a new curtain just as soon as we can come across some material and paint, or trade some coupons.

The department says that it may take some time for the adoption paper-work to be finalised, but of course this is not a problem and everything will eventually be organised.

I am not missing working at the munitions one bit but do miss the company of the girls. They have made me promise to take Jennifer down one lunch-time.

Tess has passed on some lovely clothes that her little Elizabeth has grown out of. Do everything you can to get better, Ellen. We want you home more than ever.

Your loving sister,

Mary.

*Mary's child. She's Mary's child. Child of Mary. Good Mary. Sister Mary. Immaculate Mary. Mary the Blessed Virgin. She's Mary's child. She's Mary's daughter. She belongs to Mary. Mary. Mary and Jennifer. Mother and child, mother and daughter. She's Mary's girl. Mary's girl-child. She's Mary's.*

*Blessed be Mary most holy. Blessed be Her Holy and immaculate Conception. Blessed be the Name of Mary, Virgin and Mother.*

*If only I wasn't ill. If only I hadn't been weak. If only Robert had lived. If only Mum would have helped me. If only I was worthy of you. If only I had the means to support you. If only I could have kept you. If only. If only. If only.*

*I gave you a name. I gave you away. I beg your forgiveness.*

## AFFIDAVIT

Owing to ill health and poor prognosis of the mother, Mr Joseph Grant and Mrs Mary Grant (sister of Miss Ellen Ryan) of 35 Essex Street Footscray, apply on this day, November 8th 1944, to adopt Jennifer Ryan, daughter of Miss Ellen Ryan. Mrs Gwenda Wilson of Glen Iris is appointed temporary legal guardian until the adoption is legally enforced.

Jenny waited' for Brontey to say her goodbyes as the lounge of the theatre gradually emptied. She stared at the imposing portrait hung on the wall over the stairwell. The dignified model wore a cream lace costume, a black feathered hat, an ivory rose in her coppery coloured hair. Jenny wandered over to read the inscribed plate at the bottom of the gilded frame. Rupert Bunny, 1902.

Brontey joined her on the stairs and they walked out onto the street, talking excitedly about My Fair Lady, the actors and the costumes and hummed the songs until they found a table at Petrushka's cafe.

"So, tell me all about your birthday," Brontey said. "I can hardly believe you're sixteen!"

"It's certainly one I'll never forget, that's for sure," Jenny sipped her coffee slowly, not really enjoying the bitter taste. "Mum told me something. She reckons I'm old enough to know."

"Oh?" said Brontey, suddenly wary.

"Yes," Jenny paused and looked into Brontey's eyes for any sign of expectation. "I'm adopted," she shrugged and blushed.

"Oh."

"Did you know, Brontey?"

"Um... look, um ..." Brontey paused. "Yes." Jenny nodded, not surprised. "I can't believe I never suspected. Liz says I must be a bloody dill...oops, sorry... not to have known. Nobody else in the family has red hair."

"Mm."

Jenny added another spoonful of sugar to her coffee and stirred. "My mother died when I was born and my father died at the war. I guess that makes him a hero," Jenny shrugged.

"That's what... that's what Mary told you, is it?" Brontey shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"Yep," Jenny sipped froth from her spoon.

"Do you want to talk about it?" said Brontey.

"There's no more to tell. End of story. And you know, I never had a clue. That's the funny bit. I just feel like Mum and Dad are my parents. Family. I can't believe it to be any other way. Liz says I'm refusing to accept it, that it just hasn't sunk in, you know."

"I guess it might take time, Jen, to really make sense of."

"I don't know. I'm trying not to think about it. There's nothing I can do to change anything," she sipped her coffee.

"Do you know who she is, Brontey?" Jenny said thoughtfully. Brontey closed her eyes. Her shoulders slumped. She dared not answer.

"The woman in the painting," Jenny said. "At Her Majesty's. I'm sure I should know who she is. It's like I know her, but I don't recognise her."

Brontey caught the cue. With a breath of relief she said "It's Melba, darling. Nellie Melba."

"Nellie Melba! Her hair's exactly the same colour as mine."

"Yes, it is. Or it was. Penny coloured hair."

"You know, with that hair, she could be my aunt, or my grandmother or something. Just the colour of her hair," Jenny said self-consciously.

"Beautiful coppery hair," Brontey smiled, relieved.

"I've never seen a picture of Melba where she looks like that. I didn't recognise her," Jenny said.

"Yes, it's funny. In that painting she doesn't look the way most people remember her. But it's Melba. It's our Nellie."

## Part 6

## ON LEAVING BELLINGTON SANATORIUM

You have been advised it is now time for you to leave Bellington Sanatorium and return to your home. You must always keep in mind that you have had a very serious illness, and that you will need to be always mindful of the way you care for yourself. There are some guide-lines which should be observed - think of them as "rules" - for your continued good health.

You must pay careful attention to lead a moderate life-style. Remember that you need to rest. It is expected you will include the habit of an afternoon rest-hour into your daily routine. You must have adequate sleep.

Your activities should be quiet and not of the type that exert you unnecessarily. Walking, of course, is an excellent form of exercise to maintain your health and fitness. Incorporating moderate daily exercise is most important. Light gardening is also an activity that you can expect to be able to enjoy. A nutritious diet is most important to your general well-being.

It is your responsibility to maintain good hygiene practices in your homes.

Remember, tuberculosis can only be arrested, not cured. You will be required to attend regularly for X-rays to assess your TB health status.

We wish you well with your restored health.

"Everything looks the same," Ellen said surprised, as Joe helped her from the car.

"Nothing much changes around Footscray," he said gently. Joe took her small bag from the boot while Ellen looked around for some tell-tale signs of the fire, some evidence that everything was as different as she felt.

*Nothing is the same. It never will be again.*

Ellen held Dolly in one hand and her hat in the other, as a figure appeared on the verandah. Tess rushed excitedly down the pathway and through the wrought iron gate.

"Ellen, how are you?"

*What does Tess know? What has Mary told her?*

"Come in out of this cold. I swear it's a late spring this year. There she is now..." Tess pointed to the figure running along Essex Street towards them.

*It's Mum. It's got to be Mum.*

"Oh God," Ellen gasped, her hand and hat covered her mouth. And then the realization hit. It was Mary running towards her. Mary wearing Mum's beige gabardine rain-coat. Panting, Mary's face was flushed as she reached the trio at the gate.

"Ellen, I can hardly believe it," Mary hugged her.

"I'll be off then," Tess said. "Good to have you home, Ellen."

"Thanks, love, for minding the little one," said Mary.

"No trouble at all, Mary. She's slept until a few minutes ago. Just stirring now," Tess said. "I only wish my Elizabeth would still have a morning nap. Cheerio."

Somehow Ellen walked the steps down the pathway and through the front door with Mary and Joe. Somehow she was in the sitting-room'. Somehow she was still standing when Jennifer ran from the front bedroom to Mary's side and tugged at Mary's skirt.

Ellen felt the start of a strange sensation. Perhaps she was about to faint, but the wave passed quickly.

"Mumma, Mumma," the child said in a sleepy voice as she tried to scramble up Mary's legs by way of the coat. Mary scooped her up by one arm onto her hip.

"Jennifer," Mary said quietly, watching Ellen's face. "This is Ellen. Aunty Ellen. She's going to live with us. This is her home too."

"No," the baby voice was firm. "Mummy, Daddy and Jenny."

"No darling, Aunty lives here too. She's just been away. On a long holiday. And now she's back," Mary's lips stretched wide in an attempt to find a smile. "Don't be frightened," she said quietly.

*Grab her and run. Run away with her. Mum's voice, "Don't go off like a headless chook". Chooks. Headless chooks. Poor, pathetic headless chooks. God help me.*

The little child buried her head in Mary's shoulder, her thumb firmly anchored in her mouth.

"Hello, Jennifer," Ellen said, shaking. "I'm your Aunty Ellen."

Jennifer lifted her head and looked at the strange woman. "Aun...ty, aun...ty," she played with the sounds as Mary and Ellen desperately sought the rules of this game in each other's eyes.

"Well, that's that," Joe said, tugging at his collar. "Come and I'll show you what we've done to the fernery, Ellen, while Mary gets us all a cuppa."

Joe ushered Ellen past the kitchen and down the back step into the skillion-roofed area at the back of the house used for washing and bathing. The copper, the concrete trough, the bath-tub were exactly as they had been when Ellen last saw them three years before. But here there was change. The rest of the fernery had been transformed.

"It's quite lovely," Ellen said, overwhelmed at the sight of her bed with its familiar old pink candlewick bedspread cover. Her clothes cupboard stood sentry near the foot of the bed, and on the other side of it, a bentwood chair that had always lived in the sitting-room. A new cushion, fancyworked with flannel flowers, occupied its seat. Beside the bed, a small china vase brimming with crimson snapdragons and yellow-centred white daisies sat on a snowy linen cloth draped over an upturned fruit box.

Joe had fashioned a kind of a floor for her bed, a platform above the dirt floor.

"There's everything here I need," Ellen said. Surrounded by the slatted louvres, Ellen thought the whole scene successfully mimicked her cubicle at Bellington. "It's perfect, Joe. Thank you."

"Of course it's only temporary, Ellen. Just as soon as you think you're ready, we'll move you back into your old bedroom," Joe said earnestly. "I really don't know how you'll bear the cold out here."

"I'm quite used to the cold, Joe. It doesn't bother me at all now."

"It seems so spartan, Ellen, but we've no idea what else you'd like us to do," Mary joined them.

"It's fine. Please, don't fuss," Ellen insisted. She longed to climb into her bed and sleep. The morning had exhausted her.

"Where's that cup of tea, Mary?" said Joe.

As they sat around the old kitchen table, Ellen was painfully aware of the guardedness in their conversation.

Joe and Mary spoke of everything except themselves, today, and relived the recent celebrations for the end of the war.

"You can't imagine the crowds in the street, Ellen. All dancing and shouting."

"And the din," Joe helped himself to another lamington. "Sirens, bells, whistles..."

"Kiddies from schools yahooping in the street... Everyone stopped work, didn't they love? Everyone joined in the fun," Mary smiled. "There'll never be another day like that again."

"After so long, it's almost strange it's over," Joe sipped his tea. "It's funny, Ellen, you sort of missed it all, in a way, didn't you?"

She nodded, unable to find any words to share.

*After so long, it's almost strange it's over. It's over. I've survived, haven't I? Everything. Everything. Everyone. Someone please tell me, who won?*

She finished her tea and cake, excused herself and picked up her cup, saucer and plate. As she passed the kitchen she grabbed a clean tea-towel from a freshly ironed pile on the dresser and stepped down to the fernery. At the troughs, Ellen poured a splash of phenyl over her dishes, then scalded them with a jugful of steaming water from the copper. She dried them carefully.

"Did you see that?" Mary whispered, frowning.

"Ssh. Let her go, love. It's going to take us all a while."

"But she doesn't need to do that," Mary said horrified.

"Just let it go. You can't expect her to behave as though everything's back to normal. Give her time."

"Ellen, how about we take it in turns cooking tea of a night?" said Mary, stringing beans at the kitchen table. "You've always been a much better cook than me."

"Oh, no Mary, I can't. I wouldn't," Ellen said, still engrossed in the woollen square she crocheted.

"Just because you haven't done any cooking for a while, that doesn't mean..."

"Mary, you don't understand," Ellen rested the hook and wool in her lap. "It wouldn't be wise for me to handle food."

"What?"

"I might...contaminate it, Mary," she leaned over, her face only inches from her sister's, her eyes intent. "I couldn't possibly take the risk."

"But Ellen, you're not infectious. What's there to worry about? Did Doctor Harrington say that you shouldn't handle food?"

"No. He didn't. But I'd prefer not to. It's not wise, Mary, that's all."

"Ellen, we're not frightened of catching it from you, for heaven's sake. You're better now."

"You don't really want me preparing meals for you, Mary. Breathing over the food that Jenny and Joe eat?" Ellen said emphatically.

"You're being ridiculous. There's no need to be so...obsessive."

"Call it what you like Mary, I call it *careful*, that's all."

"You need to relax a bit, Ellen," Mary frowned. "It's the only thing you think about... TB, I mean. You're home now. Just relax. Everything's back to normal," she said sharply.

Ellen grabbed her crochet and rushed from the kitchen into the fernery, shutting the back door behind her. She lay on her bed, clutching Dolly and cried.

*Back to normal. Nothing could ever be normal again.*

She felt her'pulse. Counted the beat for twenty seconds, multiplied it by three then recorded it in her diary. Ellen took her thermometer from the glass on the table beside her bed, and placed the cool stick between her trembling lips.

"I don't understand her, Tess. She's got this routine. Every day's the same," Mary said, as they supervised Elizabeth and Jenny playing hide-and-seek in the back yard.

"I've noticed her up at the tram stop of a morning. She's still going into Saint Monica's every day?"

"Yes. Hasn't even been near Saint John's since she came home. Reckons she needs to go to a real church, you know, stained glass windows and everything."

"They've been saving ever since I can remember to build a proper church at Saint John's instead of just converting the classrooms for masses."

"But that's not *it*, Tess. I'm sure she's just doing it to avoid people she knows. And I'm sure she doesn't speak to anybody up at Saint Monica's."

"Really?"

"She just slips in down the back, and after mass finishes she stays and organizes the flowers and... I don't know... mends the altar linen and dusts. That sort of thing. Every day's the same. Then she catches the tram back with her head always in a book so she doesn't have to talk to anybody. And she hasn't even been near the Mechanics Institute since she came home."

Tess shook her head. "What does she do of an afternoon?"

"We have a bit of lunch, and then she lays down for an hour or so, and spends most of the rest of her time in the fernery or pottering out here in the garden. I hear her humming hymns and other bits and pieces, but... She's living like a nun, that's the only way I can describe it. She won't mix with people. I'm really worried about her."

"I had no idea it was this serious," said Tess.

"I didn't want to say anything. I guess I was hoping she'd sort herself out... relax a bit, as time went on. But she's getting worse, Tess, not better. She's sort of taken to... muttering, I don't know, chanting or something..."

talking to herself. Prayers and songs. I'm really concerned about her."

"Go back from these windows and likewise this hall... la la la la la..." I see this look pass between us. It might come when I brush Jenny's hair, and I bend close, close enough to smell her, her breath, her skin... and Mary's watching, and there's a sadness crosses her face and a wariness, and it's that moment I shut the door - that door in my heart that says "mother". She's Mary's child. Mary's child. It's the only way. It's the only fair way. We promised. It's how it has to be. I'm grateful. I've got to be grateful. So I shut the door and then the birds fly out. Uncaged. They're in my chest fluttering wildly, around my eyes, menacing.

"This is what she does, I see her do it at least three or four times every day," Mary whispered to Joe.

"Why don't you just say something to her?" he said.

"I don't know what to say. She's just so... different."

"Of course she is, love. She's been through one hell of an experience. Don't underestimate the effect it's had on her," Joe said calmly.

"I know, I know, but it's as if she doesn't want to go back to being *normal*..."

"Whatever that means..." Joe said. "She can't go back. Nobody can, ever." They sat in silence for a minute before he continued. "It must be bloody awful for her, what she's been through. This situation... and having to face people again who she hasn't seen for three years."

"But she's got the rest of her life in front of her. She's got to make the most of it. Ellen's still a young woman."

"Of course she is. But what she's been through, and what she's lost and the way she is... She's not strong like you, Mary."

"But she's well again. She should be doing things. Look at Brontey. She's back working at His Majesty's."

"Listen love. Ellen's not like Brontey, and she's had a lot happen that Brontey didn't go through. Just remember that. She's frail, in a way. Maybe she always has been and we just never noticed it before. Don't expect miracles."

"It's like she's scared. Not just scared of getting sick again, but scared of life. Sometimes I feel like giving her a good shake," Mary said.

"Just put up with it all. Maybe as time goes on she won't feel the need to be quite so vigilant, about the food and her temperature and... everything."

"For you!" Brontey giggled as she stumbled off the back of the BSA motor bike, and thrust a small parcel to Ellen's chest. "Happy birthday."

Ellen laughed, "Brontey, you're such a wild one! It's so lovely to see you."

"G'day Ellen," the black haired young man riding the bike grinned at Ellen. "I'm Jack. Happy birthday," he said over the put-put of the motor.

"Thank you. It's so good of you to bring Brontey to visit."

"That's all right. I've got mates in the area to catch up with. So I'll see you at three then, Brontey?"

Brontey nodded, leaned over and kissed his mouth. Jack winked, roared the engine and took off, waving.

Brontey and Ellen linked arms as they walked towards the house. "Ssh," said Ellen, a finger to her lips as they stepped into the hall. "Jennifer's sleeping."

"Jennifer?"

"Mary's daughter," Ellen said. Her voice feigned a casualness she didn't feel as they sat on the couch in the sitting room.

"Daughter? I didn't know Mary and Joe had a baby! How old is she?"

"She's two, just turned two," Ellen said, her hands trembling slightly as she opened her gift.

"What? A two year old?" Brontey said, confused.

"I meant to write and tell you, Brontey. I should have... um... Joe and Mary decided to adopt a little one... before I came home from Bellington," Ellen whispered the words, shaking her head in such a way to indicate that further conversation about the topic was unnecessary.

"Oh. Isn't that lovely of them. There are so many little ones without families... with the war and everything... What's she like?"

"She's a precious, dear little thing," Ellen said softly. "They love her to bits. Now, what have you got me

here, Brontey? Stockings! Real stockings! How on earth did you manage to get them?"

"Don't tell Jack, but I've got another boyfriend, or sort of a boyfriend. American airman. He gets me all sorts of wonderful things."

"Brontey, that's terrible," Ellen laughed, "but thank you. They're such a treat."

The back door slammed behind Mary, her arms full of lettuce and tomatoes which she dropped onto the kitchen table. She quickly pulled off her apron, and rushed into the sitting room.

"It's great to see you Brontey. My word, you are looking well."

"Hello, Mary. Nice of you to say so," Brontey said, patting her carefully styled black hair.

"Have you heard from the other girls? How is Margaret? And... Dot? How's Dot?" asked Mary.

"Margaret's fine. She writes to me when she gets the chance. And Dot... well, she's working as a stenographer in the city and I rang her one day, you know, I thought about organising a reunion of the ward girls, to go out for lunch. But she didn't want to know about it."

"Really?" said Mary.

"Yes. She said, 'Look, I'm just not that interested. I've put all that behind me, like it happened to somebody else. I don't need to keep reliving it. I feel like I've been given a new chance at life. Reborn. I'm a different me, now.' She sounded so different, so calm, it didn't even sound like Dot at all. She even called herself 'Thea', a new name," Brontey shrugged.

"Who'd have thought..." said Ellen.

Jennifer appeared across the hallway, rubbing her eyes sleepily. "Drink, mummy, drink," she said in a small half-awake voice.

With one arm, Mary lifted Jennifer up to her hip in a practised motion, turning her around to face Brontey.

"This is our Jennifer," Mary said proudly.

"Hello, Jennifer, aren't you a...", as the child's eyes met Brontey's, the shock of familiarity silenced her. She was looking into Rob Atkins' dark brown eyes with the fringe of thick black lashes, and the little girl wore his unruly red curls encircling her round face.

Ellen spoke quickly, filling the gap left by the sudden silence. "She's a darling. Just a little darling." Ellen stared at Brontey, a daring defensiveness. Something like that. The moment passed.

Mary rocked the child on her hip playfully then said, "I'll leave you two in peace for a minute. Lunch is just about ready to serve."

The small sitting-room was stifled by silence. Brontey spoke, stunned. "Why didn't you tell me?" she said softly. "Why didn't you trust me?"

Ellen bowed her head, all colour drained from her face.

*The birds are flapping, biting.*

"Lu-unch," Mary called from the kitchen.

"Pass me' the green, you wear the blue. Don't you think that 'green looks better with my eyes?"

"Much. You need a bit more though. To really bring them out. Here, let me. Stop fluttering, Lizzie."

"'Beth', not 'Lizzie', okay?"

"All right. It's just hard to remember, that's all. Beth. It sounds so much more... adult."

"Good. Now how do I look?"

"See for yourself." Jen handed her the mirror.

"Bloody hell - I look just like me mum."

"Of course you do. You're very like her. You could be sisters!"

"Thanks a lot! I don't want to look *that* adult."

"Look at your eyes, particularly with the green eyeshadow. They're just the same colour and the same shape as your mum's. Like those nuts, what are they called?"

"Almonds."

"Yes, almonds. It's nice, really. Family resemblance. It must be ...nice ...for you."

"Oh, Jen. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to ...I feel awful now."

"Don't be a dill."

"It's just that I feel so ... awkward."

"Don't feel awkward. It doesn't matter, Lizzie. It doesn't bother me. Forget about it."

"You don't understand. You're the only person in the whole world I know who's adopted. Oh God, now I'm only making it worse."

"You're not making anything worse. I've told you before. It's just a fact of life for me. I think I'm lucky to be adopted, to have Mum and Dad. It really doesn't matter much. It's not a big deal. I'm just like everybody else."

*It's no big deal. I'm the same as everybody else. I'm just the same. Normal.*

"Of course you are. I'm not saying you're 'different' or anything...But what I mean is... it's me. Look. Tell me just to shut-up if you like. I would. It's just that I want to ask you all these questions about it. But Mum says it's not my business."

"Your Mum says that?"

"It's not like we talk about it. You. Or anything. It's just..."

"Lizzie. I am more than happy to confront your interrogation about my strange state if it will prove to you that I did not come from another planet."

"Well, don't you ever just sort of wonder... wonder what your mother might have been like? She might have been beautiful or exotic or ...or anything. Don't you wonder about things like that?"

"I'm quite convinced that she was beautiful... after all, if she wasn't then my father must have been! But then again, there are times when I'm quite sure I was... hatched...yes hatched from a... a ...meteorite egg, that came from the Planet of Loveliness in the Galaxy of Charm. That explains why my nearest living natural relative is an alien and accounts for my superb beauty," Jenny raved. "Can you notice that pimple... there... I've put so much pancake makeup on it, it looks like another nose protruding from my face."

"It does not. You can't notice it at all, unless you're up really close."

"How close?"

"You want me to change the subject...right?"

"No, I don't. It's just that I've really got no thoughts on it to share with you. Honestly, I don't think about it."

"Why? Why not? I'd be thinking about it all the time if I was you."

"What's there to think about? My mother died at my birth... do you really expect me to dwell on that?"

*I'm born. She died. That's the most horrible thing.*

"I'll never come to grips with it, Lizzie, but I'm bloody sure I'm not going to distress myself wondering about it all the time. My father died in the war. Okay - that's not so unusual, there's lots of girls at Our Lady's whose dads died that way. It's not like they didn't want me or anything. It's not like I'm one of those who was given away by their mothers. If it was like that, then I'd have something to feel really awful about. There was no choice but for me to be adopted out, seeing as though they had both died."

"But don't you wonder what kind of people they were? What they might have looked like?"

"Nobody can tell me about those things, Lizzie, that's what happens when you get adopted. It's a closed book and they are just things I'll never, ever know." Jenny paused, choosing her next words carefully. "I'm ...refusing....to agonise about it."

"But you never talk about it, Jenny, you never say a word about it. If it was me, I probably wouldn't stop talking about it. You don't talk about it and I think that means you don't want to talk about it."

"I'm not such a rarity at all, Liz. I'm really just the same as everybody else. It's not such a big deal. There's far more interesting things going on in other people's lives than the fact that I'm adopted."

"Is it okay by you for people to know about it?"

"For Godsakes Lizzie, when I get introduced to somebody, do you really expect me to say 'Hello, my name's

Jennifer and I'm adopted'?" she threw a pillow at Lizzie's face.

"Look, Jen. This is no joke. Be serious."

"I'm the poor adopted child here," Jenny said, the back of her hand to her forehead in a gesture of pathetic dramatic sadness, "Sorry. But you've got mascara all over your face now. Look." They stood at the mirror together as Jenny directed Lizzie in rubbing off the black smudge.

"Is there anything else bothering you Lizzie, about me?"

"Yes. There is. I have to be honest."

"Oh God... don't tell me there's more!"

"Oh, forget it. It's none of my damn business. Let's face it. I just wish sometimes I wasn't so...curious about you and your family."

"So. It's 'my family' now. What's worrying you?"

"Look. It's Aunty."

"Mh." Jenny thought she knew what might be coming.

"What about Aunty?"

"Ellen, there's a craft afternoon up at the parish on Wednesday. I'm going. We're getting things organised for the fete. Come with me?"

"No. No, Mary. I couldn't possibly. No. You just bring some materials home and I'll cover coathangers and make lavender bags here."

"Wouldn't you like to see some of the girls? They all ask after you?"

"No. No it's better if you bring the things home. I work better on my own. I'll see them... soon, some other time... maybe. Better I stay here. I can look after Jenny."

*Sometimes, when we're on our own, I pretend. I open the door a tiny bit. I know it's wrong. But I hold her little hand and stroke her face and I pretend. Ssh, only when Mary's not around. And the birds stay caged.*

1947

"Hello, Ellen, it's me," said Brontey loudly into the phone. "I've got tickets to see Annie Get Your Gun. It's a great show. Evie Hayes is playing the lead. Come with me, Ellen. It'll do you good. Purleez?"

"I don't think so Brontey. No. I'm not really one for going out much of a night."

"I'll swap them for a Sunday matinee. Go on, Ellen. You never seem to go anywhere."

"No. It'd be a waste of a ticket. really. You go and just let me know what it's like."

Part 7

"It's me, Aunty," Jennifer called as she walked through the silent house to the fernery. She was tired. A co-ordinators' staff-meeting after school had made her day later than she'd planned. Her feet hurt. She manoeuvred herself through the narrow doorway from the kitchen into her aunt's room with Ellen's tea on a tray. Ellen knitted, and didn't look up from the wool. She seemed oblivious to Jennifer's arrival.

"...knit four, yarn forward, slip one, knit one, pass the slip stitch over, knit four, yarn forward, slip one..." Ellen chanted feebly while Jennifer set the tray on the little table and then sat on the bed, waiting for Ellen to notice her.

The knitting was a mess, a scramble of greyed white baby wool, half achieved feather-and-fan patterns, dropped stitches and loops.

"...yarn forward, slip one, knit one, pass the slip stitch over, knit four, yarn forward, slip one, knit one, pass the slip stitch over, knit four, yarn forward..." Jennifer waited until Ellen completed the row before making another attempt to gain her attention.

"Aunty, Aunty. I've brought you a nice little roast and some apple crumble and cream," Jenny urged. She kicked off her shoes.

Ellen rested her knitting in her lap and looked up at Jennifer vaguely.

*Oh God, not again. She doesn't know who I am.*

"Come on, now, Aunty. Have it while it's warm."

"Are you new, nurse?" Ellen asked, warily looking around the room.

Jennifer ignored the strange question and attempted to bring Ellen back to reality as she helped sit her at the

little table in front of her meal. "What are you knitting?" she asked, "Is it for Bessie-doll?"

"Ssh," Ellen looked around as though there were others who might hear her. "It's for Mrs Wilson. It's the least I can do. It's for the baby," Ellen whispered, then put her forefinger to her lip in a gesture of secrecy.

"Mrs Wilson?" Jennifer had not heard this name before in Ellen's ravings.

Ellen nodded as she moved the food around her plate. "Don't tell Brontey. Brontey doesn't know. It's for Jennifer," she said softly.

*But I'm Jennifer, Aunty.*

"Jennifer's with Mrs Wilson. Matron knows," Ellen looked at Jennifer askance, and then suddenly completely lucid said, "How are the children dear? Did Claire make the crumble?"

"Yes, Aunty, Claire made the crumble."

"It's apple isn't it?"

"Yes, Aunty. It's apple."

Jennifer sat on the bed while Ellen ate her meal. Ellen had lost weight in the past few months, her clothes hung loosely on her.

"I'll see you tomorrow then, okay?" Jennifer asked, when Aunty had eaten all she would. "I'll drop in on my way home from school. But it will be later."

"Oh? Later? Later than ... what?"

"There's a parent-teacher meeting. I'll be here about half past six."

"Yes, dear, whatever, whatever," Ellen said, as Jenny wiped the little table with a cloth.

"Whose is this?" Ellen asked, as she reached over to the bed and held up the mess of knitting.

*Wait. Say nothing.*

"It must be Dot's," Ellen said quietly. "She can't knit you know, nurse. I don't want it. Give it back to her, please." Ellen thrust the needles and wool into Jenny's arms.

Jenny opened her mouth, not knowing what words to use to bring Aunty back to reality. None came to mind.

*Just go.*

Jenny walked back through the empty house, and locked the front door quietly behind her. She leaned her face against the cool etched glass door panel, her eyes shut. She took a slow, deep breath of the warm, tarry West Footscray air, then walked down the narrow concrete path.

*The latch is sticking. The hedge needs a trim.*

"Earth to Jennifer, earth to Jennifer, does this compute?"

"Sorry love, I was miles away. What was that?"

David rose from his chair and walked across the room to sit beside her on the couch. "It's been a rotten month for you, hasn't it. God you look stuffed."

"I really don't know what I am at the moment. There just seems to be so much to organise." Jennifer rested her head against his shoulder, smiled up at his caring familiar face. "Everything just seems so strange."

*Mum and I. We had it all organised. Had talked of it often. What would happen when Aunty died. Aunty who lived in the fernery. Aunty who never cooked. Aunty who had her fetishes about boiling everything and cleaning. Eccentric, weird old Aunty. "I just can't up and leave her, Jen. When she goes - then - I'll come and live with you and David," How often had those words been spoken?*

"I think the responsibility killed her, really I do. Aunty was nothing but a burden to Mum, a real burden."

"That's a bit hard, love. Aunty might be a strange old bird, but she's always been able to look after herself in her own way. Pretty independent."

"No - she still caused Mum ...stress. I always felt that. Mum used to find it very difficult having her there. There was always some sort of... " Jenny shook her head, searching for clarity, "... tension. I don't know. Mum was embarrassed by her, I think. And what the hell I'm to do with her now, God only knows."

"Cuppa?" David was good at deferring the hard questions in life.

*I have two mothers whose deaths I mourn. My natural mother died during my birth. I know nothing else about her. The*

woman I called Mum died a month ago. I loved her. Still love her.

"I've decided to have a couple of days off. Now the agent is showing people through the house, I need to get in there and go through Mum's things."

"It's a job that has to be done, and I didn't want to suggest it to you before you were ready. Can Claire and Allison give you a hand? They were a terrific help to me when we cleared out the shed."

"Claire's off to a conference in Sydney this week and I just don't think it's very fair to drag Allison along. She's more sensitive than you think. I'd rather just go on my own with Lizzie. She's so practical, we'll be more efficient if we just do it ourselves," Jenny toyed with the fringe on a cushion. "I think we'll just box most of it up and get St Vinnies in to collect it. I've already taken a few special things - her silver mirror and jewel box and that little table from the hallway. The crystal cabinet is worth keeping and the old stuff that's in it. But most of it can just go. Lizzie will help me sort through the linen - there are some good blankets and quilts there that we could use for the caravan. The rest can just be given away."

"If you had Allison help you, she'll probably want to bring home some of Mary's old clothes for herself," smiled David. Allison was into grunge.

"I really couldn't bear to see her walking around in Mum's things. It's best if she doesn't get her hands on them. Mum's clothes can go straight to the St Vincent de Paul."

"I'll come by on my way home from work and pick up any heavy boxes or furniture you want to bring home. One good thing about selling the old place with some of the

furniture - it really does simplify things for us, doesn't it."

"Yes - I think it's the best way, really I do."

"It's good of Lizzie to offer to help. She's a great friend."

"More like a sister, really. I mean, neither of us having had a sister.... I'd be lost without her, David. Mind you, I can just imagine her sorting through the stuff and bossing me around about what has to go and what can stay."

"She's a great organiser, that's for sure."

"Oh well, I probably can't afford to be too sentimental and impractical."

"Do you think Aunty might want any of your Mum's things?"

"I'm not even going to bother offering her anything. She's really not going along very well at all, David. That's more of my dilemma than anything else. I think she really was more dependent on Mum than what we thought. I think that in the past couple of months Aunty's got more... demented than ever. It's pathetic really."

"She doesn't really understand about selling the house, and that she'll have to be moved, does she?"

"It's hard to say. I keep explaining it to her, and she just sort of nods and keeps saying 'whatever's best'. I'm avoiding making a decision about her, really I am."

"Look Jen. Just remember, she's not your mum. If it was Mary that was left, it wouldn't have been an issue. She'd have come to live with us and there'd have been no problems about that for any of us. But Aunty - God. The decision has to be yours, Jen, but I really think she'd be just as miserable living here with all of us as we'd be to have her here."

"Lovely! Isn't old age grand?" Jennifer's eyes filled with tears.

"You know what I mean. I'm not trying to be hard, it's just practical. She'd be lost and confused here."

"But the options are just so bloody awful. I've looked at some of those places... nursing homes... and I wouldn't want my dog to go there. All those poor old people dribbling and just... just existing. Waiting to die. She's not that bad, she's just... different. You know how I've always said Aunty lives within herself? Not in a selfish way, but sort of with her obsessions. Can you believe I've never known her to even have a visitor, a friend, except for Brontey? The only people in the whole world who really cared about her and understood her were Mum and Brontey."

*I wish I knew why she is the way she is.*

"I've always felt that something happened. Maybe during the war," David stood, stretched and yawned. "Just a feeling from something Mary said to me that night after her seventieth birthday party. I felt your mum wanted to explain something to me. But then she clammed up."

"I remember you saying that at the time, but Mum was probably trying to make excuses for her. That's the main impression I always got, that Mum felt a duty to make excuses for Aunty and all her fetishes. I think I got to an age when I really didn't even notice them any more, can you believe that? I thought it was perfectly normal for Aunty to live outside in the fernery and to do all those strange little things. I'd grown up with her like that. It seemed perfectly normal to me. Anyway... where's that cuppa?"

"How long have you known Aunty, Brontey?" Jennifer slurped on a Coke.

"We've known each other for years, love. Since we weren't much older than you, really. I feel like I've known Ellen for ever."

"Was it during the war?"

"Yes, it was. Not that we knew much about what was going on at the time. We felt we were in a world of our own," Brontey looked cautiously at Jennifer, wondering if her cryptic answer had any meaning for the young woman.

"So you were in Sydney too, then?"

Brontey thought carefully before answering. She smiled ruefully and, tilting her head to one side almost imperceptibly shrugged her shoulders. "Mmm," she said, as non-committally as possible.

"You and Aunty are so...so....different."

"Yes, you're right there. But, Jen, Ellen was a very different person then to what she is now," Brontey took another sip of her gin squash. "Circumstances have made her the way she is. She had quite a lot of ..." Brontey wanted to say 'tragedy' "...well, you know, it was hard times for a lot of people in those days." You haven't a clue, have you, she thought.

"You know Brontey, you're the only visitor she ever has."

"I know love. And I'll always visit her," Brontey delicately wiped her scarlet lips with the paper serviette, scrunched it into a ball, and placed it on the table. "We were so close when we were young. Closer than sisters."

Jenny smiled.

"Jen, there's not a thing I don't know about her. Not a thing." Brontey paused, not too sure whether to continue. "I know everything she felt and everything she ever did. I know every joy she's ever had and every fear. I know Ellen

better than she knows herself. If you ever need to know anything, just remember, nobody knows her as well as I do. Nobody. Jen, 'you remember that. Remember it always," she punctuated every point with a stab of her bright pink polished finger-nail on the laminex table.

There was an intensity to Brontey's words. It seemed rather strange, Jenny thought later in the train back to Footscray. Why would she ever need to know anything about Aunty? Poor, scared, strange Aunty?

"That's great to have the kitchen all sorted out, Lizzie, and if your Michelle can make use of the microwave she's welcome to it," Jenny dragged a box of Tupperware containers and baking pans along the hall while Liz wiped out the last of the kitchen cupboards.

"Yes, thanks. I know she's been thinking about buying one, so she'll really appreciate it," Liz's voice echoed from inside the kitchen cupboard she was wiping. She sat back on her haunches, stretched and threw the cloth into the bucket of water at her side. "Okay. That's that. How about we have a bit of lunch now before we do your Mum's room?"

"Good idea," Jenny called. "I'll just check if Aunty would like us to get her something."

Liz filled the kettle and turned it on while Jenny went to the fernery and spoke to Aunty. Back in the kitchen a minute later, Jenny shook her head and said, "Oh God, this is awful. She doesn't have a clue what day it is, what time it is. Do you know what she said?"

Liz looked up from the cutting board.

"She said, 'No thank you dear, I've just had lunch. Mary's just brought me a lovely cold lamb sandwich.'"

"Oh, no. The poor old dear," Liz said, "any wonder she's lost so much weight since Mary died."

"I thought she was fretting, and hoped that with time..." Jenny paused. "But she mustn't be eating. Other than the meal I bring her of a night."

"Yes. That's probably the case. It explains why the fridge is still so full." Liz paused a moment before adding, "I think it's time, Jen. Perhaps it's not a very good idea to keep Aunty here much longer."

"Yes, I know. I've been making some enquiries, but maybe I'm going to have to tee things up sooner than I planned."

They ate their lunch hurriedly, there was still much work to be done. "Back to it, then," said Liz as they washed and dried the last of their few dishes.

Jenny paused at the door of her mother's bedroom. Suddenly it seemed out of bounds. Tears pricked her eyes.

"I feel awful doing this. When I was a kid, Mum hated me going through the drawers of her dressing table. It was always off-limits. She used to be really funny about it." Jenny put on a brave face, braced herself and added with forced lightness, "Maybe we'll find some old love letters there or something."

"I can just see your Mum now saying 'You girls, get out of my room!'" Liz reminisced, "Let's start with the wardrobe. We can do the dressing-table last," she suggested quietly.

Jenny opened the door of the free-standing closet, shocked by the familiar musty cedar smell that burst from it and the sight of her mother's clothes. A memory of hide-and-seek amongst the clothes flashed and burst.

*"Boo! You didn't know I was there, did you Mummy?"*

*"I had no idea darling."*

Jenny wished the memory could twist, change, turn inside-out. She could smell Mary, feel her, surely she was there at the back of the clothes. If only she would emerge from behind them, life could go back to normal, things could be the same, all this was just a game.

*How can they hang there. Like that. Just the same as always. Waiting for Mum to wear them. Don't they know?*

"Don't you remember when we were kids how we'd sometimes come in here and pinch her perfume..."

"Scent. Mum always called it scent," Jenny said. She bit her lower lip.

Liz smiled and nodded, "and mucked around with her powder and lipsticks? She did get quite ferocious at times, didn't she?"

"Sounded ferocious, Lizzie, but I doubt if she took it as seriously as we thought she did. I've certainly heard my voice use that same tone when I've caught Allison and Claire mucking around in my room over the years."

"They say we all become our mothers in the end, don't they? I think there's a lot of truth in it."

"So do I. There's a lot of Tess in you, Liz," Jenny laughed, pleased to change the focus.

"Everybody's been saying that for years, but quite honestly I can't even see it at all. I think I'm nothing like Mum, but there you go. That's probably the truth of it."

*We all become our mothers in the end. The girls say I'm like that now. They call it Nanna-talk. I hear it in the sound of my voice and the words I say. Things I never thought I'd say. They flow from my mouth. And there it is. I am my mother. My adopted mother.*

"Right. Now the dressing table," Jenny raised her eyebrows and sucked in her lower lip as she opened the large bottom drawer of the old mahogany cabinet. Seeing her own tired reflection in the dusty glass, she bent towards her image and wiped the mirror hastily with her sleeve. "Mum hated dusty mirrors," she said very quietly. "Didn't care about dust anywhere else, but she hated dusty mirrors," Jenny shrugged then braced herself.

*On with the job.*

"Have you ever seen so much unopened underwear in your life? Was poor old Mary worried about rationing? Have a look here!" Liz said.

"No. I don't think that was it at all. One, two, three, four, five, six boxes of white Cross Your Heart bras. One,

two, three, four, five, six, seven pairs of Bonds briefs. White, of course. Mum used to like to have things like that 'in reserve' she used to call it." Jenny gathered up the underwear and dumped it straight into the large box at their feet. "I think it was a combination of fear that she'd run out when she needed new ones and fear that those lines would be discontinued. I can remember a few years ago when her favourite hair colour went off the market - well, you'd have thought that was the end of the world. 'mink brown' it was called, and nothing she ever used afterwards was quite the same. I know she wished she'd hoarded piles of it."

"Tess has always been a 'magic-silver rose' girl," laughed Liz. "She's got quite punkish about it all in recent times. Awfully heavy handed, Jen. Forget the subtle pink highlights, we're at the full-on fairy floss pink phase at the moment," Liz said and rolled her eyes as she stacked the underwear into neat piles. "I guess some size sixteen-C woman will be quite pleased with finding all this at St Vinnies."

The two large drawers were progressively emptied. Jenny and Liz piled pantyhose, socks, spencers, singlets and petticoats which somehow seemed older than ever into the large cardboard box.

"I thought you said Mary wasn't a hoarder?" Liz asked, holding in front of her a white nylon girdle that hadn't been worn for at least thirty years.

Jenny shook her head, "God only knows why Mum bothered to keep that!" Eventually, Jenny opened the narrow top drawer of the cabinet. Its contents were arranged in neat piles.

"Old birthday cards, they can be chucked. God... programmes from the theatre, ballet. Some of these go way back. Here's a blast from the past, my old school report from Our Lady's. 'Jenny is a confident, quiet and hardworking student.' Grade four. Sister Veronica! Do you remember her?"

"Of course I do. I hated her," Liz said, happy for the diversion in the conversation.

"But she was beautiful to us. Kind and gentle. How could you have hated her?"

"Because you were her pet, remember, and everybody knew it."

"Me? She loved us all. I don't remember her ever even so much as raising her voice."

"God, Jen, you were such a little goody-goody! No, she didn't ever raise her voice, but she gave us the silent treatment if she was cross with us. Not like Sister Magdalene. Grade six. What did she write?"

"Um...", Jenny turned a few pages, "'Jennifer has worked well this year, although she is very talkative and has had to sit by herself for the whole of the term.'"

"Yes - sounds like her. I don't know who was more frightened of Sister Magdalene, the kids or the parents. Mum was absolutely intimidated by her. She used to say that Sister Magdalene was far too clever to be a wife and thank God she was a nun," Liz said the last bit imitating her mother's pious tone.

"Could you imagine anybody daring to say that about a woman these days! What do you think she meant?" said Jenny, putting a pile of hankies in the box, and sorting through more bundles of papers and cards.

"Probably that she wouldn't have made a quiet-and-obedient wife," Liz laughed.

"What's this? I haven't seen this envelope before." Jenny turned the faded sealed manila envelope over and over in her hands. "It might be private, Liz. What do you think? Should I open it? "

"Oh yes. It might just as likely be a note saying where Mary buried stolen treasure! Look, open it."

Jennifer tore the sealed edge of the envelope, and produced from it a few old and faded photos.

"Ah. Baby photos," Liz leaned over to take a closer look.

"It's me!" Jenny said, amused. "'Dear Ellen, Jennifer at six months, Gwenda Wilson," she read. Jennifer studied the photo and caption for several seconds. Her smile dissipated. "Gwenda Wilson?"

*Gwenda Wilson. I know that name. Gwenda Wil... Aunty. The other night.*

"Gwenda Wilson? Six months?" Jennifer shook her head in confusion. She looked at Lizzie, somehow expecting her to make sense of her scrambled thoughts.

*Oh God. Gwenda Wilson. Six months.*

Jennifer sat on the edge of the bed. She stared at the photo as though she expected an explanation to jump from its faded caption.

"What's wrong, Jen?" said Liz. Jenny, white-faced stared at her. "It probably means nothing, Jen. Just be calm. There's a logical...."

"This is weird," said Jennifer. "Where could this have...? I came here from the Babies' Home when I was nine months old. How would...?"

"Jen, you're getting yourself all... Look, it's just a photo. Maybe Gwenda Wilson was a nurse at the babies' home or something like that. Maybe she had these photos and passed them on to Mary when she brought you home."

*It's for Mrs Wilson. It's the least I can do. It's for the baby. Are you new, nurse? Jennifer's with Mrs Wilson. Don't tell Brontey.*

"There's something...something. A meaning," Jennifer spoke slowly. "Why does it say 'Dear Ellen'? That's funny."

"There's probably a perfectly reasonable explanation," Liz insisted, quietly, firmly.

Jenny flipped through the little pile of six small photos. "All of them are the same. Dear Ellen, To Ellen,

Jennifer at five months, Gwenda Wilson. To Ellen, Jennifer and little Johnny, July 1944, Gwenda Wilson. Johnny..." she stopped reading and looked with confused tired eyes at Liz's cautious face. "Oh my God, don't tell me ... Johnny. Johnny?" Jennifer's hands shook.

"Jen, your thoughts are racing. It's probably... I don't know what... not what you're thinking."

"Liz, you look. What else is in the envelope? I can't bear to do it."

Liz took the envelope from her. "There's nothing. Just those photos."

"I have to ask Aunty. That's the only thing I can do. She knew this ... this... Gwenda Wilson. The other day she said something... something about a secret... and Gwenda Wilson. She called her Mrs Wilson. I have to find out what it means."

"Not now, Jen. Not while you're like this."

"Like what?" Jenny said.

"I think you're in a state of shock. Don't speak to her now. You're too upset to think clearly." Liz persuaded her. "Think about it for a while. Give it some more... consideration before you ask Aunty. You're as white as a ghost, Jen."

"How's it going?" David said, suddenly at the bedroom door. "Where are all these boxes you're supposed.... What's going on?"

"Oh David. I'm just..." Jennifer stared at him open-mouthed.

"What on earth's the matter?" David said. He looked from one to the other, his smile faded.

"Jen found some photos, David. Photos of her as a baby." Liz explained.

"... and they're from a Gwenda Wilson. Gwenda Wilson," Jenny said.

"What? I don't get it," David said confused.

"Look at them," Jen said, "they were taken before I came to Mum and Dad. And they've been sent to Aunty. What does it mean?"

David sat on the edge of the high iron bed, and looked carefully at each of the photos. He turned them over one by one, read each of the captions pencilled in a tidy, unknown woman's handwriting, while Jenny and Liz waited for his analysis.

"For heavens sake, Jen. I don't know. I don't know what it means," he threw his hands in the air. "You're clutching at straws, Jen. You're looking for an answer out of something which may be very straight forward and not what you're thinking at all," he placed his hands gently on her shoulders.

"Well who do you think this Gwenda Wilson could have been? She's not a friend of Mum's. I've never heard of her," Jenny said, her voice shrill.

"Listen love, I think you're distressing yourself unnecessarily." David and Lizzie exchanged concerned glances. "Come on," he said, "Give me a hand with this trunk. It'll fit in the boot if I put it on its side." Nobody spoke for a minute. They balanced the trunk between them. Then David asked, "How's Aunty today? Any better?"

"Worse than ever, isn't she Lizzie. Off with the fairies. She's getting worse by the day."

"I never realised how much Mary must have done for her, you know. She must have been like a full-time nurse," Liz said, as the three of them struggled to manoeuvre the clumsy box through doorways and out through the front gate to David's parked car.

"Yes. But then I wonder if it's Mum's death that's triggered her into this really awful state. I mean Aunty's always been sort of ...eccentric, but she's really demented now."

"Decisions, decisions," David chanted wearily under his breath as he opened the back of the station-wagon.

1962

"I think she's glamorous. Sophisticated. And that's just how I'm going to be when I get older," Jennifer spoke with bobby pins protruding from her teeth, sitting on the tram beside Lizzie, looking at her own reflection in the glass as she teased her hair.

"I don't. I think she looks like mutton done up as lamb."

"She does not! Brontey's not like that at all!"

"Yes she is. Even my Mum says so."

"I think your Mum's just jealous."

"Jealous? Why would she be?"

"Don't try and tell me that most wives and mothers around here wouldn't swap their lives with Brontey if they had half a chance."

"Why would they want to?"

"I know I would. I'd much rather live in a city apartment and be an actress than be stuck in a house in Footscray with a couple of snotty nosed kids. There. That's all right isn't it?"

"No. It looks like a birds' nest. Here, let me." Liz grabbed the comb. "City apartment! More like a flat in Carlton! And what's she ever been in? I've never heard of any shows starring Brontey. She's an usherette, Jenny, a bloody usherette at the theatre."

"She only does that between acting roles."

"Rubbish. It's not even a real job. You don't see Brontey as she really is, Jenny."

"I do so, and what I see I like. Brontey's got style and plenty of it. Who visits your place that's a bit different? Glamorous?"

"Who cares. Anyway, guess what. We're meeting John and David under the clocks at Flinders Street Station after the show."

"Oh, no," Jenny groaned, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because if I told you, then you'd have said you wouldn't come."

"What a waste of time. I've told you before, David's nice, but I'm not interested. Never will be."

"Of course you are," said Liz. "You just don't know it yet."

"Aunty, I have something to ask you," Jenny had sat with Ellen for half an hour, flipping through an old Women's Weekly. She hadn't absorbed a word of anything she read, preoccupied wondering how much longer she could wait until the right moment would reveal itself.

"Yes, yes..." Aunty sat in her rocking chair and nursed Bessie-doll. The television showed an SBS program on the lives of Indian women, in Tamil, with subtitles. Aunty watched the screen as though understanding every word spoken.

"Now I don't want to upset you or anything, but I need to know something," Jenny began calmly. "It's about some photos I found in Mum's drawer last week."

"Yes, well, your mother loved her box brownie. Always taking photos. All those albums. She loved photos. Did you find the albums, dear?" Aunty's eyes were fixed on the screen. "You'll keep Mary's albums won't you? I'm sure she'd want that. Mary would, you know, she'd want you to keep her albums. Lots of photos, dear, all in the loungeroom, in the cupboard at the bottom of the wall cabinet. You know, dear, the one with all the albums in it. That cupboard."

"Yes, Aunty. I know. I've got all the albums at home and we'll look after them. Don't worry about that," Jennifer said carefully, relieved that Aunty seemed at least to follow the conversation.

"Good, good, good. Good God, Blessed be the Virgin Mary, Holy Mary Mother of God ...."

"Aunty..." Jennifer gently prodded, attempting to keep her on track.

"Mary would be pleased about that, dear. Oh you're a good girl, Jen, you're a good girl."

"Aunty. They're not the photos I'm talking about."

"Aren't they, dear? Oh well then... whatever," Aunty rocked aimlessly, clinging to the doll, watching the Indian women prepare for a wedding.

"Aunty, I want to ask you something. Look at this photo, Aunty," Jenny put her hand on top of the rocker to still its rhythm and passed the little photo to Ellen. She stood between Ellen and the television screen, forcing Ellen to pay attention to the photo and eager to see her response.

"Oh...oh... that's the baby, poor little baby. Poor little baby Jennifer. Poor little baby," Ellen hugged Bessie-doll to her thin chest, tenderly stroking its cap of old synthetic hair as she rocked back and forwards in the chair, her eyes transfixed by the photo.

"Aunty. You've seen this photo before, haven't you? Tell me Aunty, you've seen this photo before," Jenny prompted.

"Yes, dear. I know that photo. That's a sad photo. A very sad photo. I've seen that photo before. Such a sad photo," Ellen's eyes didn't move from the image of the curly haired baby, seated in a wooden high-chair, smiling and waving a spoon at the unseen photographer.

"And there are others, Aunty, other photos. Who are they from?" Jenny's voice was gentler, coercing Aunty for an explanation. She sat on the bed, next to her.

Ellen's eyes strayed from the photos and fixed themselves on the television, focussed fearfully on the unknown women speaking the unfamiliar language. "Questions, dear, you're asking me so many questions," she eventually said still rocking in her chair, kissing the doll's head.

"So, Aunty, you know who Gwenda Wilson is, don't you?" Jenny said, resigned to the fact that this would be no easy conversation.

"Oh...Gwenda Wilson. Mrs Wilson. Oh... yes, dear, I know who she is," Ellen said coherently, then gasped. She put her hand over her mouth, then suddenly reached out and grabbed Jennifer's arm. "Ssh. Ssh don't tell Mary," Ellen's glance darted around the room furtively. "Mary wouldn't like it. We must never talk about it. Never ever. It's a promise. Ssh, secret. Don't talk about Mrs Wilson. We can't make Mary angry. I promised."

"What did you promise, Aunty?" Jenny leaned forward, anxious for clues in Aunty's small grey eyes.

"We mustn't. We mustn't ever, ever..." Ellen's eyes were fearful, she rocked with agitation, Aunty and the doll, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards.

"Was she my real mother, Aunty?" Jennifer blurted out, unable any longer to take the conversation measure by measure as she had rehearsed. Ellen continued to rock, shaking her head from side to side and crying silently.

"Did Gwenda Wilson give birth to me?" Jennifer persisted, her voice almost shrill with frustration and excitement. "Please, Aunty, tell me the truth."

"Holy Mary, Mother of God. Pray for us sinners now and..."

"Stop it," Jennifer spoke sharply as she grasped Ellen's shoulders firmly and stared into her frightened eyes. The chair stopped its crazy motion.

"Oh, oh dear. How can I... I don't know. What?"

"Oh, Aunty," Jennifer said more gently, "Who is Gwenda Wilson?"

"Oh...Gwenda Wilson. Mrs Wilson. Oh... yes, dear, I know who she is. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, pray..."

"Was she my mother, Aunty?" Jennifer repeated the question. Please, tell me the truth," she cried. Tears streamed down her tired face.

"Mrs Wilson, she loved Jennifer so much. She...she wanted to be her mother. She was... for a time..."

"What... what are you saying Aunty? I don't understand."

"I don't know. Your mother was your mother and ... and... Mrs Wilson, she was...for a ...time...for a special time... when I ... Uh!" she gasped as she looked into Jennifer's eyes, "All the angels and the saints, pray for us."

Ellen continued in a strange chant, "Your mother died at your birth and your father, he died in the war. Your mother died at your birth and your father, he died in the war. Your mother died at your birth and your father, he

died in the war. That's all. Nothing else. Oh, no, nothing else." Ellen suddenly stopped speaking, her eyes fixed on Jenny's face as she tucked Bessie-doll quickly under the front wrap of her dressing-gown. Neither spoke for seconds.

"Ssh," Ellen eventually said, "Don't talk about it." There was a strange determination and strength in her voice. She curled her finger in the air, drawing Jennifer's face close to her own. "It was a sin. Mortal sin. The greatest of all evils. By the flesh."

"What do you mean, 'by the flesh'?" Jenny said, perplexed.

"I know it. I know it, " Aunty's eyes were wide and frantic, suddenly inspired. "The enemies. Question three five two, What do you mean by the flesh. Answer. By the flesh I mean our own corrupt inclinations and passions, which are the most dangerous of all our enemies." Her eyes shifted crazily from side to side, as she made the sign of the cross and continued, "Question three four eight. Which are the enemies we must fight against all the days of our life? Answer. The enemies we must fight against all the days of our lives are the devil, the world, the flesh," Ellen started to cry. "The devil... the world... the flesh," she sobbed.

"Oh Aunty, don't be upset. Please. I didn't mean to upset you. But I have to know. You're not making very much sense. It's not clear."

"Go back from these windows," Ellen sung madly, " ... and likewise this hall, lest dapping in the sea, you should find your downfall."

"Aunty, stop it. Please, please, stop it."

"The rain beats on my yellow locks and the dew wets me still," Ellen sung, then stopped suddenly. "Ssh...Mary will be cross. Ssh. Mary told me never to tell. It was a secret. Inclinations. Passions. No, no. It doesn't matter. Don't tell Mary, Blessed Virgin Mary. She'll send me away... she will. Won't you? Are you Jenny? Oh...are you Mary? Is it you Mary?"

Jenny watched her aunt's face, witness to her turmoil and confusion.

"She's been in here, Mary, asking questions," Ellen whispered frantically. "But I never told her a thing, Mary. I never said a thing. Our secret, Mary. I promise."

Jennifer turned away from Ellen, put her face in her hands and sighed deeply. This was all crazy. She needed fresh air. She stood up, walked out of the room and into the backyard. She wandered around, looked at the bird-ruined apples hanging unwanted on the tree. She didn't hear Aunty speak in the now quiet room.

Ellen's voice was flat and matter-of fact. "I've got to look after my baby. She's crying. Can't I keep her? She needs me. A baby needs her mother. A daughter needs a mother. I need my mother. Little Jennifer needs me. Don't make me leave her. I'll be a good mother," she said to nobody as she cuddled the doll.

*I'll love her always. Always and forever, Aunty, that's what Mum's do, isn't it? Always and forever.*

"It's just been so perfect. I wouldn't have changed a thing," Jenny said excited and tired, changing from her going-away-outfit into the special oyster silk negligee that Brontey had given her as a wedding present.

"I'm glad, Jen. We'll have great memories of today won't we, not to mention a few photos to bore our kids with in the future," David was glad that they were at last on their own in the motel, away from the noise and excitement of family and guests.

Jenny laughed and swung around to be encompassed in his bear-like hug. She was quiet for a moment. "I was thinking about her today. My mother. My birth-mother. Today. I hope she knows how happy I am," she looked up into David's eyes. "I'd just like her to know that, you know, everything's worked out all right for me." She smiled, changed the mood. "I can just imagine an angel watching down from heaven, watching everything we do."

"Not *everything*, I hope..." David said, nuzzling her neck. "Hey - did I show you this?" He reached into the trouser pocket of his new navy suit and brought out a small, old pocket knife as well as a few coloured spots of confetti. "Aunty gave it to me, just pushed it into my hand outside the church."

"Her pocket knife? That's one of her treasures, you know. Show me."

David passed it to Jennifer and she turned it over in her hand. "She's had it for years. God knows where it ever came from. I'd love to know what those letters stand for... R.A."

"I'll ask her when we get back from Tassie," said David.

"Don't waste your time. I've asked her many times over the years. She always says she can't remember."

"I can't make sense of her. I can't tell if she's with it or not," Jennifer called to David over the sound of the running shower. She stood at the bathroom mirror, attempting to disguise with make-up a blistery cold-sore that had appeared above her lip. "One minute she knows it's me, the next minute she thinks I'm Mum. She's quite lucid one moment and then...lost the next. Yuck." Jenny wiped away the heavy coat of concealer. "And all this talk about secrets. She knows. Or at least she knew. And she knew about Gwenda Wilson. But that's as far as it goes. I don't think I can get any other information out of her."

"What do you want to do about it, then?" David called from the shower.

Jenny turned around and leaned against the bathroom basin, David's shape a misty form behind the obscure glass.

"I've decided to contact the Adoption Information Service," she said.

"I wondered when you'd get around to that," he shivered as he stepped from the shower. Jenny passed him a towel.

"So you saw it coming, did you?"

"Yes, love. I've never seen you like this before," he rubbed his pink chest vigorously. "It's always surprised me that you've never needed answers before. It's the most natural thing in the world to want to know the truth." He threw the towel over the rail, then placed his hands on Jennifer's shoulders. Her head hung down as he kissed her on the top of her auburn crown. She sighed softly.

"I don't know. I'm not sure how to go about it. But if I'm Gwenda Wilson's daughter and have a brother named Johnny, I want to know. I've got to get this sorted out. Everything is different now. I used to have no problems with the whole thing, and then, when I found those photos... with her writing on the back... it made her real, David. And I want to know why Gwenda Wilson sent photos of me to Aunty and not to Mum. Maybe she was a friend of Aunty's. That's what I suspect. And why, if she wasn't

dead, why did she wait until I was nine months old to give me away."

"Do you really feel you need to go to the information centre? Have you thought about asking some of Mary's old friends? Vera and Tess might know all the answers, you know."

"It's not fair on them. Not so soon after Mum's death. They might feel awful about breaching her trust or something."

"Then again, they might be relieved. If they've known about it for years, and just supposing you're on the right track here, which of course you may not be... but if they know that you've always been told that your real mum died at your birth and that it wasn't the true story, they might be glad to get it off their chests."

"Hmm. I can see what you mean, but I think that if they've been loyal to Mum over all these years they'll hardly want to come out now and tell me. They might be inclined to as time goes on, but they can be fiercely protective about respecting each other's privacy and decisions. I'm not prepared to wait any longer. For God's sake, I'm in my fifties, David, and I need to know now."

"Jen, you know, I've always found it funny that you never even seemed to show the slightest curiosity about it before."

"Everything is different now. There were no questions before."

"Look, love. There are not necessarily any questions now. So you found some photos taken before you were adopted. Maybe somebody from the babies' home forwarded them to the adoption agency. Perhaps, like Liz says, Gwenda Wilson is from the adoption agency and sent them on to Mary. You might not get the answers you're really looking for. Can you see that?"

"Yes, I know what you're getting at, but just the fact that it raises some questions in my mind... I have to do this. I don't know why, I can't explain it. It's just a need. I have to do it now. What you're saying is perfectly

feasible but it doesn't change my mind." Jenny followed David into their bedroom, "I just have to do it this way and see how far I get."

"You could have done this earlier, it might have been more straightforward when Mary was alive," he said buttoning his shirt.

"Yes - but before there was no mystery. And it's these gaps, these questions... I never had any reason before to ask. Can't you see, I've just got to know? Maybe I've always wanted to know, deep down, subconsciously. It's just that the right moment had never been there before."

*What if she's still alive? What if she's horrible and I don't like her? What if the circumstances leading to my adoption were awful? What if it's all so ordinary.*

*What if she didn't die at my birth? What if I have brothers and sisters? What if I don't like them at all? What if she doesn't want to know me?*

*And when I find out, what then?*

"Congratulations!" Brontey poked her head around the door of Jenny's hospital room, and announced with a dramatic flourish. "Well done!" as she swanned into the room.

"Brontey! How lovely to see you."

"I knew you were having a girl, love. I just knew it."

"Oh Brontey, you and your superstitions."

"The swinging wedding ring never lies, Jen" she laughed. "I've just seen her through the nursery window."

"She's still a bit red and squished actually, but Brontey she's a darling."

"Yes, she certainly is," Brontey grasped Jennifer's hand fondly and kissed her on the cheek, then automatically rubbed at the smudge of her scarlet lipstick. "How do you feel?"

"Um...tired, sore and positively ecstatic."

"And so you should be. Fancy you, little Jenny Penny, having a baby."

"Jenny Penny! God, it's been years since you've called me that."

"I know, I'm just getting sentimental. You're very lucky. So's David of course. To see you happily married and now a mother... Oh, if only..." Brontey's voice trailed off.

"What do you mean... 'if only'? You're a strange one, Brontey. Don't tell me you've got regrets?"

"A couple. A couple of big ones, actually. I'd love to have had a child, been a mother," Brontey said earnestly.

"Why didn't you?"

"I...I couldn't."

"Couldn't! How did you know, you never married?"

"That's one of the main reasons why. I was ...sick when I was young and told that having a child may have been a risk."

"I'm sorry, Brontey. I had no idea. I thought you chose to live the way you do."

"Never mind. I'm not complaining. Besides, the type of person I am ...perhaps I'd have been a terrible mother."

"I don't think so," Jennifer smiled.

"Enough of me. Come on. Tell me everything, everything. What does Mary think of her?"

"She's tickled pink. Keeps telling me not to worry, she's not going to be one of those interfering grandmothers, and then proceeds to instruct me on all the do's and don'ts."

"And Ellen? Has she been in?"

"No. I don't expect her to visit the hospital. But look at this, Ellen made it." Jenny held up a beautiful crib-sized patchwork quilt.

"That's just gorgeous," Brontey said. "You know, Jen, Ellen might not say much, but she'll be ...she'll be just as proud and happy as Mary is. You're very special to Ellen," Brontey folded the quilt and put it back on the shelf beside Jennifer's bed.

"Do you think so?"

"Of course."

"Poor Aunty. She's getting more dippy by the week, Brontey. More intense and, oh, I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if she has much of a grasp of what's going on around her."

"Ellen's just a bit of an eccentric. Like me but different."

"No. No, Brontey. There's something else, I don't know. I'm not sure if it's that the older I get, the more I see her as she really is or if she's just getting more.. um.. whatever it is," Jenny shrugged.

"Don't worry too much. Ellen's a survivor. Plus she'll always have Mary to help her."

"Yes. And Mum won't hear a word against her, but she does worry about her. No doubt Aunty will be praying madly for us all."

## Part 8

1998

"It's Patricia here from Human Services. Is that Jennifer?" The unfamiliar voice sounded friendly and calm.

"Yes it is. Thank you for getting back to me," Jennifer said. The half hour wait for her call to be returned had seemed like days. "I'm adopted..." she planned to say more, but suddenly the words disappeared.

"Yes, Jennifer, so am I," Patricia said.

"It's called the Adoption Information Service. And they're going to send me a registration form," Jenny said to David as she sliced mushrooms and capsicums and sipped a glass of wine. "Then, after it's returned, the Department searches for the records through the Births, Deaths and Marriages. You see, once the adoption was legalised, the original birth certificate became a closed record. And they issued a new birth certificate."

"So that's the one you used for your passport?"

"Yes. It's got my actual birth date on it, but the names of the adopted parents were put in the section that says 'parents.' There's really nothing about my current birth certificate that indicates I've been adopted. Shit, the pasta." The pot boiled over onto the hot-plates. David reached over, lifted the lid and turned down the gas. "And she - Patricia - asked me what I knew about my birth parents so I told her..."

David nodded and said flatly "...your mother died at your birth and your father died..."

"Yes. And that I hadn't a clue about their names or anything else about them."

"Anyway, she... Patricia... said it wasn't at all unusual for someone to start searching for their natural parents - birth parents - until after the death of the last surviving adopted parent. Want some?" Jenny passed David

some sun-dried tomatoes, then spooned the rest into the salad bowl.

"So, what happens now?" David said.

"I wait. It can take a couple of months for them to complete the search and then I go to an interview. With a counsellor. And they tell me what they've found out and show me all the records."

"What other records might they have?"

"Court papers ...which ordered that the adoption could proceed. Sometimes they find affidavits that explain why the child was placed for adoption."

"Hi. It's me. I've just been thinking. How are you going, about Aunty?" Liz's phone-call interrupted Jenny's report writing.

"I'm still not sure. How are you, anyway?" Jenny said, writing as she spoke. She held the phone between her neck and chin as she arranged the report in the folder on her desk.

"Fine. Well, you'd better start thinking about it. You don't want another episode like yesterday's do you?" Liz said bluntly.

"Oh God no, don't remind me. She was so frightened and agitated. You know, I rang Aunty half an hour before to prepare her that the agent would be bringing a young couple through to inspect the house."

"Mmh. It was awful, wasn't it?"

"By the time the agent rang me she was a blubbering mess. And even worse when she saw me. Sort of embarrassed and upset all at the same time. But I can't very well leave school and meet him every time somebody wants to look through the house. Can you imagine it - 'excuse me Year nine, just continue with the experiment, class, and I'll be back in half an hour.' They'd be hanging from the rafters."

"Look. I know you're busy, so I've made a few phone calls."

"Look. I know you're busy, so I've made a few phone calls."

"Liz!"

"Oh, don't get on your high horse. You know how it is, I know a few people."

"That's an understatement if ever I heard one."

"Well, if it can save you and David a bit of time and energy, what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I just didn't expect to need to make a decision so soon. Anyway, what have you come up with?"

"All the nursing homes in the western region are full. They all have waiting lists and are bursting at the seams."

"All of them?"

"Well, all of the ones that you'd consider. I didn't find out about the others."

"God. I even hate the term - 'nursing home.' This is just the pits, as far as I'm concerned."

"I know. Listen, I've got one decent option to run by you. Have you ever heard of 'Bellington Lodge'?"

"No. Where is it?"

"It's near Ferntree Gully, up in the Dandenongs..."

"The Dandenongs! Liz, you've got to be..."

"Just hear me out, okay? It's got a wonderful reputation. All thanks to the manager, Judith Nesdale. Plus, they have a vacancy."

"So, some poor old soul died, did they?" said Jenny.

"No. They've just put on a new wing for respite patients. Sorry - clients. Clients or guests. Not patients. You can nominate a period of stay of up to six weeks. Think about it. I've made a tentative booking on your behalf."

"Six weeks? Mmh...that could be really useful. At least it would give us some breathing space to find something more permanent closer to home. Tell me more."

"Lovely to hear from you, darling," Brontey's telephone voice was as plummy as ever. "How are you all getting on?"

"Oh look, we're managing okay, I suppose."

"And how's Ellen?" Brontey's more natural tone started to creep through.

"Aunty's not so good, Brontey. She's not going along very well at all."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Quite honestly, she's absolutely lost. In a world of her own most of the time."

"Poor Ellen, I was afraid you might have told me that."

"If things were different, she could come and stay with us, but it's just... oh Brontey, I'm not able to give up work and I feel that Aunty really does need supervision throughout the day. There's all sorts of things that worry me that she could do if nobody is keeping an eye on her."

"Is she really that bad, love?"

"I'm sorry to say so, Brontey, but it's the truth. I don't think she even knows what day it is, and she's getting so confused, half the time she thinks I'm Mum and the rest of the time I'm not quite sure what's going on inside her mind."

"What a terrible shame. Have you any idea about what to do? I could come and stay with her for a while, until you sort yourselves out, if it's any help."

"Oh Brontey. That's a lovely offer, and I know you mean it. But it really wouldn't be fair on you. You have your own life."

"I'd be glad to, Jen, honestly."

"Thank you Brontey, but we've decided to put Aunty into a place in the Dandenongs for a few weeks starting next Friday. It's called Bellington Lodge."

"Bellington!"

"Yes. Funny name, do you know it?"

"Um. I think so," Brontey said. "It's an awfully long way from home for you dear," her voice trembled.

"Yes. That's the only problem, Brontey. But it's only for a six-week respite stay until we can get Aunty assessed and have something more permanently organised on this side of town."

"Is it on Grandview Drive, overlooking Madison Gully?"

"Yes. That's it. God, you're the only person I've spoken to who's ever heard of it. Grandview Drive. Have you been there Brontey?"

"Not for many years, love. Many, many years," Brontey said.

"Oh?" Jenny paused, thinking for a moment. "I thought Liz said it was a fairly new nursing home."

"Perhaps, dear. I think it used to be... um... a hospital or some such thing... years ago," Brontey said cautiously.

"It has a very long driveway and there's a lovely lake surrounded by..."

"Poplars. Poplars and Norfolk pines," Brontey saw it all, as it was, so long ago.

"Yes. That's the same place then."

"What does Ellen think of the idea?" Brontey asked, quickly back to the here-and-now.

"I'm not really sure if she understands. She just keeps saying that she's got to take that old Bessie-doll she nurses and... well, she's talking so much gobbledy-gook that I'm having a hell of a job making much sense of what she thinks."

"Poor Ellen. Oh, there's somebody at the door, dear. Can I call you back shortly?" Brontey lied.

"Of course. Speak to you later then, Brontey."

BELLINGTON LODGE  
Community Nursing Home Inc.

Welcome to Bellington Lodge, an asset of which the community may be proud. The lodge provides spacious single and double bedrooms with adjoining ensuites, all with a garden view. Well appointed lounges provide a home-like environment for residents and respite clients to socialise with other residents, families and friends. The delightful park-like grounds and lake provide a beautiful environment for your enjoyment.

Our qualified staff are here to assist you with all your needs. Our chef provides a vast range of nutritious meals and caters for all individual preferences and cultural requirements.

Our activities co-ordinator provides an extensive activities program and organizes weekly outings for residents. Multicultural lunches, weekly dances, ceramics, gardening and reading groups are some of our regular activities. Bellington Lodge conducts a weekly music therapy program and we have a trained validation therapist who improves the self-worth of our dementia patients. Visiting physiotherapy, podiatry and massage staff will care for your individual needs.

The spiritual needs of all denominations are catered for and representatives visit regularly.

Family and friends are encouraged to visit at any time.

We trust your stay at Bellington Lodge will be happy, peaceful and suit all your needs.

"It's just for a little while, Aunty. Just until we can get something more permanent organised. You understand, don't you?" says Jenny, driving carefully. "It'll be just like a little holiday, Aunty. Just a change of scene for a few weeks."

Ellen clutches Bessie-doll to her chest and nods. "Yes, oh yes, I know. Just for a few weeks, well, if it has to be, but don't tell anybody. Don't tell them I'm at Bellington. Tell them I've gone to Sydney. To Jessie. Mum said."

"Sydney?" Jenny looks in the rear vision mirror, catching Brontey's wary gaze from the back seat.

*When did Brontey get old? Funny, I've never noticed.*

Jenny raises her eye-brows, shakes her head and watches the road. "It's a lovely room. It's your own room, you're not sharing. It's a nice place, Aunty. You can go for walks whenever it suits you. And the grounds are beautiful, aren't they Brontey?"

"Yes dear," Brontey says, holding Ellen's hand. "It won't be long now, Ellen. We'll be there soon. There's nothing to worry about," Brontey speaks quietly.

"Nothing, nothing at all," Ellen stares at Brontey's loving face, her eyes faded and frightened. "I'm going to Bellington. Just to rest there for about six weeks and then I'll be home. Like a little holiday, a change of scene," Ellen recites the words from long ago. She leans over the front seat and whispers in Jenny's ear. "Doctor Carmichael wants you both to go down, to have a test... just in case."

"Doctor Carmichael?" Jenny says. She shakes her head and frowns as she turns onto the mountain highway.

"People die in these places. Please can't I stay home?" Ellen pleads to Brontey, then leans over the front seat and whispers again into Jenny's ear, as she waves her finger in front of her lips, "Shh. Our secret. Don't tell anybody, Mary. Tell them I'm in Sydney."

"Yes Aunty."

"Not a soul, Mary. Not even Teresa. Mum said."

Ellen hums quietly until Jenny eventually slows the car and turns into the wide entrance.

"Here it is," says Ellen.

"Yes. This is it, Aunty. We're at Bellington." Jenny parks the station-wagon as a young male nurse appears with a wheelchair.

"Miss Ryan? How about a nice ride down to reception."

"I don't know that it's necessary," Jenny says, taking Ellen's small case from the car. "Aunty can walk miles, can't you Aunty?"

Ellen ignores them. Turns around. She sees the long driveway. Norfolk pines and poplars skirt a shimmer in the distance.

*Something's the same. Everything's different. Where am I?  
This is Bellington.*

"It's a long way to reception, right down past the lake. It's policy," the nurse says. He helps Ellen into the wheelchair.

"Matron said I'd come back, if I didn't keep the rules," said Ellen softly to him. "But I'll tell Doctor Harrington. I'll tell him. I didn't. I didn't break the rules," she mutters softly, her head buried into the doll, her eyes squeezed tightly shut as they proceed down the long entrance. "It's a filthy disease. Shameful and filthy."

*Mum screamed at me, her face red and ugly, she screamed at me. I'm evil. Cursed. Diseased. The shame. I can't bear it. Nobody else will know about this. Nobody. Mum died. Fires of hell.*

"We'll share, Brontey, won't we? Same cubicle?" Aunty clasps the doll, opens her eyes and takes in the vision before her as she is wheeled along the curving paved driveway.

"No, darling. Ssh. I'm not staying."

"Please, Brontey. I'll look after the garden," says Ellen. "Oh. There's the lake. Michael Furey's lake. Michael and Gretta," Ellen says, nodding knowingly. "Don't tell Matron. Oh, no."

"She's not usually quite this..." Jenny says to the nurse. He smiles and pats Ellen's shoulder.

Ellen tucks the doll inside her camel coat. "Poor baby," she mutters. "I'm not leaving you behind. Poor baby Jennifer."

Brontey and Jenny are each locked in silent thoughts during the quiet drive back from the Dandenongs as they travel the winding roads. Little is said. Eventually Jenny speaks, "Brontey, I have something to tell you."

Brontey snaps out of her memories and fears, "Yes love, what is it?"

"I just want you to know ... I'm um...searching...for my birth parents. For their names," Jenny says, her eyes fixed on the road.

Brontey slumps in the seat, "Yes dear. It's time you found out what you need to know."

"Well, you know, it's not as if anybody can be hurt now, I mean, now Mum and Dad are both gone," Jenny glances quickly at Brontey. Notices the black stain of dye around her hairline.

"What about you, Jenny? What you find out, it might not be what you expect."

"What I expect? I don't have any expectations at all, Brontey, just curiosity."

"How do you do it ...get the answers?"

"I registered, a couple of months ago, with the Adoption Information Service. And I have an appointment in the city on Monday afternoon to get what's called 'identifying information.' Can I park in your carpark? I can just grab a tram down St. Kilda road then."

"Of course you can, dear. 'Identifying information' - what does it mean?"

"It means I get my original birth certificate with my birth parents' names on it."

"Oh," Brontey pauses. "And then?"

"Then? I don't know. I guess I'll leave it there. Just to have the names will be enough. Then it will all be over. That'll be it. Does it sound silly?"

"No. Not silly. Not at all," Brontey says slowly. "But you know, whatever you find out, it might be hard to understand, to accept."

"I'm a big girl now, Brontey. I think I'll be able to accept it. After all, what could I hear that would possibly upset me? This is something I just have to do. Now. Sort of just filling in the gaps, that's all." The engine hums as she drops down a gear.

"When you're done, you'll come and have a cuppa with me?" said Brontey. "That's if you want to, of course. I'll be home all day on Monday. Only if you want to, of course."

"Thanks Brontey. You're curious too, aren't you?"

Monday

"Oh my God," Jennifer stares into Patricia's face, unable to speak. Her eyes fill with tears. It is unbelievable.

"Do you understand what this means?" Patricia asks quietly.

"Yes," Jennifer's head throbs.

*If this is the truth, and it must be... why, why, why?*

"You can see, Jennifer, that the person who gave birth to you was your adoptive mother's sister, Ellen," Patricia speaks slowly and gently, wondering how much of this Jennifer may have guessed or suspected.

"I had absolutely no idea..." Jennifer's white face wears a stunned expression. Her hand flies to her mouth. She cries. Patricia waits in silence.

"No idea..." Jenny shakes her head, her composure in tatters.

"Jenny, this is the court affidavit," Patricia eventually says, indicating the single grey page. She reads it aloud, slowly. Jenny listens captivated, waiting for explanations to miraculously appear.

"'Owing to ill health and poor prognosis of the mother, Mr Joseph Grant and Mrs Mary Grant (sister of Miss Ellen Ryan) of 35 Essex Street Footscray, apply on this day, November 8th 1944, to adopt Jennifer Ryan, daughter of Miss Ellen Ryan. Mrs Gwenda Wilson of Glen Iris is appointed temporary legal guardian until the adoption is legally enforced.'"

"I've always been told that Aunty spent a few years in Sydney, during war-time. But that sort of doesn't make much sense, does it? Um. I was born in Melbourne. Melbourne. Mother's name, Ellen Ryan. I don't get it. Sick? Gwenda Wilson. So that's where she fits in. There's no father's name."

"That's right. No father's name," Patricia agrees calmly. "So, you know her... Ellen... your birth mother?"

"Yes. She lived with us. In the same house until I married."

"And is she ...still alive?"

"Yes. But she's ...Aunty isn't well. I suppose it's dementia."

*Dementia and other demons that have tortured her over the years.*

"She's alive but... it's too late," Jenny says as the truth washes over her in waves. Realization sinks in.

"Too late?"

"I'll never know why."

"Come in, love, sit down," Brontey says. She leads Jenny to the sofa, holding her hand.

"You've always known, haven't you?" Jenny accuses as she sits amongst the faded tapestry flowers of the couch.

"Yes, Jen. I've always known," she says. She holds Jenny's cold hand in hers, "I've always known, and in a funny way I've always hated knowing."

They sit quietly together for a minute, Jenny struggles to find the words she wants to say. "Why didn't they tell me, Brontey? Why didn't they tell me the truth?"

"Maybe they thought it was for the best," Brontey shrugs. She reaches for a cigarette from the packet on the side-table.

"Why didn't you tell me, Brontey?" Jenny stares at her.

Brontey inhales, her crimson mouth creases hard on the smoke. "It wouldn't have been right," she says. Her crinkled face twitches. She moves over to the gas heater, shudders, switches it on. "It was up to Mary and Ellen. It

wasn't my business." Brontey shrugs, then sits beside Jenny on the sofa. "So, what do you know?" she asks tentatively.

"I know that Aunty, 'Aunty' for Godsakes, is my... my mother," she shakes her head. "It's unbelievable. And I know she wasn't married. And I know that she was sick, and I was born, and because she was ill she asked Mary to adopt me." Jenny stares at the floral pattern of the carpet, looking for explanations amongst the worn full-blown axminster roses. "And Gwenda Wilson, Mrs Wilson, was my foster mother from the time I was born until I went to live with Mum and Dad at nine months. That's it." Jenny's shoulders slump.

"And your natural father?" Brontey asks, looks away and draws hard on the cigarette.

"Not a thing. His name's not on my original birth certificate."

"I see."

"But, I guess, he didn't die in the war after all," Jenny says. She lifts her chin, looks at Brontey with raised eyebrows, "Another lie, I bet."

"I need a coffee, Jen, what about you?"

Jenny nods, sighs, closes her eyes for a moment. Brontey goes to the kitchenette and switches on the kettle. Jenny follows her.

"If only they'd told me, Brontey." Jenny leans against the bench. "If only they'd told me. They've been cruel, keeping it a secret from me."

"They didn't mean to be, love." Brontey takes two willow patterned china cups and saucers from the dresser.

"Didn't mean to be? For Godsakes, Brontey, I grew up in the same house as my mother, without ever knowing that she was. It doesn't make sense."

"Sometimes things happen which ...which make people... good people... decide to do things that, in hindsight, seem ..."

"They've kept it a secret from me all my life. It's cruel. Everything, everything would be different if only I'd known. Everything's been a lie. My whole life. It's all been a bloody, awful lie."

"Ellen has lived with you since you were a tiny little girl," said Brontey. "She always, always treated you so specially. She loved you, Jenny. Adored you. And you've loved her. Does it really make everything so very... different, the way it's turned out?" Brontey reaches for the milk from the fridge.

"That's the whole issue. Since I was sixteen I've known that I was adopted. I *am* adopted. And this story, that my natural mother died during my birth and my father died at the war. This is what I've always known. This is what I've always known to be my story. And now, now, all that has just been turned upside down and inside out." Jenny pounds the bench with her fist. "All that I've believed, about the... the *why* of me... it's not. Not anymore. So now there's a different story... and it makes *me* a different me. And it means that the life I've lived has, in a way, been a lie. It's the deception." She leans over the bench-top and sobs. "Why was she...were they...too ashamed, is that what it was, Brontey, shame, that kept their secret? Did either of them ever really think that I'd go to my grave without having ever discovered the truth?"

Brontey stands rigid at the sink. "Jenny, you don't know the reasons why. And they did love you, of course they did. It was so long ago that maybe at the time there was no reason for them to suspect you'd ever be able to find out."

"Don't you understand how I feel? It's as though you're taking their side."

"Of course I'm not taking their side. This has nothing to do with 'sides'. I can understand how shocked you must feel, but, in the end how has it really affected your life? Jenny, you *did* grow up with your mother. You did. You had

them both. Shared the house and your life with both of them."

"But she never was my mother, Brontey, not to me. She was my aunt. Aunty. Always. Never, ever did she even hint that it may have been something else. Something more. Never. How can I forgive her... forgive them for that. They deprived me, not of affection or care, but they deprived me. Kept knowledge from me. Knowledge that was *mine*."

"Ellen and Mary made a decision. They each had a role to play. They thought it was for your own good. For you, not for them. They only ever thought of you, Jenny."

"Oh yes - their 'roles'! But Brontey, this wasn't a play, not an act, this has been my life. My life," Jenny's strikes her clenched fist to her chest.

"I know, darling."

They each carry a cup and saucer back to the warm sitting room and resume their positions on the sofa. "So what are you going to do about it," Brontey says. "Now that you know? Will you tell her? Tell her that you know?"

"There's no point. Not the way she is," Jenny says. "But, I want to find out about him. My father."

"I'm sure you do," Brontey sips her tea, her hands shake.

"God only knows where to start. I can try this... this..." Jenny searches in her bag for some paperwork, "'Victorian Adoption Network' in Carlton," she reads the name. "But I haven't got much to go on. You take your records there and they help you to search further."

Brontey rests her cup and saucer on the side-table. "You don't need to do that, Jen," she says, suddenly frail and tired. "I can tell you whatever you want to know."

Jenny shuts her eyes, shakes her head. "My God, you know who... who he is, Brontey?"

"Yes, I do. I knew him. I knew your father," Brontey taps the ash from her cigarette into the white marble ashtray. "I knew them both, then."

"So you know why?"

"I can guess. We never discussed it. Ever. But I can tell you everything. My memory's good, love," Brontey reaches for Jenny's hand.

"Was he... Michael Furey?" Jenny frowns, confused, grabbing a name she's heard recently.

"Michael Furey?" Brontey smiles sadly, "Michael... Michael and Gretta..." she remembers it all. "That was their game. James Joyce." Brontey looks into Jenny's eyes. "They adored each other so very much. No, Jenny. Your father's name was Robert. Robert Atkins."

"Was?"

Brontey nodded. "He died, love, before you were born." Brontey paused. "They met at Bellington."

"What? What on earth... Bellington?"

"Bellington Tuberculosis Sanatorium. That's what it was called...then."

"Oh God. Tuberculosis? Ellen?"

"Yes. You've got to understand, she had nobody. Nobody. And she was ill," Brontey hesitates, then adds quietly, "So was he. We all were. More ill than we dared to believe."

*Jen, there's not a thing I don't know about her. Not a thing. I know everything she felt and everything she ever did. I know every joy she's ever had and every fear. I know Ellen better than she knows herself. If you ever need to know anything, just remember, nobody knows her as well as I do. Nobody. Jen, you remember that. Remember it always.*

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Critical Commentary

## Essay One: Representations of Illness

The novel *The Shaded Side*, based largely on the fictional characters and events that take place in a tuberculosis sanatorium in the 1940s, has developed from my research into TB treatment of the era and a wider interest in the way that health issues are represented.

I have a particular interest in what is called *pathography*, autobiographic accounts of experiences of illness. Pathography empowers the affected person with a subjective voice. It acknowledges the experience of illness, not simply the epidemiological and medical treatment of it. While a case-study is documentation of measurable indicators of symptoms and physiological progress of illness, the purpose of pathography is to "draw out the meaning of the author's experience" according to Anne Hunsaker Hawkins in *Reconstructing Illness* (1993:12).

In my previous book *In the Company of Strangers* (Brown:1994), former patients of Australian tuberculosis sanatoria shared their experiences and insights. I considered it important for these stories and the experiences of sanatorium treatment for tuberculosis to be recorded for their historical interest and importance.

Pathographies are complex narratives, with limitations for the writer and the reader depending on who is responsible for determining the boundaries of the stories. Is it a researcher, who asks the patient or former patient to respond to certain areas of enquiry? Certainly in my own experience of interviewing former patients of Australian sanatoria, I asked each patient the same questions - questions which I thought were important, interesting and pertinent. A different researcher would have pursued different areas of enquiry, and, if the former patients had been asked to supply their own stories - without any framework imposed by a researcher - the narratives, no doubt, would have been different again, the reconstruction of the experience driven by different parameters.

Narrative description of illness is both less and more than the actual experience. Less in that remembering and writing are selective processes - certain facts are dropped because they are forgotten or they do not fit the author's narrative design; and more, in that the act of committing experience to narrative form inevitably confers upon it a particular sequence of events and endows it with a significance that was probably only latent in the original experience. (Hawkins 1993:15)

As well, the role of publishers and editors and their professional decisions determine effectively "what" and "how" illness experiences are reconstructed. In the 1990s these stories are market-driven consumables, so an integral aspect of reading illness and disease is the *commodification* of the experience.

Hawkins claims that pathographies are almost exclusively writings which belong to the second part of the twentieth century. Prior to this time the experience of illness was very much integrated with the experience of life, and not relegated as an "isolated phenomenon." In the past, journals, diaries and letters were the place of writing of one's illness experience (Hawkins:11). The development of pathology as a contemporary genre reflects better public health.

Illness is "alien other" as Sontag claims in her essay *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1988:11). Moreover, illness is uninvited, unwelcome other, and affective of change and its consequences. In the second part of the twentieth century, illness then becomes more alien, more "other" and with that I argue the patient also becomes a curiosity, an outsider.

Tuberculosis is one disease which embodies the burden of metaphor. This "burden" can be either a real burden - unhelpful - or else it can be enabling, both personally for the patient and as a consequence for the reader and wider community. Metaphor which develops from an underlying punitive perspective can lead to stigma and fear of both the illness and the ill person.

Some patients embrace metaphor during their illness experience as a way of both sharing the experience and as a

strategy for enduring it. The metaphors of re-birth, battle and journey are common representations both in pathography and other non-fiction writings where illness is a theme. Patients and writers express opposing opinions about the use of metaphor in non-fiction. For some, it is clearly an unnecessary burden added to the experience of disease, as Drusilla Modjeska explains in her biographical novel *Poppy* (1996). She writes of her mother's attitude as she experiences cancer.

'Why have you got it?' I said, my words skittering across the quiet space between us. 'I thought cancer was meant to come to people who are angry and repressed.'

'For a long time I was,' she said.

'But not when you got it,' I said.

'Who knows when I got it?'

'It seems so unfair,' I said.

'It's just cancer,' she said. 'Don't overload it with theories and unfairnesses. It's enough just to be sick.' (Modjeska:298)

For other patients and writers, the adoption of metaphor makes sense of the disease and provides a vehicle by which the patient can communicate the experience in a meaningful way to others. Language mediates experience when the realities of the experience cannot be shared, and metaphor serves the purpose of allowing a discourse, a "this is what I mean" dialogue. The person experiencing the illness, or disease, can express their symptoms as a list of facts: soreness, fever, coughing fits. But it is by metaphor that they best explain the experience, I feel *like*... - both to themselves and to others - to describe symptoms and in determining the physical and psychological strategy they will utilise in getting well.

Spencer Nadler in his essay *Hannah, I hardly knew you* (1997:50) writes of his experience as a surgical pathologist visited at his office over several years by Hannah, a woman whose breast cancer biopsy he initially evaluated. Hannah variously describes her magnified cancer cells as "like moons, each with a different face, a different complement of light and dark." Nadler describes them as "like Cyclopean monsters - granular, pink bodies

clinging to one another, each nuclear blue eye reflecting its own confusion." Nadler awaits the new metaphors Hannah will conceive "to keep her cancer at bay. It is our imagination that saves us," he opines, signifying his view that construction of metaphor is enabling for the patient.

It is not surprising that these metaphors about the experience of illness are also developed and represented in fiction where illness is a theme. Part of the reason why fiction based around illness experiences of characters makes interesting reading is the particularity conferred on the story by the theme.

In Alice Adams' recent novel *Medicine Men* (1997), her main character, Molly, has difficulty in describing her symptoms of a rare malignancy. The omniscient narrator explains

...even if anyone had wanted to hear her symptoms, Molly would have had some trouble articulating just what was wrong. How to describe a generalised malaise, a weakness, a heaviness everywhere, but especially in her head (could the golf ball weigh a lot?), and intense fatigue. She could not, and had given up trying. (Adams:97)

Molly fails to inflate her creative image of the green golf ball into a symbolic metaphor. She applies no process to the image, which remains static. Molly does not invoke metaphor therefore she is unable to share her experience of illness effectively with others.

However, Adams' omniscient narrator suggests metaphors to explain Molly's symptoms. The narrator represents the symptoms as guilt (illness as punishment) and suggests that Dave, Molly's lover and doctor, is the guide navigating her through illness towards recovery (illness as journey). As such, Adams proposes metaphors which work as a structural device.

Readers of fiction make connections and symbols from text that are neither articulated by the writer through the character's point of view or as a consequence of the musings of an omniscient narrator. These meanings and metaphors are manifested entirely by the reader as a

creative, interpretive response to text, a response which is an inherent characteristic of the reading process.

I am interested in the metaphors surrounding leprosy and HIV/AIDS. If "We felt as though we were lepers," is the oft quoted statement by former patients of TB sanatoria (Brown:38:131), then an understanding of what those sufferers of Hansen's Disease (leprosy) believe to be the perceptions of their illness - the social mantle rather than the physical reality of their condition - is worthy of enquiry. The figurative use of the word *leper*, from the Concise Oxford Dictionary, is "person shunned on moral grounds". A more punitive and regrettable perception could hardly be imagined.

Diseases such as cancer, cholera and rabies, according to Sontag's theory, were and are always quite clearly associated with metaphors of dread - terms that make them worse than they inherently are - and punitive perceptions. Such is also the case with leprosy. Not surprisingly, personal narratives about the experience of leprosy are difficult to locate and June Berthelsen's *The Lost Years: A Story of Leprosy* (1996) is the first Australian account from a resident of the lazaret at Peel Island in Moreton Bay, which operated from 1907 to 1959.

After diagnosis of the disease and explanation that treatment would involve lengthy segregation and isolation, Berthelsen explains her reactions

I felt physically sick for a few moments, then a strange sense of calm descended on me. That feeling persisted for months even when I was on Peel Island. It was as though my whole personality changed in an instant; as though I had suddenly stepped into a new dimension, a new world. (Berthelsen:14)

Later she describes her inner feeling of being "locked behind an imaginary wall" (p.16). Surely, Berthelsen had entered, both physically and psychologically, what Sontag describes as the "kingdom of the sick". Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor* wrote of the inevitability of illness.

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous

citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom, of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a time, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. (Sontag 1983:7)

Berthelsen invokes metaphor to describe her existence for many months in a "nightmare state", where everything and everyone had "a dreamlike quality" (p.54).

In 1957 Berthelsen accessed information that indicated segregation for Hansen's Disease, a condition with very low infectivity, had been condemned by International Authorities on the disease nine years prior. This confirmed to her the punitive nature of the isolating treatment she and fellow patients continued to endure. Berthelsen represents the treatment as punishment, metaphorically invoking the language of prison experience.

We are shut up in a prison without bars, just because we are ill. If I had done something wrong and had to be punished for it I would understand. (Berthelsen:61)

This metaphor of imprisonment is further developed through her story. In one chapter titled "escape!" - Berthelsen writes of a foiled plan to leave the island without permission, and further on she describes days when Matron was off-duty as "though the gaoler was away" (p.75). Formal discharge at the Health Department was only pronounced on condition of patients agreeing on regular smears. This was, in fact, called "parole" (p.112) and gives added emphasis to the metaphor of gaoled innocent prisoner. Berthelsen refers to life other than at Peel Island as "life on the outside," continuing her use of terms commonly associated with prison language.

The language of punitive metaphor associated with leprosy prevails throughout this book. Negative results of smears for monitoring progress of the disease are described as "clean" (p.82), the connotation that positive results must be dirty.

According to Berthelsen, ministers of religion continue to equate sin with leprosy, a practice which perpetuates

superstitious fears and firmly held erroneous understandings of the disease. It is her belief that the word *leprosy* has a particularly punitive connotation as a result of these historic notions. Patients prefer the use of the innocuous term HD, for Hansen's Disease, as a powerful tool to change and enlighten attitudes.

Rather than illness being "other", and likewise the diseased person being "other", Berthelsen develops a sense that the return to a lifestyle not defined or restricted by her illness is alien. She constructs the *norm* as alien because of her acculturation into the "kingdom of the sick".

I also began to think of life on the "outside". I wondered how I would adjust to a new house, new people, how my children would adjust to me. Truly I would be a stranger in a strange land.  
(Berthelsen:111)

Her sentiments of the difficulty of return to "normal" life after lengthy isolation and treatment are reflected similarly by the character Ellen in the novel *The Shaded Side*. On her return to life in Footscray after lengthy TB sanatorium treatment, Ellen is alienated from friends and community as she enforces a self-imposed taboo.

Some of the former TB patients whose stories I have recorded refer to HIV/AIDS patients as their contemporary parallels. Betty explains

I have sympathy for the people these days who have AIDS because they feel as though they are lepers, and that is how we TB patients felt at this time before there was a cure. (Brown:38)

Although Sontag considers AIDS to be represented entirely by punitive metaphor, I suggest that in the years since her essay *AIDS and Its Metaphors* was first published in 1988 there have been changes in the perceptions and metaphors surrounding this disease. AIDS is a changing discourse and while Sontag claimed that no one had been tempted to psychologise it, certainly since then the psychologising of AIDS has commenced and can be identified in recent writing.

George Melton in *Beyond AIDS* (1988:54) describes AIDS as a "message from my body," alerting him to the need for a more spiritually centred sense of life. He believes that AIDS is a disease reflecting psychological problems.

The language of contemporary health campaigns and lobbyists, including HIV/AIDS, deliberately separates the individual from their respective illness. The use of terms such as "women journeying with breast cancer" rather than "the breast cancer sufferer," the "consumer of mental health services" rather than the "mental patient" aim to represent the individual and the disease as two independent entities. I understand that a person with an illness may not want to be *only* thought of as "the ill person," and separation of the two entities - illness and the individual - particularly when the disease is associated with punitive metaphor, such as AIDS, may be helpful. However, I question the deliberate ploy to separate one from the other. It may be, in fact, rather glib when one considers the impact serious illness has on all facets of a person's life. Arthur Kleinman explains in *The Illness Narratives* (1988) that if the disease is "other," then the individual with the disease is also "other"

each of us *is* his or her body and *has* (experiences) a body....the sick person is the sick body and also recognizes that he or she has a sick body that is distinct from self and that the person observes as if it were someone else. (Kleinman:26)

Kleinman describes AIDS as being like syphilis and gonorrhoea in the past, branding the victim with the "stigmata of venereal sin". He explains the current cultural meanings associated with the disease operate as

an exoskeleton...the carapace of a culturally marked illness, a dominant societal symbol that, once applied to a person, spoils radically that individual's identity and is not easily removed (Kleinman:22).

The struggle by lobbyists against the marginalisation of people with HIV/AIDS is amply demonstrated in the media. Their strategy is to absolutely resist punitive associations of the disease by the affected individual.

Embracing the idea that "illness is other" and the individual patient is a separate entity to the illness, Mark Counter, Convenor of National Association - People Living with AIDS, in his speech from *A Night of Infectious Laughter* suggests HIV/AIDS as an experience of "everyperson," not "other people" (SBS broadcast, 1997). He attempts to de-metaphorise the disease

It's hard enough living with this virus without all the discrimination and rejection and stigma that we face. The people with HIV/AIDS contribute to communities; we work in all types of employment; we provide leadership and expertise; we fight for our rights; we live in poverty, we have children, we're coping with illness, we're educators, we're lovers, we're mothers, we're fathers, we're brothers, we're sisters, we're discriminated against, we care for our friends who get sick and die; we travel across borders, we have sex, we're in prison, we live in the country, in the city, we have relationships, we make art, we play music, we take walks, we vote in elections and we live in your neighbourhoods. But most of all we try to get on with our lives.

By representing HIV/AIDS patients as participants in the myriad of overlapping social roles and responsibilities, the gulf between the 'well' and 'the sick' is bridged. Although the illness may be feared and may be 'other', the ill individual resists the representation of 'other' because empathy is established and emphasised. The disease may in fact be accursed, but the taboo does not extend to the patient. Consequently, the patient's voice is not silenced. I believe this partly explains the existence of the plethora of narratives about HIV/AIDS experiences published over the past ten years.

The current medical and public health response deliberately rejects the representation of AIDS as plague-as-punishment and disease as invader (military myth), yet these cultural constructs remain dominant in pathographies. Wiltshire in *Decompositions: some narratives of AIDS* (1996) claims that "narrative expositions and patient scenarios play a large role in most discursive presentations of issues in the epidemic" and gives examples of many narratives which employ metaphorical approaches to

discussion of AIDS disease experiences as well as those that resist metaphorical approaches (p.73).

In examining the way pathographies are written, Hawkins' premise is that in the transition from experience to written narrative, fictions are constructed from metaphors. In particular, Hawkins identifies and examines particular metaphors - what she refers to as "mythic paradigms" - of re-birth, battle, journey and healthy-mindedness repeatedly found in pathography.

Hawkins defines the metaphor of rebirth as turning "on the belief that one can undergo a process of transformation so profound as to constitute a kind of death to the old self and rebirth to a new and very different self" (p.33). This metaphor is represented repeatedly in experiences documented by Petrea King in her non-fiction work *Spirited Women: Journeys with Breast Cancer* (1995). Trish, a breast cancer patient, contributes

It's been an enormous growth thing for me. You know, I was a real wimp before and most of my real feelings I bottled up inside. Now it feels like I'm alive for the first time in my life. It's great. (King:45)

Judith concurs with her experience of illness as a new life and transformation

Breast cancer has been a positive experience for me. I have grown in leaps and bounds... life seems such a wonderful adventure and a continuing challenge. Yes, I have changed. (King:46)

Berthelsen also incorporates this metaphor into her writing of the day she was to be discharged from the lazaret, "I felt exhilarated, almost alive, for the first time in years" (p.112). Certainly I was exposed to this representation by former TB sanatorium patients, such as Lesley Blanchard, who claimed that having TB opened a new life for her, giving her more direction (Brown:238). This myth of rebirth can be constructed in another way, where the patient, or former patient, sees herself as a new person, one who has irrevocably cast off the mantle of illness experiences.

The battle or military metaphor, based on the idea of a war-like struggle against the disease, remains pervasive in contemporary writings on illnesses such as cancer and HIV/AIDS. The disease is perceived as the enemy, the chemical agents or treatments to fight it are the weapons and the patients are soldiers in combat. Sontag is most critical of the use of this metaphor, claiming that the metaphor "overmobilizes, it overdescribes, and it powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and stigmatizing of the ill" (1988:94). Paul Monette in his pathography *Borrowed Time* (1988) continually refers to AIDS as "The War", an indication of the enduring pervasiveness of this motif.

In comparison, the journey metaphor is less aggressive than the battle motif, and can take several forms. It can be enabling when the illness experience is positively connotated. King explains her belief

any life-threatening illness can precipitate us into a journey of self-discovery, self-healing and self-accomplishment. In this way, regardless of the outcome of the illness, the destination can become deep and profound peace. To achieve this peace is a victory beyond words. (King:xii)

Her explanation is analogous to the mythic "hero's journey," where the individual conquers new territories (the kingdom of the sick) meets great adventures throughout the challenge, and then returns with a trophy or prize. An underlying tenet of King's philosophy for breast cancer patients is that the hero's trophy is not necessarily renewed health or renewed life, but the prize of peace.

Now to the novel...

In *The Shaded Side* I have endowed the main fictional characters, patients of Bellington tuberculosis sanatorium, with an understanding of their illness experiences mirroring the terms of these particular dominant metaphors.

The character, Dot, interprets her experiences according to the metaphor of rebirth.

'Look, I'm just not that interested. I've put all that behind me, like it happened to somebody else. I don't

need to keep reliving it. I feel like I've been given a new chance at life. Reborn. I'm a different me, now.' She sounded so different, so calm, it didn't even sound like Dot at all. She even called herself 'Thea,' a new name. (p.174)

Robert's representation of his TB experience conforms to the battle/war metaphor. This manifestation is his psychological strategy to endure and understand his experience although ultimately the foe is victorious.

...I'm twenty four years old. I should be fighting in the war, not lying in bed in a bloody sanatorium - in the middle of nowhere - battling a damn war against TB. I've lost it, I've lost it Ellen. All hail the conquered hero. I just can't fight anymore. I surrender. (p.83)

The main character, Ellen, by journeying to the distant sanatorium is no longer able to go to work, carry out her usual domestic duties and participate in parish life. Her estrangement from "normal" life is central to her experience of illness. Entering the sanatorium, the "kingdom of the sick" Ellen encounters a world of a different place, costumes, rituals and roles.

It is like we're in a different world, a "kingdom", I suppose. Doctor Harrington is our kindly king, Matron Steele the wicked queen and all the sisters are princesses in our eyes. And as for us? I don't know - we're just poor, sick plebs, I suppose. Brontey would hate me to write like this. (p.22)

Ellen's exile is emphasised by the stigma of contagion and she is unable to return effectively to the ordinary world on leaving the sanatorium. Her experience of illness is represented as one of loss: loss of family, loss of health, loss of purity, loss of her way of life and anticipated dreams.

There is a real difference in the way that the character Brontey constructs her experience of illness compared with Robert and Ellen. She takes a pro-active attitude towards her treatment, with a somewhat cynical perspective of the medical treatment. Brontey explains her attitude.

Look, I'm an optimist, not a realist. And I'm determined to be. I've got more chance of getting well that way. (p.20)  
I refuse to bear any guilt about this. No fear. No despair. I'm not evil because I've got this illness. Neither, for that matter, is TB. (p.48)

Of the main characters who inhabit the fictional sanatorium, Brontey is the one who most resists creating images and metaphors as representations for her illness.

Sontag claims that sickness is "a way of making people interesting" (1983:35) and I maintain that the same claim can be made for fictional characters. Adam's character, Molly, is interesting because of her illness, not in spite of it.

I am concerned about the potential that TB and sanatorium treatment have as themes in fiction with respect to their intrinsic ability to engage readers. The particularity imposed on this novel by the sanatorium setting and illness theme provide a rich resource for story development. For the character Ellen, TB is certainly an "enhancement of identity" (Sontag 1988:12). She is diagnosed as suffering from tuberculosis during the early 1940s, at a time when the disease is infectious, incurable and often terminal. The consequences of her experiences at Bellington are tied in context to the time and place in which the novel is set. Ellen's choices are options bounded by the same parameters. The particularity of the illness during that era instils drama. Metaphoric links are obvious: the parallel historic story of Ellen "battling" her illness while the outside world is at war; her pilgrimage from physical ill-health to health at the expense of a life increasingly characterised by sacrifice and religious asceticism.

Ellen's illness is the pivot on which her life turns. It is this experience that is crucial to all her relationships and the development of her strange psyche. Thomas Hardy wrote of his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* that it was one where

the great campaign of the heroine begins after an event in her experience which has usually been treated

as fatal to her part of protagonist or at least as the virtual ending of her enterprises and hopes.  
(Hardy:1962)

Eller's great campaign begins the day she says "Mum, I've got something to tell you."

Essay Two: The Place of Research in Writing Realist Fiction and the Research for *The Shaded Side*

*The famous and imposing portrait of Dame Nellie Melba, painted by Rupert Bunny, that now hangs in the National Gallery of Victoria, for many years was displayed at the top of the stairs of Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne. I've appropriated this painting in the novel The Shaded Side - used it to suit my own purposes - and in doing so have made specific changes to Bunny's portrait.*

Realist fiction set in the past with particularity about tuberculosis treatment and World War Two owes much to the rigour of the research undertaken into the main themes. Fiction writers are able to make allowances for the sake of art, but the *impression*, quite clearly, in realist fiction, must be accurate. The primary concern of the writer of realist fiction is to produce a creative work but I suggest it is helpful, though not necessarily imperative, if the writer considers those aspects of their writing which may give rise to misunderstandings of facts.

Hanging Rock, a geological feature of the Macedon district outside Melbourne, fascinated me when I was a teenager. This curiosity was only partly inspired by the majesty of the site, more by Joan Lindsay's celebrated novel, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1970). The clever foreshadowing of the cryptic note Lindsay wrote at the beginning of her novel is bound to intrigue readers.

Whether *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is fact or fiction, my readers must decide for themselves. As the fateful picnic took place in the year nineteen hundred, and all the characters who appear in this book are long since dead, it hardly seems important. (Lindsay:6)

Lindsay's novel tells the story of the mysterious disappearance of a governess and three teenage girls from a school picnic at the rock on Saint Valentine's Day in 1900. I have never established if, in fact, the fateful picnic ever took place. Lindsay creates the possibility that this

may have happened. Perhaps it is an illusion, 'verisimilitude', but this note to reader serves as a hook, a tease to lure the reader in - with the suggestion that here, perhaps, is the 'true, untold story' - although of course it need not be at all. Did Appleyard College on the Bendigo Road ever exist? I have no idea. Not knowing otherwise, though, whenever I visited Hanging Rock I surreptitiously searched stony crevices and half expected to glimpse torn fragments of antique petticoat lace. Perhaps, undramatically, it is only the site referred to in Lindsay's novel that is factual, but I believe her note exempts her from potential criticism about the appropriation of fact.

Realist fiction writers work facts. Making the facts fit their stories is more important than making plots and characters fit the facts. This is the essence of fiction. Facts are stretched, they are fractured, embellished, reorganised and reinvented depending on the purposes and needs of the writer. This is not the same as handling the facts carelessly.

*Let me describe the painting. It is large, ostentatiously large, framed in heavy ornate gilt, and the subject is a woman of great majesty, prominent in her landscape, centred in the painting. The sky is champagne, grey and turbulent. The woman stands slightly turned to one side, her right hand at her chest clutching both her peach silk-taffeta stole and the string of pearls that hangs to her hip, a finger wound round them. The breeze catches the stole on her left side, which she harnesses to her thigh with an elegantly pale hand. Her costume of fine cream lace overlays what I suspect is satin. But here I am guessing. The skirt hangs to the ground with a short train. The hemline is gently scalloped and complemented by two rows of narrow frilled lace several inches higher.*

Sallie Muirden in her recent novel *Revelations of a Spanish Infanta* (1997) writes of budgerigars being among the birds and beasts of the Spanish Court during the early seventeenth century. After publication of the book it was brought to Muirden's attention that these birds, indigenous to Australia, were not identified in Europe at that time. Speaking at the Melbourne Writers Festival in October 1997, Muirden explained that inclusion of the budgies was an error and quite different to *knowingly* distorting the facts - an appropriate strategy of the fiction writer.

Muirden's novel swivels on interpretations of paintings by the artist Velazquez. Some of the paintings she interprets have *in fact* never existed; they were never executed by Velazquez. These paintings are part of Muirden's fiction, she needs them for her plot - creative licence for which she makes no apology. Interviewed in *Write On*, (August:1997) Muirden explains

I don't feel the need to be faithful to the past in the sense a historian would, but I like to know what the facts were so I can tamper with them in a way that is harmonious with the style of book I am creating.  
(p.7)

I would argue that one of the most important issues about the appropriation of the underlying facts in realist fiction is whether the fictional work has represented an event, a history or a person in such a way that could impact with malicious, dangerous controversy. I do not mean the kind of controversy that is induced by giving voice to a different possible point of view that has been otherwise silenced, ignored or dismissed, but rather controversy caused by a created point of view that has no basis on fact, or is in opposition to fact. This seems to be the point of contention resulting from publication of Helen Demidenko's *The Hand That Signed the Paper*. Ludmilla Forsyth in *Overland* (1995:31) claims the book has released 'hate, bitterness, anger and in some cases, latent prejudices.' While one school of thought is that Demidenko's work - as fiction - is required only to construct a fictional world where the characters are true

to their subjectivities, Demidenko's critics claim that the book should be true to the history that leads to the events portrayed.

John McLaren in *Overland* (1995:29) maintains quite reasonably that 'writers are responsible for the truths they identify and the consequences of what they write.' According to McLaren, the obligation of novelist and historian is similar. Although history and fiction - which I interpret here as realist fiction - are different kinds of story telling, they both have 'obligations to the truth'.

Fiction... must create a self-sufficient world, but to the extent that this world refers to objective events, these must have the degree of objective reality required for us to assent to the fiction. ... fiction furthers our understanding of a more general history. (McLaren: 30)

The ultimate question for the mimetic critic, according to William Kenny in *How to Read and Write About Fiction* (1988:108), is 'whether the theme is true or not, whether the story offers us a true insight into human experience.' McLaren, then, clearly favours the mimetic approach to literary criticism where the meaning and value of the fictional work is measured against the insight it offers into the real world, with a faithful representation of the theme.

Sometimes the presentation of the research in realist fiction is impeccable. At other times, it is inherently unreliable. The use of the disclaimer, the explanatory note to readers or the prelude are opportunities for a writer to declare their appropriation of research. Readers quite clearly understand the nature of a story when it begins with the words *Once upon a time*.... A similar string of words with contemporary currency could herald works of fiction where the facts quite clearly have been no obstacle to the telling of a story, and thus eliminate potential problems of interpretation. Problems arise because explanatory notes are not included and then there is

expectation that what appears to be background research is faithfully represented.

The fiction writer cannot accurately present all the facts, for example, of the past in a historical novel. Any truth or fact that a novel is based upon is somehow limited; McLaren (1995:30) describes it as 'provisional, limited both by the available documentation and by the culture and assumptions of the interpreter.' Indeed, selectivity is part of the process. The issue of the responsibility of realist fiction writers to accurately represent the underlying facts will always be open to debate.

*The skirt is narrow at the waist, I presume it is semi-flared, cut on the half circle. I can see the black ribbon tied into a bow, a soft floppy bow, towards the right of the woman's waist. The top of the costume is a form-fitted lace jacket, bolero-like. A scalloped frill of lace winds its way around the edge of the jacket. At the high neckline, there is a hint again of black ribbon, almost hidden by a froth of lace.*

*Topping this explosion of lace at her throat is the face of the subject. She regards me sternly from heavy lidded eyes, framed by wide dark brows. She wears a raven feathered architecturally-defying hat swung up high on the left of her head, punctuated by a splotch of crimson - a rose I suspect. Her hair is long. It must be, but then I know it was her mode at the time. Here it is caught up somewhere not visible to me. Perhaps on top of her head, inside the hat. Perhaps at the back of her head. I cannot be sure. I can tell you this though, in all certainty. Melba's hair is painted black in this portrait. The same black as her magnificent hat. It has been painted so black, in fact, that it is difficult to determine where the hair ends and the hat starts. And what does it matter, anyway?*

In writing *The Shaded Side*, my intention has been to create a story faithfully based on a background of documented history; representation that is close to realism. The research for my previous non-fiction book, *In the Company of Strangers* (Brown 1994) informed me about tuberculosis and the development and impact of its changing treatment on the lives, prognosis and attitudes of sufferers. The main character of *The Shaded Side*, Ellen, endures some experiences which are inspired by the candid reports documented in this earlier work.

What did it mean to be a TB patient in an Australian sanatorium in the early 1940s? A. J. Proust in *History of Tuberculosis in Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea*, reflected on the conceptions associated with tuberculosis earlier this century.

... tuberculosis was far more than a killer disease. It became inextricably linked with the short-comings of the new society including poverty, illiteracy, urban overcrowding, migration of the sick and the socially disadvantaged, the Great War and unhealthy working conditions. (Proust 1991:xiii)

By addressing these factors and recording how the challenge to control TB has been approached in Australia, Proust emphasised that once attitudes towards TB were formed, they persisted long after changing and effective treatments were developed. Walker in *The Struggle Against Pulmonary Tuberculosis* records that the disease in twentieth century Australia became strongly correlated with social class, mortality being heavier in poorer suburbs (Walker 1983:442).

Although people from any socio-economic group and circumstance were susceptible to tuberculosis infection, there were always those who felt an added social embarrassment about family members being diagnosed with or treated for the illness. Ellen's mother in *The Shaded Side* equates the disease with these punitive connotations of uncleanness and poverty, and as a proud working-class woman, she fears the perceptions others would harbour

towards her family if they knew of Ellen's illness. Nesdale in *A Bridge to Independence* (1986) supports the claim that the community as a whole feared the disease, "Sufferers were left to themselves, shunned for fear of infection..." (p.7)

Public fear of tuberculosis was the major factor which seemed to define the stigma and discrimination experienced by some former patients. Once "the cure" became available, public fear and stigma related to the disease subsided, and attitudes towards the disease and sufferers eventually mellowed. Clearly, the fear associated with TB changed alongside evolution of successful treatment for the disease. Waksman, who was awarded a Nobel prize for his discovery of streptomycin - an effective antibiotic for TB - reflected on the changing perception of the disease in *The Conquest of Tuberculosis*.

"If I had tuberculosis..." this idea, formerly terrifying, no longer makes anyone tremble... antibiotics have appeared, sanatoria have disappeared." (Waksman 1964)

In the early 1940s tuberculosis was a potentially fatal, incurable, infectious disease. Patients were isolated from their families and communities and sent for lengthy treatment in sanatoria. In this era, on diagnosis of TB, doctors sometimes failed to inform their patients of the extent of the disease and the likely prognosis. Sontag wrote of TB in *Illness as Metaphor* (1983):

When, not so many decades ago, learning that one had TB was tantamount to hearing a sentence of death - as today, in the popular imagination, cancer equals death - it was common to conceal the identity of their disease from tuberculars, and after they died, from their children. Even with patients informed about their disease, doctors and family were reluctant to talk freely. (p.11)

Frank Stewart, diagnosed with TB in 1943, recalls his reluctance to talk freely of the disease.

Even after I came home two years later it was a very long time before it was discussed in the family. We kept the condition very private. Only our immediate families knew... we were concerned that the children may have been ostracised and hurt if others knew that

I had TB and was at Bedford Park Sanatorium. (Brown 1994:60).

This reflection contrasts with that of Arthur, who, in summarizing his experiences as a TB patient diagnosed in 1963, explains he has "never felt embarrassment, stigma or discrimination about having this disease." (Brown 1994:247)

The research for writing *The Shaded Side* has been thorough and rigorous, but I have taken liberties. The treatment regime and sanatorium life I depict just as I understand it to have been, although, to my knowledge no government administrated tuberculosis sanatorium operated near Belgrave in the 1940s, where I set Bellington. These facilities were mostly set on large sites, far away from cities and almost always poorly serviced by public transport. The day to day life was characterised by routines and a slow progression through stages of treatment that depended on weight and temperature records. Food was hearty, buildings and conditions were fairly spartan and treatment until the mid-1940s consisted mainly of supervised rest and 'fresh air.'

*I am unsure of the colour of the singer's hair at the time this painting was executed. Bunny has painted it black. It is possible Melba wore a wig or dyed her hair. Other impressions, other representations of this famous woman with lighter hair persist in my memory. The issue about all this is simply 'Reader Beware'. I have changed this fact. I endow Melba with bright copper coloured hair in the Rupert Bunny portrait. It suits my purposes.*

In his preface to the *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy (1962) wrote "there was something more to be said in fiction than had been said about the shaded side of a well-known catastrophe" (p.7). The novel *The Shaded Side* explores motives and decisions driven by 'well-known catastrophes' in various contexts. As realist fiction it presents possible further links, experiences, and positions

about the consequences of TB experienced in the era of the 1940s. The experience of TB and sanatorium treatment is certainly catastrophic for the main character, Ellen. The title *The Shaded Side* relates to Ellen's diagnosis in the early 1940s of a shadow on the lung - tuberculosis - and to the theme of secrecy, wherein those not privy to a secret are left 'in the dark'.

The particularity of sanatorium treatment has been reflected with a fictional perspective by Somerset Maugham's short story *Sanatorium* (1950) and Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*, first published in English in 1927. More recently, Alice Munro in her short story *Carried Away* (1992) created a character who had experienced lengthy sanatorium treatment. I have also written a short story related to the theme, *Blooming Consumption* (Brown, 1993). Delia Falconer in her novel *The Service of Clouds* (1997) writes of the experiences of the character Eureka who works at a sanatorium in the Blue Mountains near Sydney early this century. Each of these fictional works relies heavily on the particularity afforded by research into TB of the time and place the stories are set, including Falconer's 'magic realist' treatment.

I try to immerse myself in research, rather than just dip a toe in to test the water. A real immersion surrounds me with enough information to enable me to build a convincing world, so that when I write it is with confidence that I understand the overall picture - the housing, the world of work, the places visited, the social mores - within which my characters exist. There is a difficult balance between the fictional story and the temptation to flaunt the research.

The balance is indefinable; it is the difference between the work reading as an authentic story in terms of particularity rather than a showy display of research which takes the foreground position at the expense of the fiction. The ultimate fear is that the work drowns in the research, and the fiction becomes a tool to reveal the research rather than the research being the tool to reveal

the fiction. My aim is to do research which allows my characters to function within the realm of realistic possibilities. Elizabeth Jolley in *Central Mischief* (1992) explains

In order to write fiction it is important to pay attention to what is real and to those things which belong to human needs and wishes. (p.121)

It is the human condition that intrigues me. I know about sanatorium treatment and tuberculosis in the 1940s, but how have I learned about adoption practices of the same era and the contemporary mechanics of searching for one's birth relatives? Life in Footscray during World War 2? The history of Her Majesty's Theatre in Melbourne? These gaps in my knowledge and understanding needed to be filled, to make sense of my characters' motives and behaviours in *The Shaded Side*.

*Why did I do it? It's been said that this portrayal of Melba is unlike any other. Yes, it's Melba, but it doesn't really resemble her as she is remembered. Jenny, in The Shaded Side, becomes familiar with the painting because of her annual visits to the theatre with Brontey. In one scene Jenny asks Brontey the identity of the model in the imposing portrait. Brontey says "It's Melba, darling. Nellie Melba. ...it's funny. In that painting she doesn't look the way most people remember her. But it's Melba. It's our Nellie" (p.161). Melba is slimmer in this painting than she is remembered, and her features more angular than in other representations.*

The issue of adoption has had prominence in recent works of non-fiction. Sue Chick in *Searching for Charmian* (1994) and Robert Dessaix in *A Mother's Disgrace* (1995) share their personal stories. The insights and attitudes they document provide an understanding - and an Australian perspective - of the myriad of issues adoptees face. I use such insights to construct Jenny's character. Chick writes of the common

practice, particularly in the past, of false information being given to adopted children about the identity of their natural parents and the circumstances of their births (p.309). I have checked her claim with the Victorian Adoption Information Service and incorporated it into Jennifer's story.

In the novel, Jennifer is actually raised within her natural family but there are different dynamics of relationships when mother becomes aunt and aunt becomes mother. It is the circumstances surrounding Jenny's birth and adoption, added to her experience of illness, that cause Ellen to retreat from the world. Carole Anderson in her article *Thoughts to Consider for Newly Searching Adoptees* (1982) explains that birth mothers typically suffer damage to their self-esteem.

Most birth mothers have been treated in dehumanising and degrading ways and are constantly exposed to media stereotypes of them that make them feel worthless and subhuman....They have been told that what they think and feel does not matter, that it is only the adoptee and the adoptive parents whose feelings count and only they who should have any rights. At a minimum, this is damaging to birth mothers. Often it is devastating.  
(p.11)

Ellen suffers terribly from guilt caused by the devastating circumstances of Jenny's birth and Mary's adoption of the baby. The gratitude she feels towards Mary for taking on the role of mother affects Ellen's self-esteem. According to Wicks in *Yesterday They Took My Baby* (1994) it is common for adoptees to begin the search for their birth parents only after the death of their adoptive parents. Similarly, Jennifer begins her search while grieving Mary's death.

Material available from the Adoption Information Service, Department of Human Services, Victoria, outline current adoption laws and access to information rights and procedures. Jenny's search for information about her birth mother is represented in an authentic way, consistent with these processes. She experiences a crisis of identity when her construction of reality from scant and advised deception that have been part of her life-story is then

changed. She is not who she thinks she is. Her beliefs are not only challenged, but completely dismantled.

I use adoption as a device to develop character and advance plot. As a theme in fiction, adoption provides unique opportunities. Swain and Swain explain in their book *In Search for Self: The Experience of Access to Adoption Information* (1992:56), that "a child does not 'belong' in an adoptive family the way he would if he were their natural-born child". Similarly, in fiction there are unique opportunities for a character who is adopted to be this outsider on the inside.

Novels involving an adopted character are not necessarily plotted on the obvious search for identity. Joanna Trollope in *Next of Kin* (1996) introduces an adopted character, Judy, and some measure of her personality and the dynamics of her relationships are defined by her adopted status. Judy's 'adoptedness' works to move the story, although there is scant reference throughout the novel to the adoption.

Elizabeth Jolly created Kathy, a teenage orphan, to be "adopted" by Miss Hester Harper in *The Well* (1987)

"What have you brought me Hester? What have you brought me from the shop?"

"I've brought Katherine, Father," Miss Harper said.

"I've brought Katherine, but she's for me." (p.3)

Hester acquires Katherine in much the same way as a child brings home a doll from a shop. Katherine fulfils Miss Harper's need for intimacy. She becomes, in a way, a precious possession, with a mysterious past only ever alluded to in the novel. Readers never learn how or when she became orphaned. This unknown dimension adds a strange mystique to Kathy's character which works to complement Jolley's bizarre story.

While realist fiction demands imagination and creativity it needs to be based on genuine experience. I have taken John Marsden's advice to fiction writers in *Everything I Know About Writing* (1993)

...try instead reading authentic accounts, by people writing honestly about their experiences. When you've

read a lot of them a reasonably accurate picture should start to form.... All of these books are difficult to read - emotionally difficult, that is, - because they are authentic. They don't deal in slick, superficial feelings of the kind that soap operas and sitcoms exploit. They deal in the uncomfortable raw feelings of people trying to do the best job they can of living their lives.

To my good fortune, there are well documented narratives of each of the other main themes which required research for writing *The Shaded Side*. The information in Mary's war-time letters to Ellen about her work at the munitions factory is derived from anecdotes recorded in *Go West Young Woman* (Living Museum of the West, 1984) and Rod Faulkner's compilation *Ammunition* (1985). Access to these narratives of former women workers of the munitions enables me to particularise the working conditions of the time. Life in Footscray during the 1940s is well documented by Lack in *A History of Footscray* (1991), and augmented by my personal knowledge of the area. During the writing of the novel, I revisited that neighbourhood. The houses in Essex Street, Saint John's School, the Barkly Street shopping centre, the Footscray Mechanics Institute and Saint Monica's Church all exist, and existed in the 1940s.

*I needed to link Melba to Jenny. Jenny has red hair. I wanted to suggest the idea that this woman who is famous, and whose face Jenny knows from history books and old photos is familiar to her, but in this representation not recognisable. I use this scene about Bunny's portrait to allude to the idea that Brontey is the one who affects Jenny's understanding, just as, at the end of the novel, Brontey is the one who affects Jenny's understanding of Ellen: Jenny knows and at the same time doesn't know her birth mother. The representation of Ellen with which she is familiar is only one of Ellen's identities.*

Concern about my portrayal of Mary and Ellen as devout young Catholic women during the 1940s led me to the State

Library of Victoria for information. Perusal of diaries kept by young women during the 1940s was serendipitous. Days and weeks punctuated by attending mass, benediction and contemplation of what to 'give up' for Lent are recorded among the work, recreation and home details. Historically, the obligations to their religion and participation in the social activities of their parishes were central to the lives of practising Catholics, a characteristic that has largely changed in more recent times.

Research undertaken at the Performing Arts Museum enables me to particularise some of the history of Her Majesty's Theatre in Melbourne. Access to copies of theatre programmes for productions from the 1940s, old photographs of the theatre and further information from John West's book *Theatre in Australia* (1978) provides the background knowledge required for me to write about Brontey's work at the theatre.

Much can be said in non-fiction about an event, a theme or an experience, but in writing *The Shaded Side* I have enjoyed the freedom realist fiction allows to integrate themes both contextually and creatively. The choice of the main characters as women from the Western suburbs of Melbourne gives a representation of the lives of working class women, Catholicism and mores, particularly during the era of the Second World War. Juxtaposed against the contemporary story of Jenny as an adult in the 1990s, *The Shaded Side* explores identity from female perspectives across different generations.

*A crimson rose topping bright red hair? Never. I must create a different splotch. A splotch that looks just right with coppery hair, a black hat, champagne and grey sky. Let the rose be ...ivory.*

Certainly realist fiction has a special significance with its ability not only to entertain and engage but also to inform. Documented non-fiction provides the source, the

evidence upon which realist fiction writers articulate - and play with - what is already known and established. Readers must use prudence about relying on what *appears* to be fact in a work of fiction. McLaren (1995:30) explains that histories and fictions are judged by their ability to locate readers' subjectivities within stories, allowing the extension of the readers' realms of experience. Similarly, I would argue that it is the manner in which critical readers respond to realist fiction - whether they commend it or disparage it - that measures the success of the judgement of the writer's appropriation of research.

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